



We Only Know So Much

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A funny and moving debut novel that follows four generations of a singularly weird American family, all living under one roof, as each member confronts a moment of crisis in a narrative told through a uniquely quirky, charming, and unforgettable voice. Acclaimed short story writer Elizabeth Crane, well known to public radio listeners for her frequent and captivating contributions to WBEZ Chicago's Writer's Block Party, delivers a sublime, poignant, and often hilarious first novel, perfect for fans of Jessica Anya Blau's *The Summer of Naked Swim Parties* and Heather O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. Now a major motion picture featuring Jeanne Tripplehorn, Damian Young, and Noah Schnapp.

We Only Know So Much Details

Date : Published June 12th 2012 by Harper Perennial

ISBN : 9780062099471

Author : Elizabeth Crane

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Literary Fiction, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit

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From Reader Review We Only Know So Much for online ebook

Rosy says

We Only Know So Much tells the story of the Copeland family - a seemingly happy family of 6 comprising of four generations - all living in the same house. The story is told from each character's point of view, and they are presented, flaws and all, very humanly and honestly. The characters appear as stereotypes but as the novel progresses we get deeper insight into each of their lives, from nine year old Otis to ninety-eight year old Vivian, and the others in between.

The novel embodies what I dislike most about the stereotype of literary fiction, which is that nothing really happens. There are a few plot points to move story along, but this is not the novel to read if you enjoy plot. The book also suffers from a rather annoying and confusing omniscient narrator. The narrator is able to get into each character's psyche but adds his/her own commentary, complete with choppy sentences and an overly familiar tone, often using first person plural nouns ("Look, we're just reporting what we've heard." Sorry, but there is no we).

Ultimately it's a story of how people can share the same roof, even the same bed, and yet not know a thing about each other. It was a pleasant enough read but it was forgettable and I couldn't get past the narrative voice.

Mara says

Add a star for not following the formula of adultery novels. Take away a star for the precocious kid who doesn't have words for all he understands; I wanted more from him than he was allowed in his story of not understanding what his mother told him and having that elementary school first love. Add stars for compassion for characters lacking self-awareness. Add two stars because her short stories have made me life-long loyal and this disconfirmed my hypothesis that people who can really do short story rhythm often blow the rhythm of novels, but take away a star because I knew the characters of her short stories much better than I got to know any one member of this family. Add a star for compassion for the bitchy girl. Add a star because I enjoyed reading it and it will stick with me, and I have no idea how many stars I'm at now. Maybe another star because she writes recognizably as herself without irritating me with quiriness, can use that first person plural to talk about what the narrator and reader _know_ without me feeling like it's some fourth wall gimmick that will seem terribly dated in five years. Maybe the hardest thing is that I liked it but there were moments when it could have done more, so I wasn't blown away.

Alexandra says

Cannot even express how much I enjoyed this writing style. It flowed so freely & fluidly. If not for the chapter breaks, I probably would have read this book in one sitting, that's how difficult it was to put down.

The story centers around the various members of the Copeland family. There's Gordon - the dad, a kind of know-it-all, although he means well; Jean - the mom, a good person but a little preoccupied with her own issues as of late; Priscilla - the bitchy fame obsessed daughter; Otis -the absolutely Adorable with a capital A

nine year old brother. Theodore is pretty darn adorable himself - he's the 'grampa'. Always taking out of focus pictures with his beloved camera & falling asleep mid conversation. There are two other family members: Vivian, Theodore's mother (she is 98!) & Mott, the newly acquired drool machine (a mastiff).

Everybody has their quirks.

This one's particularly interesting though just because the point of view in the story gets switched around so frequently (but totally in an easy to follow way). You really get a sense of who these people are. The characters are so 3d they nearly come right off the page. This is not just normal, mundane, everyday stuff, you *really* get inside these ppl's heads. I loved every second of it.

I sincerely wish all books could hook me in so fast. But I guess it's a good thing they can't or else I wouldn't ever stop reading. And a girl's got to eat, right? ;D

Natalie says

I didn't hate this book, but I also didn't love it. It left me feeling "meh." There were parts that I really like. I liked Otis and his ill-fated love with Caterina, lover of jelly beans. I liked Theodore, and his relationship with Pricilla. I do think that much of this book is witty and funny. I'm just not sure what it's all supposed to add up to (or what we're to make of that move towards magical realism (maybe? I'm not even sure) at the end that seems to come out of nowhere. Really, no one with the exception of Otis is particularly likeable (okay, so maybe that makes them more "real", but it makes it less fun for me to read. God, I'm sick to death this summer of reading about people I hate.). This book was a Rumpus book, and reminds me again that I should quit the book club. They have this close connection with McSweeney's and nothing screams hipster writing to me like McSweeney's. I am no hipster. As a matter of fact, I feel less and less hip every day. I suppose my writing is also not hipster writing (and probably not particularly clever or witty. I'm so sick of clever I could scream). Perhaps that means that I'll never get a book published, but there it is.

My copy of this book does have an interesting PS section in the back where the author answers some questions and then talks a little about how this book came to be and how she wanted it to remain as much like a short story as possible. I'm not sure I totally understand all of that (or even why one would want the novel to stay like a short story--why not then just write linked short stories?), but it was interesting to read none-the-less.

Roxane says

We Only Know So Much is a wonderful book, bursting with heart and wit. This is one of those books where you will laugh over and over because so much of the story of the Copeland family is so open and honest and human.

Crane was really effective in showcasing the concerns of each family member--Gordon, the loquacious, self-involved, deeply distracted father, Jean, the mother mourning the suicide of her lover, Priscilla, the bitchy daughter, trying to figure out what she's going to do with her life, what she can be proud of, Otis, the 9 year old son who is whimsical and quiet and observant and in love with a girl from school, Theodore, Gordon's father, whose mind and health are failing, and Vivian, Gordon's grandmother, who is elegant and

emotionally subdued, but full of verve and opinion, hell bent on keeping the family on track.

Each character feels distinct, though Crane especially shines when writing Priscilla and Otis. She has a fine skill for capturing the frustrations and terrible hopes of youth and young adulthood and you cannot help but root for Priscilla, especially, even when she drives you crazy.

I also appreciated how each character had a clear narrative arc that felt true to the novel as a whole.

There is only one part of the book I did not appreciate--the narration is this odd omniscient, first person plural sort of snarky voice of some outside party making these observations about the family but the novel, to my mind, would have been much stronger without it. The narrative intrusions were inconsistent and often jarring, pulling me out of the cozy world of the Copeland family where I very much wanted to stay.

On the whole, though, this is a really fulfilling, intelligent book that will make you want to cry as much as you laugh—a winning combination.

Elizabeth says

Well, I know enough.

Brandon Will says

This novel shows familial struggles so well from inside all sides you get to thinking: man, why doesn't Jean leave her husband Gordon, they're just miserable and can't even relate to each other, they're so wrapped up in their own struggles -- and then you think yeah, they have kids, so it's complicated, and they did care for each other, it was a long, slow progression of getting to this place, maybe they can get out of it, but then just no, sometimes relationships outgrow their potential for positive growth, maybe it's best just to go -- these relationships are so dramatic and unbearably intense, maybe they should just opt out -- and then you maybe get to thinking about your own intense family struggles, and how you can't just opt out, and then you maybe realize that that's the entire definition of the family relationship, and if we're so blessed as to have a family, and stuck with and cursed by family, that's why stories like this are so valuable and inherently engaging, when done well, as this one is, expertly so.

Priscilla, the teenage daughter, is so unlikeable and nasty until you realize she's a teenager acutely observed and rendered, and teenagers are inherently unlikeable and nasty at phases, as you yourself probably were (I for sure was). And during her descent, the more Priscilla thinks she sucks, the more you care for her and see the good in her.

Basically I left this novel thinking "Oh my Lord, everybody is so confused and trying so hard and stuffs just really super hard and I hope I'm good to the people in my life."

And there is this scene with a man succumbing to dementia, well-intentionally dismantling his mother's beloved Furby that will choke-hold your heart. Yes, a scene with a fucking Furby that will ruin you for a

minute.

Tara says

I LOVED this book- reading about the Copeland family had me laughing, cringing and crying almost at the same time. This family is one at a cross roads- each for a slightly different reason- each wrapped up in their own personal drama that they don't see the turmoil in the lives of those around them. This first novel will be one that sticks with you and makes you want to spend more time with this cast of characters.

This is a book I recommend for any one who loves Wes Anderson's movies as it has a similar sensibility :)

Tuck says

a novel from a short story. and has wonderful letter to the reader and reading list and essay on the writing of the book. now for something completely different
ONE good thing about 15,000,000 new book titles

Yes, a 500% increase in books published from 2011 to 2012. And for nostalgia's sake, in 2003 there were 300,000 titles published. One good thing about the huge amount of choice today is the prominence of fantastic new women authors. Sure there have always been some books written by women, and some of the top literature has been written by women, like award winning "Them" by Joyce Carol Oates. But with literally a handful of titles from 1970, to literally 10's of millions today, Stillwater Public Library has a wide collection of new, exciting, and groundbreaking authors who write with jarring honesty. Here is a brief list of some of the great new fiction I have read the past 12 months and be sure to have The Do as an appropriate modern soundtrack for your reading.

Nina-Marie Gardner's first novel about a young grad student who falls in love with a facebook poster, and moves to Manchester England to be with him, "Sherry and Narcotics".

In Sheila Heti's new novel a young artist tries to figure out how to be a genius. A bold and experimental new novel "How Should a Person Be?"

Barbara Browning writes an epistle novel via emails and texts in "The Correspondence Artist".

Vanessa Veselka writes about a recent geology grad who moves to the big city, but cannot find a job anywhere, then gets caught up in the apocalypse in "Zazen".

Elizabeth Crane debuts her first novel delving into the family, but what a family in "We Only Know So Much".

Another family tale from one of the craziest families you'll meet from Jessica Blau in "Drinking Closer to Home".

Lydia Millet too writes about a California family torn by un-communication and modern age in "Ghost Lights".

Susan Daitch writes historical novel of 1880's France but being investigated by 21st century film preservationist in "Paper Conspiracies".

And these 8 titles are just the very beginning of exciting, bold and truthful new authors at Stillwater Public Library. Follow these links for many more great new fiction: Elizabeth Hand thriller ; Trinie Dalton experimental ; Jesmyn Ward national book award winner ; Bonnie Nadzam in a modern Lolita ; Joy Williams family stories ; Julia Otsuke mail-order brides ; Sloane Crosley essays ; Lidia Yuknavitch teenage

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Tiffany says

This is the worst book I've ever read.

My mom bought the book, read it, hated it, and gave it to me to read with the forewarning it was the worst book. I thought the premise seemed interesting and I'd read it. The premise might have been fine. The writing is so very, very terrible. Half of the book is in italics, half of the book is in list form. All of it is idiotic.

'Yesterday I looked into the eyes of a squirrel and I saw my dead lover, James, who said, Yes, it's true about heaven.'

That is not quirky, that is terrible writing. There are so many examples of how terrible the writing is, but I wasted so much time reading this book already...

The last lines are " We only know so much. What do you think?" I think this was horrible and I advise everyone to find something else to read!

David says

I've never had so much fun reading about such messed up people. Messed up people are always the most interesting (though I suppose everyone is messed up anyway and it is just where they are messed up that they are interesting), but it can sometimes be unpleasant to read about it. Interesting and pleasant are not the same thing. Crane balances wonderfully in this book. The characters go through some real bad times with their messed up selves, but I still found the book enjoyable to read. I have rarely seen a group of people so alone and together.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Former Chicagoan Elizabeth Crane is just a little too good a personal friend for me to claim I could do an "objective" review of her newest book, last year's *We Only Know So Much* (BONUS: Listen to my 2007 podcast interview with Crane); but I wanted to get a mention of it up here anyway because I enjoyed it so much, another solid winner in what's always a delightful career. A contemporary human-interest dramedy firmly in the Franzen dysfunctional-family vein, the story is peopled with more eccentric weirdos than a Wes Anderson film -- the wife having an affair with a guy who then dies, the husband obsessed with getting Alzheimer's, the vapid daughter, the nerdy son, the senile grandfather and the pissy 98-year-old great-grandmother -- and Crane builds an interesting, event-filled plot for all of them to go through, the kind of entertaining and charming novel that sleeper low-budget Hollywood hits get adapted from. Given that Crane is mostly known at this point for her short stories, I love seeing her expand here into full novel territory, and this quiet yet sophisticated tale is sure to strike a chord with fans of Jennifer Egan and the like.

Out of 10: N/A

Christine Palau says

My favorite type of book: funny, sad, super obsessive, dark and twisted, and so charming. I didn't want it to end. And in a way it doesn't just end. The P.S. is such a personal and honest account of the writer's background, her influences, and a little bit about the novel, the story behind it, from its inception at Yaddo to the changes from agent to editor to page. You get the sense that E. Crane is a very cool person, plus, she was on a DFW panel, which proves that she's special.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NZDXD...>

Robert says

One hot mess. That's the first thought that comes to mind. The story was told out of sequence; the characters proved unlikeable and sometimes odious; the entire family managed to engage in conversations without ever really talking about anything meaningful; relationships died faster than a daisy in the middle of a blizzard; the voice was quirky, at times eccentric, and it filled me up with about as much hope as a five car pile-up. But I enjoyed the hell out of it anyway. I can't adequately explain it, but it spoke to me like a ghost with two heads, or a blue lizard with his mouth open and eyes wide, telling me meaningful and profound thoughts with a slight upturn of his head.

I went into *WE ONLY KNOW SO MUCH* without any predispositions or inclinations, and I was glad I had my eyes open wide, and just went along for the ride. Because this story took me to some dark places, down some lonely roads, and I didn't particularly like myself at all parts of this journey, but it was an exploratory endeavor that was as discombobulated and confusing and complicated as life itself. Had I not been a bit eccentric, I might have been less than thrilled with this ride, but I often look at myself (and I say this with complete sincerity) as one hot mess. So I connected with the material on a deep, meaningful level, even though it took me a while to reach the level of full emersion.

This novel breaks the major rule of writing: Show, don't tell. Told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, it single-handedly proves that with good writing there are no rules. Because I loved the fact that the narrator talks directly to the audience with a bit of dialogue, exposition, and backstory thrown in to move the story along. Even when it moves a bit tangentially (again, I'm often prone to making random connections in the universe), I was giddy with Elizabeth Crane's storytelling ability. It was like snuggling up in a warm blanket, even if that blanket may turn around and occasionally bite you on the ass.

Cross-posted at Robert's Reads
