



The Portable Veblen

Elizabeth Mckenzie

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The Portable Veblen is a dazzlingly original novel that's as big-hearted as it is laugh-out-loud funny. Set in and around Palo Alto, amid the culture clash of new money and old (antiestablishment) values, and with the specter of our current wars looming across its pages, *The Portable Veblen* is an unforgettable look at the way we live now. A young couple on the brink of marriage—the charming Veblen and her fiancé Paul, a brilliant neurologist—find their engagement in danger of collapse. Along the way they weather everything from each other's dysfunctional families, to the attentions of a seductive pharmaceutical heiress, to an intimate tête-à-tête with a very charismatic squirrel.

Veblen (named after the iconoclastic economist Thorstein Veblen, who coined the term “conspicuous consumption”) is one of the most refreshing heroines in recent fiction. Not quite liberated from the burdens of her hypochondriac, narcissistic mother and her institutionalized father, Veblen is an amateur translator and “freelance self”; in other words, she's adrift. Meanwhile, Paul—the product of good hippies who were bad parents—finds his ambition soaring. His medical research has led to the development of a device to help minimize battlefield brain trauma—an invention that gets him swept up in a high-stakes deal with the Department of Defense, a Bizarro World that McKenzie satirizes with granular specificity.

As Paul is swept up by the promise of fame and fortune, Veblen heroically keeps the peace between all the damaged parties involved in their upcoming wedding, until she finds herself falling for someone—or something—else. Throughout, Elizabeth McKenzie asks: Where do our families end and we begin? How do we stay true to our ideals? And what is that squirrel *really* thinking? Replete with deadpan photos and sly appendices, *The Portable Veblen* is at once an honest inquiry into what we look for in love and an electrifying reading experience.

The Portable Veblen Details

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From Reader Review *The Portable Veblen* for online ebook

Lolly K Dandeneau says

This novel was bizarre, and Veblen is adorably quirky. Her love affair with squirrels tickled me, thinking on how I act just as weird talking to raccoons outside our house and my dog, of course- they don't answer me back. The writing is wonderful, I spent so much time highlighting passages. Veblen and her fiancé Paul (a neurologist on the verge of huge success) couldn't be more opposite. Where she embraces her differences, he is escaping his hippyish, embarrassing family and disabled brother- hoping to have wealth and prestige. But can we really ever cut ourselves free of our roots? His love for oddball Veblen seems at war with the life he is reaching for, but love doesn't give a flying..uh...squirrel what you want. Paul isn't as perfect as his brilliant mind would naturally cause others to assume. He is deeply affected by his disabled brother and family, he is just running from his quirk.

Veblen has lived with an overbearing, needy, ill (or not) mother who has tried to sour sweet Veblen on marriage. When she finds out Veblen is going to marry a doctor, of all things, she takes it as personal attack. Doctors, those fools that dismiss her sufferings... how can it be her beloved daughter could love the enemy? Paul has a mountain to scale in being accepted by Veblen's mother. The situations that arise when Paul and Veblen meet each other's families had me cringing, but this is such an honest take on the shock of getting to know your loved one's family. Out come all our skeletons when our bride/groom-to-be meet our families and see all the wounds and 'sores' as Veblen calls them. Veblen, having been named after Thorstein Veblen, has spent her life with an affinity for the peculiar economist/sociologist. She has embraced his beliefs much as her own but has she been wrong? Has she been misled by her commanding mother? All the cracks are exposed and examined by our intended and we wonder 'how can he/she possibly love me? Can I love them? Are they as mad as their parents?' Oh to be seen by our lovers as our family sees us! To have our entire existence under a microscope as we helplessly squirm and can't edit our shame.

I spent a lot of time embarrassed for Veblen and Paul, the incidents with her mother, and Paul's brother are hilarious. Love is great when it's 'just us two' but enter the in-laws and forget it; the best person we've become grows a third eye and tentacles as soon as our beloved sees where we came from. We are all doomed. Veblen wonders if anyone can love her knowing her mother, will her mother make love impossible? Paul fears his brother's disability is used to make his life hell, can he escape his family long enough to wed Veblen? With the circus that is both their families, Paul is in the middle of a big deal with the Department of Defense, inventing something to help with brain trauma on the battlefield, wrapped up in an ongoing study to see his research approved. He has the backing of an important woman, naturally this doesn't seem like such a success to his hippy anti-establishment parents. Veblen tries to keep each person happy as Paul is wrapped up in his career. From a mad father, a hypochondriac mother, an eunuch step-father, Paul's free loving hippy parents and sometimes deviant disabled brother- is she going to lose her mind too? Will the lovers be forced out of love because of their parents? Paul is beginning to see Veblen's odd behavior as a reflection of her 'off' mother's own personality. Could he be right? And what about Paul? Can she possibly love someone that can't feel joy in the beauty of nature, who dampens her pleasure of small joys?

This novel is more than just a take on love and the messy complications that ensue. It is more than a satire on medical research/war. It is even more than the blessings and curses of one's family. *The Portable Veblen* (whose title you will understand and I find cute as can be) is honest, hilarious, strangely enthralling and I will make you think of Veblen for now on when I you spy a squirrel. Oh what our families do to and for us... Shocking to think any of us survive our families and yet impossible to imagine ourselves without their influence. I spent a lot of time laughing because as crazy as this story gets, it touches on truths most of us refuse to see. We are, all of us, deranged in our own special way. We love the flawed because we are the flawed. We might spend our time thinking others are crazy until another shines a light on our own family brand of crazy. As two come together, maybe the wreckage of their childhood is the beating heart of their

happy future.

This is an uncorrected proof I was elated to read. I need to share just a few excerpts though I underlined many. Beautiful writing, unique characters (very meaty, in fact I know people like this), and such a fun story- this is a must read and I don't give a squirrel's twitchy arse if someone disagrees.

"- she's a classic hypochondriac. Right?"

"You think that?" Veblen's voice cracked, as did her peaceable domestic fantasies, which suddenly seemed cracked to begin with. No one would ever embrace her mother. No one will ever love me because of her. She was impaled on the truth of it.

"Wasn't it vital to think your betrothed had been an adorable child? What if they had been a baby like him, sour and grim? When she couldn't stand one more image of the little blob, she jumped up and offered to make tea...."

"Do you think wishful thinking is a psychiatric condition?"

"Albertine, who specialized in doubts, who pointed out the shadow side of human nature at every turn, who swore allegiance to ambivalence and ambiguity, whose favorite color was gray..."

I can't quote much more or I'd just copy the entire book. Stayed up all night finishing it, lovers of quirk take note, here is THE book for you all!

Esil says

When I give a book 3 stars it can mean that I liked it well enough but didn't feel anything special, or it can be an averaging out of positive and negative reactions. My reaction to *The Portable Veblen* falls into this second category. There was a lot I really liked about this book, but at other times I felt really disengaged and a bit incredulous and irritated. *The Portable Veblen* is not so much a story as a character study -- of very quirky characters and their families. The book focuses on Veblen and Paul. Veblen works as a temp in Palo Alto. Paul is a very ambitious neurologist. At the beginning of the book, Veblen and Paul get engaged. As the book unfolds, they get to know each other better and they especially get to know each other's families. Veblen's mother is arguably hell on wheels -- driven by her own insecurities, she has taken Veblen on an emotional roller coaster since childhood. Paul's family members have their own issues -- living off the grid and on the fringe, they have showered attention and support on Paul's disabled brother and any number of strangers at very straight Paul's expense. Not surprisingly, Veblen and Paul are emotionally enmeshed with their respective families, which creates complications in their relationship. What I really liked about *The Portable Veblen*: Veblen, Veblen's love of squirrels (I can completely relate), Veblen's coping mechanisms, optimism and buoyancy, Veblen's quiriness, the cringe making but well rendered depiction of Veblen's mother and the cover (great picture of a squirrel). What I didn't like about *The Portable Veblen*: Paul, the lengthy descriptions of Paul's work as a neurologist and Paul's reaction to his family. I don't need to like a character to like a book -- quite the contrary -- but to me Paul didn't work -- his peevishness about his family and life in general all seemed a bit too cartoonish. One GR reviewer commented that she didn't know if she was reading a satire or a serious book. I agree, and this really describes my struggle with Paul's character. It felt like a novel in fragments that didn't quite come together for me. Lots of talent, lots of cleverness, but it didn't all gel -- parts were great and parts had me shaking my head or getting distracted. Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

Rebecca Foster says

Veblen, named after the late-nineteenth-century Norwegian-American economist, is one of the oddest heroines you'll ever meet. She thinks squirrels are talking to her and kisses flowers. But McKenzie doesn't just play Veblen for laughs; she makes her a believable character well aware of her own psychological backstory. I suspect the squirrel material could be a potential turn-off for readers who can't handle too much whimsy. Over-the-top silly in places, this is nonetheless a serious account of the difficulty of Veblen and Paul, her neurology researcher fiancé, blending their dysfunctional families and different ideologies – which is what marriage is all about.

Non-subscribers can read an excerpt of my review at [BookBrowse](#).

(See also Elizabeth McKenzie's [Top 10 Squirrels in Literature](#) list.)

Hugh says

Sometimes you have to accept that you are just not the target audience for a book. I am never keen on rom-com, and whimsy is my least favourite form of humour. Add in a caricatured pair of dysfunctional families and a rather strange obsession with apparently sentient squirrels and it starts to sound like the script of a film I would run a mile from.

All of that is rather a shame, because I'm normally sympathetic to anything which is critical of the values of corporate America and the excesses of big pharma, the heroine Veblen is charming and Thorstein Veblen sounds fascinating. Overall though, I felt that there were not enough high points to compensate, so I can't recommend it, but I'll happily accept that others will disagree, as the current discussion in the 21st Century Literature group demonstrates.

Jessica Sullivan says

3.5/5 Stars.

If you combined Natalie Portman's character in *Garden State* with a Wes Anderson movie, you would get *The Portable Veblen*. Quirkiness abounds in this National Book Award-longlisted novel.

When Veblen and her boyfriend Paul get engaged, they each have a bit of an existential crisis. Bearing the scars from both their dysfunctional families, they come to wonder if they can deal with each other's respective flaws. Maybe this was a mistake.

The bulk of the story focuses on Veblen, the titular character. Her father is in a mental institution. Her mother is one of the most amusingly grating, awful and passive aggressive parental figures I've ever come across. And Veblen herself talks to squirrels, convinced that they're invested in the ins and outs of her life. Veblen's secret fear is that no one will fully accept her until they accept her mother—and questions whether Paul can pass this test.

Meanwhile, what Veblen doesn't realize is that Paul's family has its own skeletons in the closet, and that Paul hasn't escaped his upbringing unscathed.

The Portable Veblen is a book about relationships—both familial and romantic. Through their own unconventional journey, Veblen and Paul face quandaries and revelations that affect any couple: that being in a relationship means sharing your idiosyncrasies and accepting those of your loved one, and finding that crucial balance between retaining your individuality and becoming a harmonious unit.

I struggled rating this one. As much as I enjoy quirky, eccentric stories and characters, there were times when it felt over the top. But McKenzie's writing is fluid, funny, and full of surprising depth. The interactions between Veblen and her mother alone make it worth the read, and as someone in a long-term relationship, I appreciated the insights on love and commitment. Lots of little treasures to be found in this one if you're willing to endure some borderline-tweeness.

Amanda says

This book was a huge surprise to me in how much I liked it. I was afraid it was going to be too quirky or adorable for my taste. While it is quirky it is also really well written, funny and has a lot to say about love and marriage.

Bianca says

Wow! This was one hell of a novel!

If you think, "what's with the title, it's kind of unusual", wait till you read it.

Original, quirky, smart and educational, 'The Portable Veblen' was like nothing I've read before.

I'll jot down some of my thoughts, well aware that my limited writing skills won't do justice to this incredible piece of writing.

'The Portable Veblen' was so refreshing. I loved everything about it.

The characters are endearing, quirky, weird, but very interesting and complex. The main protagonist is Veblen Amundsen-Hovda, a thirty-year-old woman, temping as a secretary and also doing Norwegian translations in her free time. Veblen's hero is the unknown and forgotten thinker Thorstein Veblen. She lives modestly, within her means and is content. One day, she meets Paul Vreeland, a neurologist, about to patent an instrument for relieving pressure in the skull following a traumatic injury. Paul proposes to Veblen after only a few months of dating. In many respects, Veblen and Paul are opposites. He's the high achiever, determined, purposeful man, Veblen is a bit of dreamer, talks to squirrels, sees the best in everyone and doesn't have much of a plan.

Both Veblen and Paul have *interesting* families and have had unconventional upbringings. But while Paul is determined to succeed and is eager to acquire all the paraphernalia proof of one's "success": a big house,

expensive cars, boats etc, to be as far away from his off-the-grid family, Veblen resists all that as she's not interested in stuff.

This book was so up my alley in so many ways, it was uncanny. I'm very interested in medicine, so I quite enjoyed reading about medical research and medical trials. I am sure that this aspect of the novel will put some people off.

Another thing that I loved, but could annoy other readers, is all the talk about Thorstein Veblen. I am grateful to Elizabeth McKenzie for introducing me to the economist/thinker who came up with the expression "conspicuous consumerism" and who, amongst other things, criticised the capitalist model of making a profit for the sake of profit. I was flabbergasted that I had not heard of him and that we hadn't studied him at university (economics degree). I'll make sure to read more about him and his ideas.

Elizabeth McKenzie's writing is masterful. Some people may have an issue with the extensive use of neologisms and medical, research, and military jargon. I was happy to have read it on kindle as all I had to do was tap and the dictionary came up. As I said before, I love it when authors teach me something new.

This novel is the perfect candidate for a book club read, as there is so much to discuss and analyse. I can't speak for everyone, and I haven't read other reviews, but I think this will be a polarising novel, that you'll either love or find too cumbersome and/or too quirky.

I'm in the "I loved it" camp.

'The Portable Veblen' is a very ambitious novel, that looks at relationships between parents and kids, between lovers, between people and nature. It also has a good look at society, at what it means to be successful, and at consumerism (I personally would have liked more of that aspect addressed). There's also commentary about what it means to work for the big pharmaceutical corporations, which can be corrupt and heartless.

I was so impressed with this novel, and obviously with its writer, I'll have to do some research to find out a bit more about Elizabeth McKenzie and her writing process.

While this was not perfect, arguably nothing is, I will give it 5 stars for originality, quirkiness, and most importantly, for having the audacity to not dumb it down for the masses, while still remaining very readable.

READ THIS!

Update: I forgot to note that this book has Appendices. A, B and C. All of them different and very interesting, including a list with 65 Ways to Say Squirrel. Cute!

I've received this novel via Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review. My gratitude to the publishers, Harper Collings, Fouth Estate, for allowing me to read and review this extraordinary novel.

Cover: 4 stars

Amy Rhodes says

I think many could love this novel, but it irritated me no end and I wanted to put it down but kept plowing through. The characters just bugged me though I think they were supposed to be lovable weirdos and the squirrel subtheme (don't ask) did not make things better.

Debbie says

I was in the mood for some quirk, and this book delivered. It's about the queen of quirk, Veblen, who talks to squirrels. No, let me rephrase: she talks WITH squirrels. I thought it was a riot when she talked to them, but I thought it was too cutesy and dumb when the squirrels talked back. I always hate it when someone is on transmit-only, but here I definitely would have preferred it if Veblen had had a one-way conversation.

Veblen had another quirk besides drumming up conversations with squirrels. As a child she carried around a portable typewriter (hence, the book title, I'm guessing). She visited neighbors and typed up whatever they had to share—poems, recipes, etc. This totally original idea fascinated me. But wait—this quirk gets no air-time! Veblen doesn't carry around her typewriter during the story; it was just briefly mentioned as something weird she did as a kid. I think the author missed a great opportunity here.

The squirrel whisperer is engaged to a neurologist, Paul, who develops a machine that digs into the brains of injured war vets. The details of the machine were too much and too weird, and I wasn't in love with the idea of this contraption. Pretty creepy, and I questioned the ethics.

Some reviewers mentioned that they couldn't figure out if they were supposed to laugh or be serious. I see what they mean. There's an underlying thread about the evils of consumerism and ambition. Does that belong in a book of quirk? Not sure, but for me the book tipped more to the funny side.

Okay, okay. I see I'm already madly scribbling on my damn Complaint Board, so I might as well finish up with the bitching before I get into all the good stuff.

There was a short section on neurology, which had a zillion five-syllable medical words and sounded like it was lifted right out of a John Hopkins journal—totally incomprehensible to us non-doctors. I really didn't get why the hell the author included it.

And my last complaint (I hope by God this is the last) is that I was mostly bored by the references to Theodore Veblen, an American economist and sociologist from the early twentieth century. The reference sent me flying to Wikipedia, and though I enjoyed learning about him (I had never heard of the guy), I didn't think the author needed to give him such a huge presence in a story that prides itself on quirk. And I wish she would have woven him in better or made him less boring.

Okay, on to the good stuff. Count how many times I say *love* in this list!

Who doesn't love a surprise? The absolute best thing about this book is that everything is a surprise. Man how I love it when I have no idea what anyone is going to say or do—that alone is worth the price of

admission. The characters, the events, the conversations: all new and different and full of the unexpected. I get so sick of reading books that are all about snoozy mundane life. Here, I just sit and wait for each new surprise, and it makes me marvel and smile. Every sentence is a fun one and takes me someplace cool.

I love to see some jump. Give me some characters that are so interesting that they jump off the page. Veblen and Paul and their kooky families jump pretty damn high.

Who doesn't love a quirky love story? I liked Veblen and Paul. A lot. Offbeat and out-there Veblen is curious, earnest, loyal, and pensive, besides being more than a little nutso. Paul is as straight as Veblen is odd, and their personalities play off each other. I liked their rich relationship, and I was convinced they were in love despite their huge differences. Even the drama, which was palpable, was unusual in its lack of conflict—neither Veblen nor Paul were melodramatic or had any ill-will toward each other. They seemed simultaneously innocent and insecure, and they both were devoted to making their relationship work.

My parents were never nudists. But good old straight Paul's were! Both families were made up of outrageous characters and all were well drawn. They include a bossy hypochondriac mom and a pair of weed-smoking ex-nudist hippies. What more could you ask for? Both Veblen and Paul have tense and entwined relationships with them—I bought and liked all the family dynamics.

I highlighted like mad. I loved the comical and creative plot and the near-perfect pacing. And I loved the playful language and the unusual viewpoint. Highlight city.

I loved spending time in Veblen's head. She has her own wonderful and unique view of the world, and the author was so good at letting us in to see.

A little grass growing in the window sill doesn't hurt anyone. I loved Veblen's cool ramshackle house, which, seriously, did have grass growing inside the window sills! She loved her run-down shack, of course—"it filled her with warmth and hope." A great place to visit, but I'll pass on an invite to stay the night.

Squirrels are a kick! I don't care if they're related to rats. I really don't. Squirrels are nothing like their dirty creepy rat kin, and they shouldn't get a bad rap just because of their distant relatives. But if you don't like these jumpy, speedy, climb-y little furballs, you probably won't think the book is any fun. Me? I could watch the little tree runners all day.

As you can tell, I loved this book, though my Complaint Board is full enough to make me give the book a 4 instead of a 5. I'm dying to add a few gem-y quotes so you can see just how cool the language and perspective are, but I'm not supposed to do that since the book is an advance copy. I think this one is going to get a lot of mixed reviews. For me, it totally did the trick.

Thank you, Netgalley, for the advance copy.

Taryn says

"We're old enough not to care what our parents think, but somehow we do," Paul admitted, philosophically. "That's for sure. " "Because they allowed us to exist. " She had once

concluded everyone on earth was a servant to the previous generation—born from the body's factory for entertainment and use. A life could be spent like an apology—to prove you had been worth it.

3.75 Stars. As quirky as you would expect, given the cover! Part ruminations on marriage and family and part statement on materialism, consumerism, and the military-industrial complex, *The Portable Veblen's* strength is its complicated, memorable characters. I received this book from Penguin Random House in exchange for an honest review. It will be released on January 19, 2016.

I love squirrels. This little guy has permanent residency on my desk:

So I had to read this book!

Veblen, 30, is filled with anxieties and neuroses, primarily induced by her narcissistic, hypochondriac mother. She was never really close with her father, who is now institutionalized. She is now a secretary who does translation work on-the-side as a hobby. Like her namesake, the real-life Thorstein Veblen, she detests consumerism and materialism. She is happy with her small life and cozy little home, which she renovated herself. When she agrees to marry her boyfriend Paul, the engagement brings many deep-seated issues to the surface. Oh, and she talks to squirrels.

Paul, 34, was raised in a hippy commune. He resents his parents for his unconventional childhood and for favoring his developmentally disabled brother. Paul is now a neurologist and is dedicated to carving out a life completely separate from the one he grew up in. He finally reaches the success he has been chasing when he develops a revolutionary tool that will minimize the effects of Traumatic Brain Injury in war zones. Success isn't so sweet though because he ends up in a complicated relationship with the pharmaceutical industry and the military-industrial complex. His desire for a traditional middle-class life also causes complications in his relationship with Veblen.

“Have you read Marriage: Dead or Alive?” Veblen said no. “It’s the magnum opus of Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig. He says marriage is a continuous inevitable confrontation that can be resolved only through death.”

I grew really fond of the characters. I could really relate to many of Veblen's personality quirks, especially being hyperaware of her own flaws and her need to maintain an equilibrium. (*“I feel like I’m not allowed to be bothered.” “Not allowed?” “It’s like I’m under pressure from some higher source to remain calm or neutral, to prevent something terrible from happening.”*) Veblen has a rich inner life and she overanalyzes everything, which is a source of much of the humor. I really loved the pride she took in her cozy little home and her empathy for all living creatures. Paul is hard to like at first, but as his family history is revealed, his motivations and actions become understandable.

Then she snapped out of it, and they laughed about it, and she came to understand that this recognition of otherness would occur over and over until death they did part, that she couldn’t despair every time it occurred, and that anyway, Paul wasn’t a dictator like her mother...yet it was clear that your choice of mate would shape the rest of your life in ways you couldn’t begin to know. One by one, things he didn’t like would be jettisoned. First squirrels, then turkey meatballs, then corn, then—what next? Marriage could be a continuing exercise in disappearances.

There is so much going on in this book. It addresses so many issues and I don't feel like everything 100% meshed together, at least on first reading. It almost seems like two books. A week after reading, what sticks with me most is the character portraits, the couple interactions, and the family dynamics. The military-industrial complex/pharmaceutical sections are already starting to fade from my memory, although it did create an ethical dilemma for Paul and ramifications on Paul's and Veblen's relationship. The mood of the military sections felt a little different too, a little more absurd. There are also a few random, irrelevant pictures featured throughout the book, mostly to up the quirk factor. They didn't really add much for me and the decision to include them didn't seem fully committed since they were few and far between.

She started to run, feeling the warmth of the sun and the rub of the grass under her soles, remembering how running used to make her pretend to be Mighty Mouse, shouting, "Here I come to save the day!" and later on, Maria singing, "The hills are alive ... " and then thinking it very strange that she could not run across grass without pretending to be someone other than herself, for even now she found herself in search of something to think when running across grass.

The Portable Veblen is partially about the impact our childhoods have on us, the break for independence, and discovering your own identity outside of your family. Veblen really struggles with tying herself to another person, especially when she is still inextricably intertwined with her mother. She is fearful about what she will have to give up when she gets married. Veblen eventually realizes she can have a relationship with her mother, without being an extension of her. Likewise, she can get married without losing herself and her ideals. Paul realizes that he doesn't have to be the complete opposite of his family to be his own person.

'If you end up with a boring miserable life because you listened to your mom, your dad, or some guy on TV telling you how to do your crapola, then you deserve it. ' Paul and Veblen, I think you'll understand me when I say that we'll always be here for you, but that your own crapola is where it's at... "

I had fun reading this novel. The writing was pleasant and the pages flew by. It may have run a little long, but I was sad when it ended. After the story ends, there are appendices that serve as "Where are they now?" chapters. It was a really cute way to end it and it suited the mood of the book. It is the perfect book for when you are in the mood for a weird, cozy, funny, heartfelt book, with a bit of whimsy.

According to Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, the Swiss analyst and author of Marriage: Dead or Alive, a wedding is more than a party or a legality. It's no less than a boxing ring, two people facing off, acknowledging their separate identities rather than their union, in the company of all the people who lay claim to them. A wedding is the time and place to recognize the full clutch of the past in the negotiation of a shared future."

Michael says

Definitely a fun read, with a number of quirky but lovable characters, two dysfunctional families trying to do better, and a love relationship threatened by crazy circumstances and misunderstandings. The lead character, Veblen, is a woman with modest ambitions who lives by the precepts of the Norwegian-American social philosopher, Thorstien Veblen, who assailed the consumerism and invented the concept of the "leisure class." She falls for Paul Vreeland, a research neurosurgeon who has invented a portable skull-punch device

for use by technicians in the field to mitigate traumatic brain injury. He admires Veblen's honesty, spontaneity, and critical mind. As they begin to plan for a wedding, they must get past the hurdles presented by their weird and troublesome families. Veblen has a controlling, hypochondriac for a mother and a father with dementia, while Paul's parents are aging hippies, and both Veblen and Paul have challenging, "special needs" brothers. Much zany action ensues.

Differences in values between the couple become apparent as Paul jumps at the chance at career advancement and big money through selling his device to a big biomedical company which contracts him to run a trial with VA patients. Veblen takes to talking to a squirrel for insight. Has she gone around the bend. Will Paul become too corrupt with his Faustian bargain for Veblen to sustain her love for him? What will it take for their love to work>

In closing I will share examples of the author's satirical humor. At one point Paul ponders the nature of Chloris, the aggressive, seductive female scion of the company that recruits him:

To his shame, he really believed the wealthy were superior. In a Darwinian sense, the had to be. He could read the story of past conquests and brutal takeovers in her bone structure, her long arms and legs, her narrow shoulders, her high cheekbones and forehead, her elegant hands.

Veblen on the other hand sees Chloris as a parasite like her namesake once wrote:

Thorstein Veblen said captains of industry are like ichneumon flies. They jump on fuzzy, friendly caterpillars and lay eggs in them, and the eggs hatch and the larvae eat the caterpillars from the inside out.

These charming examples, and the book as a whole, were funny and entertaining for me. But the overall satire wasn't quite vicious enough in bite or with hidden depths like a Vonnegut story to send me over the top.

This book was provided by the publisher as part of the Net galley program

Suzanne says

Having some familiarity with the shenanigans of the medical device industry (I worked as a Regulatory Compliance Coordinator for a dental supplies manufacturer for a horrible year and a half) and with the extreme frustration of dealing with pathologically narcissistic family members, I found this story relatable. I admire a writer who can take potentially dismal topics and present them in an entertaining, humorous, and warm-hearted way. Like the song says, "I used to be disgusted, now I try to be amused." Although I'm not sure those reactions are mutually exclusive.

I didn't identify as much with Veblen's squirrel fixation, but I'm sure I've probably got obsessions and coping mechanisms of my own that are squirrely enough, without being, you know, actually squirrely.

This was excellent storytelling with flawed but likeable characters (well, most of them). And I loved the style, with its slightly off-kilter metaphors and philosophizing as our protagonists learn to navigate life, love, consumerism, mental illness, and the ethical challenges of dealing with huge multinational pharmaceutical companies. Recommended.

Elyse says

Update: \$1.99 Kindle special today!!!!

I liked this book so much that I bought the physical book after having received the arc for free. I actually sat and talked with Elizabeth McKenzie last week at the Saratoga library when she came to speak.

I had never met her and I was very excited...

She knew who I was and I knew who she was...(so it was a mutual joy of meeting).

I bought two other books that she wrote, but I have not read them yet.

Listening to Elizabeth speak about the family she grew up in and the way in which she writes was fascinating. I everybody could've been there.

Those have you who have read this book.. One of the questions that she answered when I asked who did she relate to most in the book.... 50% of her was Veblen... The other 50% was Paul ... The fiancé. These two characters are extremely different.

In real life.....

Elizabeth talked about living in a garage with writing raising a son - a single mom.

Today she is married for a second time living in Santa Cruz. This novel is highly original!

Chosen as a 2016 National Book Award! WORKS FOR ME!!

"This thing's gonna work," Sadiq said.

"Don't act so surprised," Paul said.

"Let's do it again."

Next Sadiq tried, holding the cadavers head for leverage. He pressed the device to the shaved skull and activated. The cut was clean, and with a quick flip of the switch on the handle, the blade contracted around the fresh plug of bone and lifted it out.

"The average skull is 6.5 millimeters thick. The blade is 6.3 millimeters, so it stops short of the dura," Paul said.

"Like shooting a gun," Sadiq said, impressed.

Paul said, "That blades's coming at 42.7 meters a second."

THERE IS SO MUCH TO go NUTS over in the outrageously inventive 'ONE-of-a-KIND', NOVEL!

It's funny, sad, 'nutty', original, [THIS BOOK DESERVES FRICKEN GOLD MEDAL AWARDS], it's enormously --entertaining--and pokes holes into our humanity.... bumping up against 'the-important-issues-at-hand' in our lives. How much money do we really need? Just what are our obligations to our insane-extended families? How do we come to terms with modern life when we don't feel modern at all?

Paul and Veblen are engaged to be married.

Will this couple survive each of their narcissistic & wacky families, and differences over squirrels in the attic & their passion differences for squirrels and critters in nature?

This story takes place in Palo Alto, California. (in the heart of Silicon Valley).

Paul is an extraordinary neurologist...having developed a tool to reduce the trauma for those who suffer with brain injury. Moral questions arise from a pharmaceutical lab. He works in Mountain View with acutely

somnolent insenate veterans. He comes from hippie parents who were nudists when he was a child, (he survived it), and worries that his handicap brother will sabotage their wedding.

Veblen is pretty much fluent in Norwegian - and does translations for the Norwegian Diaspora Project in Oslo. (Norwegian from her father's side). She was named after Thorstein Bunde Veblen, the Norwegian American economist who espoused anti materialistic beliefs: A noble nonconformist. The house she rents had cracked linoleum - doors that hung loose off the hinges...even a bank of dirt on the windowsill was growing grass. The yard was neck high with weeds... But Veblen has a great imagination - knew she could transform it - with a thrifty budget. When Paul introduced Veblen to his friends---doctors, architects, financiers...at first everyone said,...."What-a-Hottie", she was --- until they realized she wasn't on a notable career path. Paul was disgusted with his friends, with their snobbery.....yet mystified at Veblen's low- hanging job as a temp secretary. Paul wanted to buy them a big house. Veblen thinks it is "the greatest soul-sucking trap of modern civilization". She makes most of her own clothes - and is not trying to impress, keep up with the latest fashions or designs. She likes her rustic house.

This couple 'seems' like opposites-- it's hilarious how corn on the cob can be an issue. - but it's possible that Veblen is one of the greatest female characters created in a novel in Years! [If they make a movie... they need to find one hell of a terrific actress to capture all the wonderful colors of Veblen].

The next conversation takes place when Veblen is meeting Paul's parents, Bill & Marion, for the first time: "It's so weird how people like hamsters so much better than squirrels," Veblen added, knowing that hamsters were hindgut fermenters and coprophagists were as squirrels were nothing of the sort " "Maybe to veer away from further comparison of rodents, Paul coaxed Veblen into telling them about her translation work, and her interest in Thorstein Veblen. She described the article she was translating now for the project: a history of Thorstein Veblen's Norwegian family in Minnesota. "Sounds interesting!" Marion said. "There were many Norwegians where I grew up." They talked about and Norwegians for a while. Paul said, "I think he helps you justify your Spartan upbringing." She nodded. "Maybe." Something had slashed past the window. "There's a lot about him to like" "He endures " Bill said. "He's still widely read." "Is it okay if I say this? Veblen has a very dysfunctional family, possibly more than ours," Paul blurted out. "What the heck! Veblen yelled. Was this necessary? "Dysfunctional my ass! cried Bill"

I'll let you decide about Veblen's family when you meet them.

Mostly... I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THIS BOOK!!! There is something for 'everyone': A new committed relationship, Family dynamics, A little insanity, medical science, nature, social and moral issues.....

And..... what might the Squirrel be teaching us????

I can't say thank you enough to Penguin Publishing, Netgalley, and

Elizabeth McKenzie for the opportunity to read this book.

Bloom says

I really enjoyed this read. *The Portable Veblen* is at turns poetic, philosophical, and insightful. From the beginning to the end, it is quirky and dotted with humorous anecdotes and lines of thought that make you raise an eyebrow and at the same time chuckle at its eccentricity. For instance:

"[Paul] visualized himself not as a weakling but as a dense little torpedo penetrating the bullshit of the world, and that always made him smile."

and

"The armpit was a hitherto unknown landscape of fleshiness and stubble, and it struck Veblen as an armpit so vast and cavernous it could smuggle a pup. She'd been relieved when the arm came down and the armpit receded from sight, though, alas, not from memory."

The one thread holding the plot together is the matter of marriage.

I recall there was a part in there where Veblen thought to herself that marital life is like a never-ending sequence of loss due to compromises, such that if your significant other dislikes something which *you* like, then that something is bound to be forever gone because you'll never get to share it with them. And if you're not sharing it with them, what is the point of marriage? Or something like that. I really should have highlighted that in my kindle. Anyway, I thought that was really true, at first. Why would anyone want to sacrifice part of themselves only to be bounded with a complete stranger for the rest of their lives? But then Veblen and Paul proved that the idea of marriage is misunderstood in the eyes of many, as much to themselves as to people like me. Marriage isn't just about giving or taking, is it? It's about observing the admirable qualities of one another and applying them to oneself to the best of one's abilities. That's how long-lasting marriages are forged. That part really stood out for me.

I think it is the author's intent to show obvious character development throughout the book and in this, she did well. The one character who stands out above the rest is of course, our protagonist, Veblen. She's the one who's instantly likeable here, I think. For me, I really love her inner thoughts, her nature-loving personality, her modesty and her moral values. But between all her intelligence and humble personality, there are also pockets of anxiety and low self-esteem and this goes to show that she's just like any other person, riddled with her own flaws.

At its core, the book is about finding beauty in the simplest things in life, embracing our family members no matter how flawed they are/seem to be, and staying true to who we are ourselves.

Thank you NetGalley and Penguin Press for giving me this ARC to review.

Helen Marquis says

Loved it!! A wonderful quirky tale of a lady called Veblen, her fiance Paul, their dysfunctional families and

her love for the squirrels that live in the trees around her Palo Alto home.

Veblen's mother is a neurotic, hyper-sensitive hypochondriac, long estranged from her wayward father who is in the advanced stages of neurological decline in an institution. Her fiance is at the cutting edge of surgical tool development, and working a bit too closely with the heir to one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies.

While it may sound a fairly complicated set-up, McKenzie effortlessly weaves the narrative threads together to form a truly wondrous whole. She does it so well that the reader doesn't have to stretch their imagination too far to understand why Veblen seeks counsel from squirrels, when all those around her are somewhat challenging....

I really can't recommend this book highly enough. It's a wonderfully crafted and engaging tale, reminiscent in style of Jonas Jonasson and Fredrik Backman - lovable characters on the fun side of quirky and the extraordinary situations they find themselves in. Just read it now!

Andrea Larson says

I loved this unique, unexpected novel. It starts out almost like a fairy tale, and its heroine, Veblen (don't ask – read the book) feels just like a fairy-tale character: unconventional, gentlehearted ... and she talks to squirrels. Sweet Veblen is moving through her life, working as a temp at Stanford's School of Medicine, taking care of her little house in Palo Alto, and translating Norwegian for fun. Then she meets Paul Vreeland, an ambitious doctor whose research project has been picked up by a giant pharmaceutical company, and her world suddenly changes. They have a whirlwind romance, followed by a marriage proposal, and Veblen finds herself sharing her quiet life and her eccentric family with Paul. As it turns out, Paul's family isn't exactly normal either – and his sponsorship by Big Pharma isn't all it's cracked up to be.

This book combines the oddest subjects – pharmaceutical fraud, suffering war veterans, mental illness, dysfunctional families – but it does so brilliantly, and with humor and sensitivity. (There are even pictures illustrating various chapters, and they're hilarious.) The characters are all kind of wacky, not always in a good way, but you just keep rooting for Veblen and Paul, their relationship, and their messed-up families. In the end, this is a hopeful story, about how we can all come to terms with our past and do the right thing. This is an absolute gem of a book.

Ellie says

I struggled with *The Portable Veblen*, a comedy by Elizabeth McKenzie. My problem was that I found it like one of those pictures where you can see either a vase or two profiles, or an old lady or a young girl. and you can toggle between the two visions. I found myself toggling between this book as farcical and this book as painfully serious. When I saw the humor, it was hilarious; when I read it seriously, it was painfully sad. And maybe that makes it a little bit true to life.

Veblen (named for the philosopher who wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class*) is an underemployed 20 something who talks to squirrels. Her mother is an incurable hypochondriac whose relentless need of Veblen, coupled with a hypersensitivity to anything and everything Veblen says, has Veblen emotionally crippled. Then Veblen meets Paul, a handsome doctor raised by hippie parents who seemingly have always placed the needs of his brother, a man with special needs, above his own. Paul and Veblen take refuge in each other

only to discover that each is imperfect and unable to cure the other's wounds. In addition, Paul hates the squirrels that Veblen talks to and loves.

Can you see how the situation is filled with the possibility of both humor and pain?

The blurbs I've read hail the book as extremely funny. As I said, my reaction was more complicated. I sometimes laughed out loud and sometimes cringed. I was unsure about how I felt finally about the book, until the conclusion which I enjoyed enormously and pulled the book together for me.

I want to thank NetGalley for giving me this book and Elizabeth McKenzie for writing so well. I think it is a sign of her skill that the book portrayed some poignant human relationships which are often enacted in painfully funny ways.

Jen Campbell says

Video review to come

Carolyn says

What a deliciously quirky and original book this is. Veblen Amundsen-Hovda, named after the American writer and anti-consumerism activist, Thorstein Veblen is herself a unique and original character. Raised by a neurotic, hypochondriac mother, seldom having contact with her distant divorced father, she has developed quite a few quirks. Her mother's fascination with Thorstein Veblen (she was working on an unfinished PhD about him before Veblen was born) has transferred to Veblen herself and she has taken on board his message of anti-consumerism. She also has a fascination with all things Norwegian, has learnt Norwegian and become a translator. She lives in a ramshackle cottage that she has fixed up herself, at the top of a gully surrounded closely by nature. She dresses in hand made and op shop clothes for comfort rather than fashion. She also talks to squirrels and imagines that they talk back to her and. She seems unlikely to every settle down to married life but in her 30s she meets nerdy, straight neurologist Paul, and they immediately click and eventually become engaged.

Paul loves everything that Veblen doesn't, luxury houses and cars, smart clothes and making his way up the career ladder. He has invented a device to use in the battlefield to relieve pressure build up in the brain after head injuries that will help to reduce serious brain injury while the soldiers wait to get to hospital for surgery. He is sure this is going to be a major breakthrough for him and has embarked on a clinical trial with a greedy medical devices company that should bring him fame and fortune. But all is not smooth sailing for Paul and Veblen. They are severely handicapped by their parents and upbringings. Paul's parents were hippies who were into nudism and mind altering substances. His older brother Justin was born handicapped and Paul has spent his whole life pampering to his needs and ignored by his parents. He also hates squirrels. Will love be enough to conquer all as this odd couple navigate the minefield of love and relationships, not to mention corporate greed?

Apart from Veblen and Paul there are some great characters in this book as well as a lot of understated humour. Cloris Hutmacher, the grasping, conniving heiress to the Hutmacher medical conglomerate that funds Paul's clinical trial is cast in the role of all that is bad about greedy corporations. Veblen's mother is

one of the most controlling women I have met in literature but Veblen clearly loves her despite her selfish, manipulative nature. And of course there is the squirrel, charming and bushy tailed who pops up throughout the book to give Veblen advice when needed. All in all a most delightful and engaging read! 4.5★

With thanks to Netgalley and Penguin Press for an ecopy of the book to read and review

Debbie "DJ" says

Well, I'm finding it hard to even describe this book. Yup, its a cute story. A story that revolves around an eccentric woman named Veblen. She believes she will never find love, but guess what? She meets Paul, a neurological researcher. They not only have their own differences, but their respective families must be reckoned with also. Veblen is named after Thorstein Veblen, who shunned societal waste. Not sure if there is supposed to be a social commentary here or not as as the character Paul wrestled with this very issue. I felt the story never went below the surface, and nothing held much meaning for me. I must say though, this was a very descriptive book. Page after page of of describing things I could care less about. Also, the last chapter switches to a third person narrative. I found myself thrown on this one, and had trouble understanding what the author was trying to pull off here. Oh, one last point, how could I miss this? There are squirrels intertwined throughout the plot!
