



Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe

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A young woman caught at the turning point between success and failure hopes fame and fortune will finally let her leave her old life--and her old self--behind

Birdie Baker has always dreamed of becoming someone else. At twenty-two, she sets off to do just that. Walking out on her pastor husband and deeply evangelical parents, she leaves behind her small-town, small-time life and gets on a bus to Los Angeles.

Nine years later, Birdie's life in Hollywood is far from golden, and nothing in the intervening years--the brutal auditions, the tawdry commercials--has brought her any closer to the transformation she craves. Caught between success and failure, haunted by guilt about a tragedy in her long-forsaken family, Birdie is at the brink of collapse when she meets Lewis, a beautiful but naive young actor with his own troubled history, whose self-destructive impulses run dangerously parallel to her own.

When her big chance finally comes, Birdie must reconcile the wide-eyed girl she once was with the jaded starlet she has become and try to find herself and her future somewhere in between. *Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe* is the story of a young woman's struggle to make her own way in the Technicolor land of make-believe.

Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe Details

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From Reader Review Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe for online ebook

Perkimom says

Absolutely pointless, but maybe that was the point.

Renee says

Jenny Hollowells' first novel is about a young woman (Birdie Baker) who leaves her preacher husband at age 21, her evangelical parents, and her small town Christian community to find her life's mission and true calling in L.A. A decade later, Birdie is faced with the realization that she will never truly be discovered or really "make it". The writing was good, but the plot was lacking. The story itself, is not bad, and quite believable in most parts, but the passiveness of Birdie became a real drag for me. All in all, a good first novel, but one I will soon forget.

Jennifer says

From My Blog...[return][return]Finally a book that is not filled with sunshine and happiness, Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe by Jenny Howell breaks the mold of "girl changes her life and becomes tremendously happy". Howell presents a sad, and confused protagonist who is looking to escape her deeply religious upbringing and become famous, offering the reader a satirical look into Hollywood through the eyes of Birdie, who leaves her husband and her past behind and reinvents herself in Hollywood. Birdie alternates present day with bits and pieces of memories, real or imagined from her past in an attempt to better understand Birdie, to see how far she has come, and to realize she has not come far at all, save becoming an accomplished liar. From her earliest memories, Birdie has wanted to be someone she was not. Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe is an intriguing look at a young woman's yearning to find happiness and what she finds is the superficial nature of Hollywood. Birdie is a character that either the reader will like or dislike, but either way I think all readers will be able to identify with at least some aspects of Birdie. Witty, satirical, sad, lonely, and utterly fabulous, Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe is a book I would recommend to everyone.

Michelle says

This book is almost like a descendant of JCO's *Blonde*: it's a poetic & haunted drift through the exhausting repetition of auditions and rejections and the endless bouts of waiting for phone calls and the ambiguous (and sometime sleazy and dehumanizing) feedback from agents, directors, and fellow actors that characterize "making it in Hollywood." It's well-written and effectively atmospheric (not effervescent). There is sadness and emptiness, and there is very little intimacy in the narrator's world. One might criticize the book for being a bit nihilistic: at times there is a sense of emptiness (rather than futility, which is what one might expect from this sort of plot), and the narrator's motivation is vague and sometimes ambiguous. One can't help asking, "but for what?" I did not find this to be a flaw of the book, but I could see how some might find it

challenging or unsatisfying. For me, this gave the book an otherworldly quality. And isn't that, after all, what Hollywood is about?

Jodi says

I'm thinking about joining the ranks of those boring, jackassy literary pundits who warn about the impending death of something: publishing, the novel, the short story, the traditional book, and everything else you love hold dear.

What am I declaring the death of? Story. Or at least good, engaging stories. Off the top of my head I can think of four books I've read this year that were well-written but lacked interesting stories or the stories fell apart midway through the book (*The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, *The Melting Season*, *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*, and *The Ask*). I can't tell if it's me or if it's them. Is there a dearth of story in this year's must-read books? Or am I just more demanding than usual?

You can add Jenny Hollowell's *Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe* to that list of beautifully-written books that lack an actual story. On the surface the story of Birdie Baker, a thirty-year-old struggling actress seems like it would be fraught with tension, but it's not. Instead we get a sort of dreamy, wishy-washy portrayal of a woman so far removed from her life it feels like she's floating through it.

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Katy says

Birdie Baker has viewed her life as one film take after another. Her childhood dreams found her running away from her deeply religious home life in rural Virginia and heading west in an attempt to make them all come true. 9 years later she is still sitting in the yard of her rented guest house in Venice Beach, drinking scotch and watching the sun fade away.

Birdie's wit makes up for her somewhat frivolous desire to make it as an actress and for the superficial routines she undertakes in an attempt to get there. Hollowell manages to make her sympathetic and you overlook her tendency to detach and be self destructive. Incredibly well written. Almost every word in every sentence unfolds the narrative. Not a word is wasted. An obsessive read.

Rachel McCready-Flora says

Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe is Jenny Hollowell's first book. Like many things I read, it was an impulse pick at the library, chosen because it has a pretty cover and was part of the etc. series, which I have enjoyed in the past. I guess I love reading about how and why an author wrote what they wrote. This extra section was great; Hollowell even included her writing playlist for the book, and the songs really capture the mood of her writing.

But let's talk about the actual book. *Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe* is the story of Birdie, an aspiring actress trying to break through in Hollywood. We meet Birdie when she is 30 (only claiming 26), and follow

her near mental breakdown as she attends parties, auditions for various commercials and bit parts. Birdie falls in love (or doesn't?), she drinks, she hides. And then she somehow makes it, or so we are lead to believe. Hollowell doesn't lay everything out within easy reach for the reader.

I'm not going to lie and say that this was a pleasant book to read. Birdie is not a likeable character - she's a self-destructive alcoholic, and you know that she will never be happy, whether or not she finds the fame she craves. The whole book has this thick, gray cast. But Hollowell's writing is masterful. No word or sentence is wasted, and her prose are just lovely. Hollowell makes you feel Birdie's despair and internal confusion as you read, and this, I think, is a great accomplishment.

Tess says

The fact that Hollowell is a shining genius in a great big sea of mediocre isn't what I'm torn about. I'm torn about how to write a review of this book. One one hand, I couldn't sympathize with the main character, which made reading it a little like spending several hours with someone who annoys me. And on the other hand, I couldn't put the book down -- probably because of lush, enveloping descriptions that really bring you into the detailed agonies of Birdie's world:

"She closes her eyes and decides what will come next: walking down the hallway and then on into the kitchen. In the kitchen in the cupboard and in the cupboard is the glass and in the freezer is the ice and in the pantry is the scotch and if she puts in the scotch in the glass and the ince in the scotch the drink will grow cold in her hand. The ice will pop and snap, as familiar as a friend, and she will whisper to it, *Yes? What are you trying to tell me?* She'll listen for a moment to that breaking-apart sound. She'll press her lips against the glass and be cold for just a minute, and then she'll take a sip and feel warm again."

And it's also worth a read because even if Birdie is the Same Old Tortured Soul you often come across, the themes of the book are not: The concept of running away from the life you hate, just to end up finding that same life wrapped firmly around you. The futility of self-loathing, self-punishing, and basing all happiness and well-being on a career. The idea of being *real*, whatever that is. And finally, sinking into what's easy and what's expected, and maybe even being pretty content with it.

Micah says

I'm not a huge fan of realism in fiction, as I suppose anyone could guess from looking at the rest of my "shelf". That said, what Jenny has done in "Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe" is very similar to another of my recent favorites - John Brandon's "Arkansas". She's created a world of emotion ruled by words. Phrases that are clever, sparse and targeted. They make a point and drive it home. Birdie, the no-nonsense character she's created, is spoken - she doesn't speak. The others are varied and believable - no mere props. It's arguable which sort of realism this is at all. Is it the sort that forces you to love or to leave, or the sort that leaves you indifferent to the spaces and situations portrayed? I think it's somewhere between - it's a

Facebook friend or an acquaintance you're tempted to get to know better. That's a real achievement as far as I'm concerned, considering the limited appeal of the vapid cul de sac of a culture it pries open for us. There's a through the looking glass moment for the Hollywood culture where Birdie briefly wonders what is on the other side of a wall somewhere in the sprawl of LA. "Probably nothing" she thinks, and leaves it to the reader to imagine a logistics warehouse, a meth lab, a safari park or a vacant lot.

Jenny reveals a world that's neither for nor against her heroine - it just is, more or less indifferently, so it is ours. This is a refreshing world to see through her eyes, one which doesn't demand that we view the lead as a victim of anything greater or lesser than her own ambition and intelligence. Jenny also peppers the story with a host of memorable images. They're cinematic, for the most part, in the studied, deliberate sense of cinema created by Haneke or a new auteur like Rick Alverson, where the image isn't done being made until it shifts on its heels for a while in the middle of a vast, uncomfortable silence. The young Birdie searching for herself in the mirror, daydreaming at the tail end of an industry party, the camel crickets scattering from the lights flicked on in the basement, the speaking ice cubes, the intense boredom of life on set. What finally happens isn't what we want to happen, or what Birdie wants to happen or what the author wants to happen (I got the feeling) - it's just the inevitable. It's fame and riches, just rewards, postmodernism and possibly, probably nothing.

Nicely done, Jenny, keep them coming!

Alyssa says

Highly recommended. Comes out on 06/08/10!

Karen says

Depressing, whiny story. Did not quite make 100 pages...life is too short for such drivel.

Jessica says

The book took a while to settle for me after I read it; the ending (and, actually, most of the book) garnered a strange reaction from my usual reading habits.

I usually enjoy books in which I like the protagonist. Or, so I thought. I realized to say this would be to oversimplify my thought process. I like books not in which I exactly like the protagonist, but I somehow relate to them or understand them.

I did not like Hollowell's main character Birdie Baker. Nothing she does is quite likable, and her motives are not deep but rather cliché and superficial. But there's something there that feels a bit too real - she is the cliché actress trying to make it, but her depressing sadness at her everyday life, her weariness really sold her as a character to me. I may not have liked her, but I understand her.

However, what really made me love this book was Hollowell's lovely prose and dismal, descriptive portrait of Hollywood. Hollowell writes well, and with biting, cynical humor that is necessary to tell such a tale. She

sets up scenes well and punctuates them with great dialogue. Can't wait for her next effort.

Alison Hardtmann says

She is preaching in the park with her mother when suddenly Wes is standing in front of her. Mother thrusts a pamphlet into his hand. Wes glances at Birdie, not recognizing her at first. Then there is the moment when his eyes slowly narrow, like a gear turning inside him. He stares, comparing, she knows, this girl with the other one. She didn't tell him about this life, but doesn't everyone have two? There is the life you live for your parents and then the life for you.

This is Jenny Hollowell's debut novel. It concerns Birdie, a young woman who grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household in Virginia, marrying at a young age the man chosen for her by her parents. She runs away to save herself, only to find that that escape wasn't an ending but a beginning. Despite leaving, she's still tethered to her past, even as she doubts her future. Los Angeles is wearing her down, not only with the endless auditions, but also with the need to pretend, to laugh at jokes that aren't funny, to smile at parties she'd rather not attend. It's changed her.

Now the phone is Lewis, wondering if she wants company. She is unsure of her answer, of what would be easiest. Lewis is better than most diversions because he doesn't seem bad for her, at least not in the way that drinking is bad for her or married directors are bad for her.

The writing in this book is gorgeous, both melancholy and comic. There were several passages, especially of dialogue, which I read more than once, Hollowell puts her sentences together so carefully that they appear as effortless as the life Birdie longs for.

Mother once told her never to pick up the phone on the first three rings. It makes you seem desperate, she said, like you're just sitting around waiting for someone to call you. Like you have nothing better to do. And so when the phone would ring Mother would stare at the jangling receiver, counting the rings until she was certain that whoever was at the other end of the line would not think she needed them.

Christina says

The main reason I liked this book was because the writing was so lyrical -- so many sentences just jumped out at me as gorgeous. I think I've been craving finely crafted prose and this book hit the spot. Story and plot-wise there wasn't much there, but it was more of a character-driven piece and I did feel invested in the characters. Surprisingly, because the main character is kind of a mess and not very sympathetic. But I still cared enough to keep reading. The tone of the book is a little distant and melancholy -- the main themes are guilt and trying to find meaning in the fakery of Los Angeles.

I'll admit I got more out of the book after reading the interview with the author in the back, where she explained some of what the main character was going through (if I were studying the book for school or a book club I guess I would have picked up on some of that eventually, but I read this in one day and prefer to have insights spoon-fed to me in those situations).

Kari says

I could NEVER be a psychiatrist or a psychologist and this book just confirmed that. Every time I read about, or listen to someone whose dealing with mental illness, the likes of which send the person into immobility, constant negativity, and apathy, I leave feeling drained. That's what this book did to me. I rushed through reading it because I wanted to get it over with, rip that bandaid off and move on with life.

Birdie's life is pathetic. She runs from what she knows to one of the most inhospitable places in the U.S. (Hollywood) and finds herself fighting all odds to become something she eventually finds she doesn't want. It's insanity. She rejects everything she's raised to believe, but then finds herself hating life because she hates life without her religious upbringing too. I can relate to wanting to get away, find yourself on your own, and make something of yourself that you can believe in. I can't relate to compromising everything about yourself in order to get what you 'think' you want. Birdie's left feeling hollow and so was I. Much of her 'duh, I get it now' moments were things I felt most sane people figure out without putting herself through Hades.

What Hollowell does well is her ability to transfer the reader to the crazy-place that is the mind of an unstable person. You can't help but be sucked into Birdie's depression. Her writing is well crafted, with imagery, symbolism, metaphors up the wazoo. While I can appreciate this, it felt over done. I started skimming sections because I simply DID NOT CARE about how crazy Birdie's mind had become. Time and again, I felt those long descriptions were ways to make the book longer or stall out the story's progress. I realize this is a literary device used to help the reader feel the interminably wait Birdie had while trying to make it in show business. But, man, it was ridiculous.

I can see why some people enjoyed the book though. It is raw, real, painful, and I'm guessing, honest in what the world of Hollywood puts some through. It also reminded me a lot of the American literature courses I took in college, Hemmingway, Faulkner, etc.--dark, depressing, and eerily reminds you of the realities of this harsh world. In some ways it reminded me of Sylvia Plath's writing in *The Bell Jar*. With those comparisons I think you can decide if this is your kind of book.
