



# Off Keck Road

*Mona Simpson*

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## Off Keck Road Mona Simpson

The narrative follows the lives of three women from 1956 to the present in Green Bay, Wis. Bea Maxwell, a practical, efficient woman, seems to have inherited the steadfast, can-do traits of earlier Midwestern heroines found in the landscapes of Willa Cather. The quintessential overachiever in high school, Bea is equally successful during a brief stint working for an advertising agency in Chicago. In terms of love or any risky emotional connection, however, Bea is somehow missing the boat, apparently by choice. She easily gives up her job and returns to Green Bay when her mother contracts rheumatoid arthritis. Once home, she is drawn to June Umberhum, a college friend who grew up off Keck Road. June has returned from an early marriage and is raising a daughter. Always a bit of a town rebel, June puts forth an effort to taste life, while Bea's desires remain submerged. Also telescoped into the neighborhood scene is Shelley, a Keck Road girl who contracted a mild case of polio as a child. The connections between these three women are gentle and unforced. They pass through the years in the eddies of their own interiors as their community expands around them

## Off Keck Road Details

Date : Published 2002 by Birlinn (first published 2000)

ISBN : 9781843540014

Author : Mona Simpson

Format : 167 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literary Fiction, Novels

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# From Reader Review Off Keck Road for online ebook

## Jeremy Steingraber says

Not a bad book, but I'm not really the target audience just picked it up from the local library because it was a Wisconsin author and felt like reading something out of my usual tastes.

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## Dan Sherrell says

Quiet, gorgeous Americana. Mona Simpson is an incredibly perceptive and humane observer of people.

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## Sandra says

It was an ok read for me. I might check out some of Ms. Simpson's other works, some that are newer reads.

From Amazon:

In this flawless novella, Mona Simpson turns her powers of observation toward characters who, unlike Ann and Adele August in her bestselling *Anywhere but Here*, choose to stay rather than go.

As a high school student in Green Bay, Bea Maxwell raised money for good causes; later, she became a successful real estate agent and an accomplished knitter. The one thing missing from her life is a romantic relationship. She soon settles comfortably into the role of stylish spinster and do-gooder. Woven into Bea's story are stories of other lifelong residents of Green Bay and the changes time brings to a town and its residents. This pure and simple work once again proves Mona Simpson one of the defining writers of her generation.

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## Margaret Carmel says

If you're looking for a lot in the way of action, this is not your book.

Off Keck Road is a beautiful novella about the lives of several women in Green Bay over the course of many decades. Simpson describes the changing landscape of Green Bay, three single women coming of age and dealing (or not dealing) with their problems.

I loved how Simpson focused on the struggles of women who were single, yet still had relationships with men. She created several characters that stand on their own without being in a romantic relationship, but did not ignore the role men played in their lives. It was not an all women utopia, but instead a realistic world where women are trying to find themselves in society that pushed them to the outside.

Great read.

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## **Sean Cisneros says**

Very good story telling and interesting characters made this book a great read for me.

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## **Paula says**

It's odd how similar this book is to *Empire Falls*, even though it's only a quarter of its size and about an area on the other side of the United States. It may be minimalistic instead of expansive, but *Off Keck Road* perfectly describes small town life and its inapplicability in today's world. People don't necessarily change, but places do; attachment to place is vastly important, which is why the end is, in many ways, heartbreaking. The perspective wanders among various characters, but it begins and ends largely with one (Bea Maxwell) who doesn't fit in and yet is the only one left. There are wealthy and poor, and the lifestyles of each is in many ways very different, but they remain consistent with what one might expect.

One thing that struck me was how closely I identified to Bea's character; I guess living in a small state is like living in a small town, and the continuous push-pull of expectations and desires is felt by everyone. Character, not plot, is what drives this novella forward, so one has to be interested in the characters if one wants to keep reading to the end. Also, reading this in as few sittings as possible makes it easier to keep track of who is related to whom, who lives where, and what time period currently is being described because the book hops around in time and amid characters in a non-linear way. I think the trouble I had keeping all the details straight in my head was due to picking it up for short periods and reading just a chapter at a time.

Worthwhile read for someone willing to put in the time to read it and invest oneself in the characters. This book doesn't aim to take any positions or make any big points, it just follows small-town people around, like regular people do every day.

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## **Rosie says**

I just started *Off Keck Road*. She interviewed Edmund White last night at the Hammer. It was hilarious! She is quick and funny, and I can't wait to get into this story further.

O.K. Several hours later, I devoured this book like a box of See's. It's about two women who grew up in the same town, on opposite sides of the track, and who never leave. Their lives are similar yet so very different. Both never married or had children, the things everyone in Green Bay associated with a successful life. They both ended up with success in their own way, and more than any of their peers would ever really know. It's also about family and place, and to me, San Pedro.

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## **Erik Laiho says**

This novella is the shortest of her works and, for me, the one for which I have the fondest memories. *Anywhere But Here* gets all the attention, but this is the book for me.

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### **Cathryn Conroy says**

This pithy novella by Mona Simpson is a story of what was, what is and what could have been. Taking place in Green Bay, Wisconsin in the '50s, '60s '70s and beyond, the story focuses on Bea Maxwell, who grew up in Green Bay, went away to college and then returned to never leave. Bea never marries at a time when marriage was the end-all goal for women. Her story is interwoven with that of other residents, some of whom are also not following the norm—a young woman who is living with polio, a divorced single mother and a real estate magnate who plays the drums. The plot, such as it is, is not riveting. The book will not keep you up at night to find out what happens next. But it is filled with wisdom and wit about the joy and sorrows of an ordinary life in an ordinary town, especially for those who are deemed a bit "different." And in this sense, it is brilliant.

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### **Dawn says**

Except for historical context this is a waste of time. There really is no story line. Most characters are not developed enough to remember who your reading about and how they are connected. Really this Novella could have been a short story and been more successful.

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### **Marielle says**

After reading the first page, I wondered if I would really like this book. I saw Mona Simpson speak and she was such a good story teller in person, that I kept reading. I'm glad I did. Our main character, Bea, eventually goes through life without ever having a male companion or losing her virginity. We think at first that the book is only going to explore part of her life, but really it goes from post college on and back. Shelly, the girl who contracts polio, is the most interesting of the characters in the book. Although she might not be as pretty as the other girls, she takes what is given to her and tries to actually enjoy it, even if she is nursing an old man and cooking him dinners, she enjoys the high life if only for a while. It's interesting to see these possibilities of companionship come up with the priest and Bea's boss. Everyone is so intertwined in a small town, it makes sense, but nothing ever comes of what we want to happen in love for her. Which makes sense in her reality. Instead she manages the real estate market in Greenbay, phones her divorced and re-married friend Judith every once and a while, and eats dinner in bed.

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### **Carmen says**

Summary:

Set in Green Bay, Wis., where Simpson grew up, "Off Keck Road" moves between the last few decades, telling of characters who are emotionally and often physically paralyzed, frozen in place and standing apart, destined, in some cases, to miss out on even the most ordinary chances for happiness.

That's all I will tell you about the summary, and jump right into my review.

I give it 2 1/2 stars. Not two stars because I didn't dislike it, but not three stars because I also did not like it. I found it to be lackluster and shallow. While the characters had some serious flaws, both emotional and physical, I was never invested in them. I continued to have to go back and read about characters and their relationships to one another, and I was still confused.

For example, Shelley's grandmother was called Gram Umberhum. George and June were her kids. Shelley helped George build a pool in his backyard (when he was an adult) and they started a sexual relationship, even though she was young enough to be his daughter (maybe younger).

My confusion is this: I never remember reading Shelley's last name, but if her grandmother's last name is Umberhum, couldn't we assume that Shelley and George are related in some way? I could never figure it out, but didn't try very hard because I was at the point that I just didn't care. It was creepy either way.

I did find out that Keck Road was more or less on the lesser desirable end of the real estate spectrum, residents didn't have large homes and often didn't keep them up. June lived on Keck Road and was embarrassed by it. Other than that, I'm not sure what foreshadowing the title was supposed to impart.

So it went with this book. If it had been a bit longer, I probably would have put it down, but at 167 pages, it was worth it just to add to my "Books I have Read" list.

Can't recommend this one.

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## **SP says**

I must say that the first 40 pages of this novella is *\*VERY CONFUSING\**, numerous names just pour out without context.

In fact I gave up twice, both at about 40 pages. However it has only 167 pages and it seems a waste if I gave up at a quarter, so I pick it up a third time and finally read it through.

To be fair, the final pages are rather good, the language and tone is nicely detached, some scenes are moving. But it is so only after you know WHO are the true protagonists of this book, that's Bea and Shelly. This book is to depict their lonesome spinster lives. I like both stories of Bea and Shelly, both characters are memorable, especially Bea.

But would it be too late?? Not every reader is patient. After finish the book, I do not know why it is necessary to introduce so many names in the first pages. It is really frustrating that I tried to chart out the relations between them during my reading and failed. Even now, after I finish this book I still can not locate some of them correctly.

And, somebody please tells me, what is the difference between gramma and grandmother? In page 16, "her gramma and the grandmother... should do something together" and in page 38: "her grandmother died.... her gramma had a stroke". So are these two persons or the same one??

This is a good story and has very nice atmosphere --- once you know the main story line. But as said, it is

very confusing at the beginning. Dear Simpson, if you read this review, please do not do that again!

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### **Patrick Faller says**

In this expansive novella wrought of spare, lyrical passages, Mona Simpson traces with affection the entire arcs of two women's lives. Bea Maxwell never marries, forswearing a life in Chicago to return to Green Bay to care for her ailing busybody mother as arthritis cripples her. Bea's life as a prosperous but frustrated real estate saleswoman counters but parallels the coming-of-age of young Shelley, whose stubbornness couples nicely with a naivety that contrasts Bea's ability to glimpse the motives of the proper old-fashioned men and women of her parents' generation. The point of view flitters gracefully between these women's impressions of their lives and reveals the frustrations of growing up in a city growing less familiar with each new subdivision. Simpson remains faithful to her character's impressions and standpoints and doesn't allow for commentary; rather, in her focus on the pains of spinsterhood, the quiet death of one's parents, the distance that grows between siblings and old friends, Simpson gives life to the imperceptible pains of stagnation and stasis most people ignore as the world around them dims, and revives our hope briefly in the potential for such change to enliven us, to redefine ourselves and start anew. For my money, this spare little book says much more about the cost of living in a maturing America than most of the bigger, sardonic books on the shelves. I always was more afraid of needles than knives; that kind of pain was impossible to ignore because you lived to feel it.

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### **Shauna says**

There is two reasons why I chose to read this book, the first and ultimate reason being that I am from Green Bay, WI, and the book takes place there. The second being that Mona Simpson also wrote "Anywhere but Here," which I remember liking. This book however is different. The only reason that I enjoyed it even partially was because she references things and places that I know about, even being over 50 years ago. Other than that, I think the writing lacked, and the 'storyline' - if there even was one, was horrible. The story follows different women as they grow up and then how their lives interact. The story doesn't sound horrible, but there is really no real point, and I ended the book feeling like I wasted time.

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