



# Perfect

*Rachel Joyce*

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## **Perfect** Rachel Joyce

A spellbinding novel that will resonate with readers of Mark Haddon, Louise Erdrich, and John Irving, "Perfect" tells the story of a young boy who is thrown into the murky, difficult realities of the adult world with far-reaching consequences.

Byron Hemmings wakes to a morning that looks like any other: his school uniform draped over his wooden desk chair, his sister arguing over the breakfast cereal, the click of his mother's heels as she crosses the kitchen. But when the three of them leave home, driving into a dense summer fog, the morning takes an unmistakable turn. In one terrible moment, something happens, something completely unexpected and at odds with life as Byron understands it. While his mother seems not to have noticed, eleven-year-old Byron understands that from now on nothing can be the same.

What happened and who is to blame? Over the days and weeks that follow, Byron's perfect world is shattered. Unable to trust his parents, he confides in his best friend, James, and together they concoct a plan. . .

As she did in her debut, "The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry," Rachel Joyce has imagined bewitching characters who find their ordinary lives unexpectedly thrown into chaos, who learn that there are times when children must become parents to their parents, and who discover that in confronting the hard truths about their pasts, they will forge unexpected relationships that have profound and surprising impacts. Brimming with love, forgiveness, and redemption, "Perfect" will cement Rachel Joyce's reputation as one of fiction's brightest talents.

Praise for Rachel Joyce

"Perfect"

"'Perfect' is a poignant and powerful book, rich with empathy and charged with beautiful, atmospheric writing."--Tana French, author of "In the Woods" and "Broken Harbor"

"[Rachel] Joyce, showing the same talent for adroit plot development seen in the bestselling "The Unlikely Pilgrimage" of Harold Fry, " brings both narrative strands together in a shocking, redemptive denouement."--Publishers Weekly"

" "

"['Perfect's] unputdownable factor . . . lies in its exploration of so many multilayered emotions. There is the unbreakable bond between mother and son, the fear of not belonging . . . and how love can offer redemption."--London Evening Standard"

" "

"The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry"

"[Rachel Joyce] has a lovely sense of the possibilities of redemption. . . . She's cleared space where miracles are still possible."--Ron Charles, "The Washington Post"

" "

"Joyce's beguiling debut is [a] modest-seeming story of 'ordinary' English lives that enthralls and moves you as it unfolds."--"People" (four stars)

" "

"[A] gorgeously poignant novel of hope and transformation."--O: The Oprah Magazine"

" "

"A gentle adventure with an emotional wallop. It's a smart, feel-good story. . . . I can't think of a better recommendation for summer reading. And take your time, just as Harold does."--Bob Minzesheimer, "USA Today" "From the Hardcover edition."

## Perfect Details

Date : Published January 14th 2014 by Random House (first published July 4th 2013)

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Author : Rachel Joyce

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## From Reader Review Perfect for online ebook

**Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says**

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Have you ever picked up a book to find that it wasn't what you expected? PERFECT was that for me. It was really difficult to get into, but the beautiful writing and dual narrative were oddly compelling. More so when you start to see how the concept of "perfect" ties into the adult man, Jim, who is ruled by his OCD and the demons from his past, and Byron, the child of WASP-y parents whose lives are torn apart because of a tragedy.

It's been a while since a story I was enjoying made me so angry. I think the last time was something by J.M. Coetzee. He's good at that. Rachel Joyce is also good, but not *as*. Byron's story was interesting, but unraveled too quickly at the end. Jim's story, on the other hand, had an unnecessary romance subplot.

PERFECT isn't a perfect book by any means, but it's a fast read with an interesting mystery at its heart, and watching both story lines spiral downward has all the appeal of a literary train wreck.

Sorry if this review is short, but I can't say much more than this without spoiling everything. :)

3 stars.

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### **Margarita says**

1.5 out of 5.

There are two alternating parallel narratives in this novel that eventually intersect. Pacing is an issue.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the novel moves at a snail's pace while the last  $\frac{1}{4}$  is rushed. The conclusion, although satisfactory (in that it wraps up the storyline), is too tidy to be realistic.

Character development is stiff – As a result, the unfolding of events don't quite fit together. The literary devices used to move the story forward are gimmicky, forced and deliberately misleading. All in all, for an author who's been nominated for awards previously, this novel's writing lacked sophistication although it flirted with pretention. Quite boring.

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## **Carolyn says**

This is the story of two young boys, a dysfunctional family and how a small event rippled out to affect lives over the next few decades.

The two boys, Byron and James are intrigued by the announcement that time is going to be advanced by two seconds to account for the slight difference the Earth's rotation and the length of a year. Byron becomes obsessed with how this will affect his life and when his mother Diana has an accident at the time he believes the seconds are added, events in his life start to spiral out of control.

The book alternates chapters between the story of that summer in 1972 when Byron and James plot to help Diana atone for her accident and forty years later where a man called Jim, destitute and suffering from OCD is trying to make a life for himself. It took me a little while to get into the book and to work out how the two threads of the story are connected, however it was worthwhile persevering. To me Diana was a tragic figure, married to the wrong man, a cold overbearing misogynist who drained all the colour and life out of her. Jim's story is also a sad one and you wish you could wind time back and let him start again on a happier route. Despite that there was also humour and love in this well crafted novel.

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## **Maxine (Booklover Catlady) says**

Astonishing book, I'm in tears after literally just finishing it, this book punched me in the stomach and took emotions to another place. I have rarely cried reading a book, interestingly Rachel Joyce's first novel, The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry did too.

I won't repeat the book synopsis here but the book is magical, the writing is sublime. It is a book to please persist with, it can seem slow going in places but when all the pieces of the story interweave together it will be worth it, I promise.

I loved Diana, Byron's mother in the book, because she could be any of a million women in the world, living a similar existence, she was so normal yet so tragic too.

There is humour if you look for it in this book but overall it's a sad melancholy story but wow does it pack a powerful punch at the end. I was similarly moved by her other novel, you just simply have to read this book.

I just want to hug Byron, the young boy whom much of the book focuses on, he made me want to invite him home for a hot chocolate and popcorn. Beautiful and heartbreaking portrayal of a young boys life and inner world.

It made me cry! I got choked up, that never happens to me, ever....highly recommended reading, and hold on to the very end, don't skip a single word, you'll be so glad you did, but have the tissues ready.

Rachel Joyce is one of my new favourite authors. Beautifully written books that capture the light and shade of life.

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## Kevin Ansbro says

Being a fan of Rachel Joyce's other work (*The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* & *The Love Song of Queenie Hennessy*), I had high hopes for this one.

Unfortunately I was left feeling underwhelmed, which is a shame as the premise is a fascinating one: how life can turn on a sixpence within the blink of an eye; in this case within the space of two leap seconds, which were added to time in the year 1972.

*Perfect* is incredibly sad, but it's also ponderous; it truly lacks pizzazz and needs some va-va-voom.

Nnnnggg, and the 'twist' was easy to predict, which is always maddening.

So, nope, not for me.

But please don't let this put you off those other two books; both are simply glorious!

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## Michael says

I was charmed and emotionally wrenched many times with this coming of age tale combined with that of a middle-aged man trying to evolve past his mental illness. So many passages shone with the special aura of truth. In other ways the plot elements felt a bit too "precious."

The story slowly connects the story of a ten-year old boy, Byron, trying to correct the unhappiness in his mother's life in 1972 with that of Jim, a lonely middle-aged man beset with obsessive compulsive disorder in the current time. Byron is a sensitive kid in an upper-middle class family with a loving stay-at-home mom, Diana, his sister Lucy, and a cold, controlling father who comes home only on weekends from his banking job. He has become worried about an adjustment to take place in time, an addition of two seconds to the official clock to make up a bit of variation in planetary spin. When his mother has a minor accident on the way to school she is unaware of, these threats link up in his mind and threaten the perfection of the world he tries so hard to hold on to. His mother is so precious to him:

*When Byron pictured the inside of his mother, he imagined a series of inlaid drawer with jeweled handles so delicate that his fingers would struggle to get a grip.*

Her tenderness grounds his world:

*"What is it love?" He told her he was frightened and she rushed to shut the window. She rearranged the curtains into neat blue folds.*

*"You're such a worrier," she smiled. "Things are never so bad as we think." Sitting on the edge of his bed, she stroked her fingers over his forehead. She sang a quiet song he didn't know and he closed his eyes.*

He engages his friend James to help him figure things out:

*He needed to find James. He needed to find him urgently. James understood things in ways that Byron couldn't. James was the logical piece of Byron that was missing. The first time Mr. Roper had explained about relativity, for instance, James had nodded enthusiastically as if magnetic forces were a truth he expected all along, whereas for Byron the new idea was like tangles in his head.*

He is a quite bamboozled by the mental leaps James is capable of:

*James Lowe had once said that a dog was not necessarily a dog. ...Maybe, he had said, a dog was really a hat. ...I am only saying that hat and dog are words that someone has chosen. And if they are only words someone has chosen, it stands to reason they may have got the wrong ones.*

Together they come up with a series of interventions to change his mother's life, ways to help her get back to perfection and to be her true self through alleviation of her isolation and the controlling boundaries laid down by his father. In the process, he feels himself acquire agency in the world, taking steps toward becoming a man. But his mother surprises him with the changes she makes, leading to more risks to stability of Byron's world. Many of the attitudes among her coffee-clatch friends she ends up defying (having a friend outside her class; believing a woman's highest role is not having babies) seem more out of the 50's than the 70's, but I let that imperfection in Joyce's plot slide. It was Byron's desperate sense of responsibility for his mother that won me over:

*He didn't know how he was going to keep his mother safe. The job seemed too big for one boy alone. There was something about her, something pure and fluid that would not be contained.*

In the segments about Jim in the other story thread we learn he has spent years in and out of a mental hospital and now lives in a camper while working at cleaning tasks at a restaurant in a shopping center. The mystery of his connection to the other narrative lurks, but I was content just to dwell in his story. It is one of the most sensitive and empathetic portrayals of mental illness I have encountered. For example, in one scene, a co-worker, Eileen, defends him from a verbal attack by a diner whose coat he has knocked to the floor, and the way the emotional violence undermines his mind rang true for me:

*"Pick up that coat." ... "Why don't you do it yourself?" ...The woman will be hurt. Eileen will be hurt. The supermarket customers and Mr. Meade and the girls in the kitchen will be hurt and it is all Jim's fault. ...He can feel the woman watching, both Eileen and the customer with her metallic voice. It is like being peeled. He is more them than himself. Then the rude woman sits.*

How his OCD rituals work to make him feel safe is elucidated well by Joyce. In remembering how a psychiatric nurse once exhorted Jim that "You will see that the rituals make no difference", he clings to his convictions:

*But here she was wrong. There were so many people, there was so much chaos—there were fast trains, and busy platforms, there were pigeons missing feet, broken windows and cavernous air vents—that what he learned that morning was that life was even more hazardous than he had previously realized.*

He suffers from a stammer and has big memory gaps. We can only wonder what role shock therapy has contributed to such problems:

*ECT would not cause a stammer, the doctor's agreed. Jim knew they must be right; they were professionals. It was just that a short while after his last session his mouth stopped remembering how to make words.*

Despite the alien world of Jim's mind, his confusion over his budding relationship comes off as universal: *He doesn't know suddenly what words mean. He can't see the sense in them; they seem to slice things in half even as he thinks of them. Is he, when he says, "More crisps?", actually saying something else, something like "I love you, Eileen?" And is she, when she says, "Thanks you," saying something else, something like "Yes, Jim, I love you."*

Many times his outlook leads to epiphanies that make me think he has a better handle on the mysteries of reality than I do:

*Seeing the lilies, Jim's heart bangs inside his chest. The petaled hoods are so white, so waxy, that they shine.*

*He can smell them. He doesn't know if he is terribly happy or terribly sad. Maybe he is both. Sometimes things happen like that; they appear like a sign from another part of life, from another context, as if stray moments from the past and present can join up and gain extra significance.*

As Jim's world seems to open up and Byron's gets more precarious, we look for revelation in the mysterious connection between these two figures in the story. I was content to let Joyce solve it for me at her own pace. The resolution was a surprise, and it felt a little contrived with a bit of the feeling of a fable. It wasn't quite as "perfect" as in "The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry", but for both the life of the story lies in the journey, not in the arrival at the destination.

This book was provided by the publisher as an e-book loan through the Netgalley program.

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## **Patrice Hoffman says**

How many times have we convinced ourselves that we'd only missed a change so profound to our lives by a few second? Or that if only we'd been somewhere at a certain time could our luck have gone differently? This is the idea that cripples Byron Hemmings when he's sure that the 2 seconds added on to time have caused a chain reaction of events that forever change his life. Rachel Joyce's Perfect explores time and how it affects us all. Good or bad.

In June of 1972, Byron's overactive imagination convinces him that the alter in time will only end with horrible consequences. He asks his best friend James Lowe, who's also the person who told him the news of 2 additional seconds, how can they add 2 seconds that don't exist. *It wasn't safe*. If only he hadn't been told about the 2 seconds, his life could quite possibly have gone in a different direction.

While rushing from the home one morning, Byron's mother, Diane, decides to take a shortcut through a part of the town that's considered to be seedy. Digby Road is one to be avoided at all costs says his father and their other upper-crust friends. While trying to recoup the loss of time, Diane's new Jaguar seemingly collides with something. Byron is sure that his mother has either ignored that she hit something/someone or is just oblivious to what has happened. They continue on this forbidden road but Byron is unable to forget that something tragic has happened.

Perfect alternates with an equally interesting story of a man named Jim. Jim has been in and out of psyche institutes and bases his life on rituals. These rituals he must perform is in order to avoid mistakes or misfortune. Ironical since he lives out of a van and seems like a shell of a man. His story is heartbreaking yet I still had hope for this man. He seemed to be so damaged and in need of a friend. Anyone who would care about what time has done to him or cost him.

A few short months after the time change life changes drastically for both boys Byron and James. Because Perfect primarily focuses on Byron, we readers are able to take the journey with him. It's almost like a coming of age story at times when Joyce describes the inner struggles that Byron goes through. We also see how protective of his mother he is. Lovely Diane...



Perfect seems to focus heavily on Diane. She's the forgotten housewife who's husband only comes home on the weekends. Sure she gets to live in a magnificent home in the English countryside and has two wonderful children. But why does she seem so neglected? Byron seemingly wants to protect her from everything. He almost takes on the role of being man of the house especially where her new friend Beverly is concerned. The two, Diane and Byron, are definitely close. It is because of Byron's intentions of her well-being that things fall apart.

Overall, Perfect was the perfect book to start off 2014. Although it is heavy and dark there are moments where hope prevails. The best way to welcome the new year is to realize that time waits for no one. What's done is done. What will be will be. Sometimes it's better to just live out the mistakes instead of working to repair them.

*Copy provided by Random House via Netgalley*

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## **Marvin says**

Great literary dramas strive on understatement. From the first few pages of Rachel Joyce's nearly perfect *Perfect*, we know there will be tragedy. We know it will affect two children in traumatic ways. But the author leads us on oh so slowly, giving us bits and pieces as we need them. We are given a tantalizing premise at the first page. In 1972, James Lowe tells his best friend Byron Hemmings, that 2 seconds were added onto time to keep it in sync with the earth's movement. What James accepts as an exciting bit of trivia, Bryon reacts with fear. Then an unfortunate event occurs that cements Bryon's fear that reality has been thrown out of whack. Everything that follows comes from these occurrences.

But the novel is about much more than tragedy. It is told in alternating stories. One taking place in the 70s and another happening about 40 years later. They intersect well with all the details being filled as we read the novel. As important to the story as Jim and Bryon is Bryon's mother, Diana. She is in a position of privilege but is uncomfortable to it and as delicate to reality as her son Bryon. The British author is taking on the issue of class with some devastating frankness. I was also impressed by Joyce's depiction of the Hemmings family. The father is often absent and while Diana tries to be a good mother, her relation to Bryon is more like equals than mother and son. We find the son often taking the role of dispensing advice to his mother which only heighten the sense of doom as we watch both of them unraveling.

It a delicate and beautiful balancing act. James seems to be on the outskirts of the action but often the instigator. He is seen by others as the troublemaker and maybe a bit unhinged but one of the delights in this novel is in discovering the true connection with the characters and especially the connection to the two individuals depicts in the two alternating stories.

The novel grabbed me from the first page yet some may find it a little plodding and frustrating. I can only say stick with it and you will be rewarded and maybe a little stunned with the end like I was.

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## **Shelby \*trains flying monkeys\* says**

2.5 stars

Byron Hemming's friend James informs him that two seconds are being added to the year. James knows all kinds of facts so Bryan becomes obsessed with the fact. It will mess everything up. You just can't mess with time.

**Two seconds are huge. It's the difference between something happening and something not happening. You could take one step too many and fall over the edge of a cliff. It's very dangerous.**

On the way to school that morning that Bryan thinks the time is being added his mom is running late taking his sister and Bryan to school. So she takes a shortcut through Digby Road, that bad part of town that his father has forbidden her to go.

Bryan's father has set ways that he wants his wife to act while he works away from home. He calls to make sure that no one is there with her every day. He comes home on weekends so she can wash his clothes. He buys her a new Jaguar so they can impress the other families in the snooty area they live in. I don't like Bryan's father.

**"Although your father is a very clever man, of course. Much more clever than me. I've never read a book from start to finish."**

**"You've read magazines. You read cookery books."**

**"Yes, but they have pictures. Clever books only have words."**

During that car ride Bryan sees his watch go back in time those two seconds. Then an accident happens and it changes that whole summer and the rest of all their lives.

There is an alternating viewpoint from current time of a man learning to live outside the mental hospital on his own. It ends up all tying into the story but it's a bumpy ride.

Usually I like darker reads, but dang this book read slow. I kept picking it up and making myself read.

Then the ending comes around and I ended up liking the book. It's dark and twisty and bleak.

I've had this book from Netgalley for awhile and like the ~~slacker~~ boss that I am I'm just now getting to it. Sorry, Netgalley gods.

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## **Jane says**

In 1972 two seconds were added to time, to bring the clock back into line with the movement of the earth. Now two seconds might not seem like very much at all, but they could be very important. Byron was eleven years old, and he knew that.

*"Two seconds are huge. It's the difference between something happening and something not happening. It's very dangerous."*

He was right, of course. Two seconds can make all the difference; for better or for worse.

Byron and his best friend James talked it over. James was sure that everything would be alright but, though

Byron had great faith in his friend, he continued to worry. And what happened one morning, when his mother was driving Byron and sister his sister Lucy to school, proved him right. He saw the second hand of his watch go backwards and then it happened ....

Diana, Byron's mother didn't even notice, and so once again Byron consulted James. They launched 'Operation Perfect' to analyse what happened, to manage the repercussions, and to make things right, as they had been before. But they find that things that happen, things that they do, can have unforeseen and unmanageable consequences.

'Operation Perfect' changed everything. For ever.

I loved watching Byron and James. I cared about them, and I worried about them. I wanted to reach into the book and guide them, but of course I couldn't.

But this is really Diana's story; she was its emotional centre. She was plucked from life as a performer to become the trophy wife of a successful man. A man who seemed to give her everything but his time. She didn't care for the society of competitive, middle-class mothers, the things that her husband thought important didn't interest her at all, and at times she struggled to hold on. But she loved her children, she came into her own as a mother, and that was so lovely to see.

'Operation Perfect' could make her or it could break her, and my heart rose and fell as events unfolded.

The story was both profound and moving: one for the heart and the head.

And there's another story. When I realised my heart sank, because the device is over-used, and because I didn't think the book needed it. But I was wrong, and I was quickly engrossed in both strands of the story. It's not often you get a twin narrative when either story could have sustained a book on its own ...

The second strand was set in the present day, and Jim was trying to get back on his feet, but it wasn't easy. He had mental health issues, he'd been in and out of institutions, but he had a job and he was living independently. Could he stay on his feet? I really hoped so, and it was lovely to see him find friendship and support can come from the most unlikely of places. He saw new possibilities. But could he take them?

Jim's story is beautifully observed, and told with such understanding.

I knew that the two stories must be linked, but I didn't think too much about how. I was too caught up with the characters and the story, and I had every confidence in the author.

This book is a step forward from 'The Strange Pilgrimage of Harold Fry.' It's more sophisticated, more profound, and it speaks so very, very well of what it is that makes us human. The characters and their relationships are beautifully drawn, their stories are cleverly and elegantly constructed, but most of all this is a wonderfully readable book.

There are so many wonderful details, but I'm not going to spoil them. Because this is a story that can touch your head, your heart and your soul.

And now I am really eager to find out what Rachel Joyce will do with her third book ...

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## Ace says

My third Rachel Joyce novel, all of which are 5 star gorgeous reads ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

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## Mo says

I received an advance copy of this book through a GoodReads contest. My thanks to the author.

I opened the book... read a few pages... closed the book. Opened the book... read a few pages... closed the book. You get the idea? I just couldn't get into the story. It seemed to go and on, and I could see where the main part of the story was headed, and it seemed to be CRAWLING to get there. It was an awfully long way to go to get to the payoff at the end (for the other part of the dual story).

I started this book on Nov 18th and didn't finish it until Nov 26th. 9 days is a VERY long time for me to take to read a book. It started to feel like homework, I really wanted to read something else, I started to resent having to read it, and it went downhill from there.

As of today, there are 183 reviews and 597 ratings for this book here on GoodReads. So I don't feel too bad about not writing a more detailed review. Suffice it to say that it wasn't for me.

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## Hanne says

I absolutely loved Rachel Joyce's debut novel 'The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry', so I was excited to start her latest one. And as it often goes with books you're really excited about: some of my hopes were satisfied, some a bit less. But that doesn't change the fact that this is a really nice book that many people will enjoy reading.

Two alternating stories are being told in this novel. The most interesting one takes place in 1972, the year that two seconds were going to be added to the clock because time was out of joint with the movement of the Earth. The thought terrifies Byron Hemmings, an 11-year-old upper class boy: Time is not something to be tampered with.

*"The addition of two seconds was extremely exciting, said James. First, man had put a man on the moon. Now they were going to alter time. But how could two seconds exist where two seconds had not existed before?"*

One morning everything goes wrong: shattered glass at the breakfast table, traffic jams and to avoid being late they drive through Digby Road, a place the upper class doesn't go. And just then, Byron notices his watch go one second back and then one second forward again. Time was being added right there, and in two

seconds a lot can happen.

*“Nothing happened by itself. And even though it was not his mother’s fault, even though no one knew about the accident, there must be repercussions. He listened to the clocks all over the house, ticking and tocking and chiming their passage through time. One day – if not now, then in the future – someone would have to pay.”*

I loved the way this part of the story was written: Byron’s unease about the two seconds, his stunted attempts to right the wrongs, the daily visits of people who don’t seem to belong there and the stubborn refusal of his sister to accept them.

There is a second story being told in current time, and though this additional storyline brings some depth to the novel, it still failed to grab me and all I wanted was to go back to 1972. The second story’s ending also didn’t really work for me: the sunshine breaks through the skies a bit too bright and sudden. I would have been happier for it to end with just the suggestion of rainbows and sunshine ahead.

In many ways, I think this book has more mature plot and theme than her previous novel did. The opposition of upper class versus lower class works out really well for instance, but I thought it was less strong on the characters. There are some really intriguing ones especially in the back story with Byron, Lucy and their mother, but none of them grabbed me like Harold Fry did.

The biggest grievance I have is about the title though: ‘Perfect’ is such a weird title for a book like this. First of that word has been overused by chick-lit and romance novels and many people who would enjoy this novel might not even consider it because of that title; but above all – I don’t think it covers the book really well.

I’ve noticed that nearly all translations have changed the title, and I don’t think that’s a coincidence, because all of these titles (which I clumsily translated – except for the Icelandic, that’s all google translate’s work) would work so much better for this book.

*Dutch: ‘The day time stood still’*

*French: ‘Two seconds too much’*

*German: ‘The year that needed two seconds more’*

*Italian: ‘The bizarre incident of stolen time’*

*Icelandic: ‘When two seconds were added to time’*

But in the end, a title is just that: a title. It doesn’t change the story itself, and I think that anyone who loved reading about Harold Fry, will enjoy reading Byron’s story as well.

*Disclaimer: This book has been provided by the publisher in exchange for an honest review. This review reflects my own experience and opinion with this book. All quotes are taken from the pre-published copy and may be altered or omitted from the final copy.*

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## **Jill says**

First, I'd be remiss if I didn't give a big thank you to Goodreads FirstReads and Random House for providing an advance copy of PERFECT in exchange for an honest review. I was thrilled to win this book since I loved Ms. Joyce's debut book, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Frye*.

Rachel Joyce deserves applause for not going back to the well. PERFECT is an entirely different book, revealing the versatility of this author. And indeed, I expect it WILL be Perfect for some readers. My personal reading experience was a bit more conflicted.

The book focuses on two boys: Byron and James, two privileged 11-year-olds who attend Winston House School because it is private. James is the cleverer of the two, and shares some trivia with Byron: two seconds will be added to time to balance time with the earth's movement. Those two seconds will eventually make a world of difference when his focus on the time anomaly coincides with a terrible miscalculation on the part of his mother, Diana.

Alternating chapters center on an older man named Jim, a gentle but damaged character whose obsessive-compulsive disorder and memory loss place him out of step with those around him. These two seemingly unrelated stories eventually provide the whole of a puzzle.

The author knows how to tell a compelling story; she has proved that before and she proves it again. Yet the story, this time, may be a little too pat. Acquiescent Diana – who tries mightily to be the perfect wife-- and her controlling husband, Seymour, are a little too clichéd, even for the early 1970s (which is when this book takes place). Her would-be friend, Beverley, who is of a whole different social class, is too evident in her manipulation; I couldn't quite understand why Diana couldn't see through her. And Jim's therapeutic guidance can seem rote ("Yes, we have done some very good work," says the counselor. Jim is ready to let go. He can get on with his life now.")

Additionally, the theme is hammered home once too often "You said we shouldn't play with time. It isn't up to us, you said, "You were right. It's playing with fire when we tamper with the gods." And later "All those years of trying to get it right –they meant nothing. You can run and run, but in the end you won't get away from the gods."

While not perfect, this is far from an imperfect read. I can imagine this book being a favorite of book clubs for the questions it evokes about social strata and rigid gender expectations, fractured lives and false self-perceptions, the stigma of mental illness, and perfection is often not the standard we should strive for. I encourage other readers to see for themselves whether the book speaks to them.

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## **Barbara says**

Eleven-year-old Byron Hemmings becomes anxious when his friend James tells him that two seconds are going to be added to the clock to compensate for the 1972 leap year. Fretting about this when his mother

Diana is driving him to upscale Winston House school one morning, Byron is sure his watch has moved backward. He insists on showing Diana the watch, which causes her to swerve her Jaguar and hit a young girl on Digby Street - a neighborhood of working class people. Unaware of what's happened Diana continues on her way.

Byron, obsessed with the accident, hounds Diana until he convinces her of the incident and she goes back to Digby Street to "confess". This starts a series of events that have dire consequences. Diana develops a friendship with Beverley, mother of the injured child Jeanie. Jeanie sustained very minor injuries but - as Beverley becomes more and more envious of Diana's lovely home and lifestyle - Jeanie's "disability" suspiciously become worse and worse. This, in turn, makes Diana more and more frantic to make amends.

Byron, wanting to help Diana and encouraged by his friend James, studies what's going on and keeps a journal where he writes and sketches everything - starting with the accident and continuing with Beverley's visits to his home, Jeanie's escalating problems, and so on. He shares this observations with James, who seems to be over-interested in the entire affair.

All this exacerbates the tension in the Hemmings home, which is already high. Byron's father Seymour, who works in the city and comes home only on weekends, is wildly jealous, suspicious of Diana, obsessed with appearances, and distant toward Byron and his sister Lucy. Thus Diana - who seems to have an "unrespectable" history and takes some kind of medication - is determined to keep the accident and new friendship a secret from her husband.

This story alternates with anecdotes about a man named Jim that take place forty years in the future. Jim - who has spent most of his life in mental institutions - is now out. He has a bad stammer and is severely handicapped by obsessive compulsive disorder. However, Jim is able to live in his camper and maintain a job cleaning tables at a supermarket cafe. Jim is almost incapable of interacting with other people but seems to want to befriend his co-worker Eileen.

The author does a good job conveying the ambiance of the Hemmings home as well as the mental/emotional states of the main characters. I don't want to give away spoilers so I won't say more except that the story provides an interesting treatise about obvious and not-so-obvious mental breakdowns.

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