



Fellow Mortals

Dennis Mahoney

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An affecting story about how relationships are built—and burned—by desperate needs and obligations

When Henry Cooper sets out on his mail route on Arcadia Street one crisp spring morning, he has no idea that his world is about to change. He is simply enjoying the sunshine as he lights up a cigar and tosses the match to the ground, entirely unaware that he has just started a fire that will destroy a neighborhood and kill a young wife.

Even though the fire has been put out, it has ignited a lurking menace in an otherwise apparently peaceful suburb. In *Fellow Mortals*, Dennis Mahoney depicts the fire's aftermath in the lives of its survivors. There's Henry's wife, Ava, devoted to her husband but yearning to recover a simpler time in their marriage. There's the angry neighbor, Peg, who wants Henry to pay for what he's done, no matter the cost—which ends up being grave. And then there's Sam Bailey, the sculptor who lost his wife in the fire and has retreated to the woods to carve mysterious figures out of trees. As Sam struggles to overcome his anger and loss, Henry becomes the focal point of deepening loyalties and resentments, leaving them all vulnerable to hidden dangers and reliant on the bonds that have emerged, unexpectedly, from tragedy.

With sparse and handsome prose reminiscent of Raymond Carver and early Stewart O'Nan, Mahoney's probing first novel charts the fall of a man who has spent his life working to be decent and shows us a community trying desperately to hold itself together.

Fellow Mortals Details

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From Reader Review Fellow Mortals for online ebook

Jaime Boler says

“It had been a warm, blustery day in a spring without rain. Henry lit a match. The fire looked clear in the sun and he threw it down, thinking the wind had blown it out and not thinking twice, despite the drought, despite the mulch under the boxwood hedge,” Dennis Mahoney writes in his highly-charged and blistering debut, *Fellow Mortals*. Henry’s trifling act of pleasure literally ignites a firestorm in a neighborhood, leaving death and destruction in its wake.

Accidents happen to all of us; we are, after all, mere mortals, as Mahoney suggests in his title. Mahoney, however, is interested less in the act itself than in what happens after. *Fellow Mortals* is about how we handle the consequences of our actions.

Yet Henry’s mishap does not affect him alone. Henry is a mail carrier who takes great pride in his job. He always has a smile and a kind word for everyone, even those who are not so nice. His route includes Arcadia Street, “one of the smaller streets, a cul-de-sac with sixteen houses, tightly packed Capes with long backyards, the east-side homes bordering the woods and giving the block a special kind of privacy—rural and remote, separate from the town.” Arcadia Street seems tranquil and idyllic, until the fire that is.

Mahoney employs a bit of irony regarding Henry and his cigar. Henry “wasn’t allowed to smoke on the route. He wasn’t allowed at all, having promised it to Ava,” his wife. But Henry cannot resist, despite his heart condition, despite his promise not to smoke. He quickly smokes his cigar and delivers the mail. Until something stops him in his tracks.

A crackle is what Henry first hears before he registers anything is amiss. When he sees the fire, Henry immediately springs into action to save the people who live nearby. But he cannot save everyone. A young wife, Laura Bailey, is trapped inside her house. Henry is powerless, and so are the firefighters. “Pain like a hammer claw mounted in his chest, squeezing in deep and prying up his ribs.” When the firemen bring out Laura, Henry falls to his knees. Henry blames himself and carries around a great deal of guilt.

Many of those affected by the fire on Arcadia Street do not blame Henry, while others do. All fault aside, the victims’ lives have been dramatically altered. The fire destroyed the home of Nan and Joan Finn, two elderly sisters, and left them homeless. The fire made Sam Bailey a widower, leading him to seek refuge in the woods where he carves art in the trees.

Using crisp, stark, and striking language, Mahoney explores how culpability and penance can consume a character, especially one enmeshed in a tragic and highly emotional situation. Henry desperately wants those on Arcadia Street to forgive him. More than anything else, Henry sets out to atone for the calamity he has caused. He is determined to help the victims, whatever the cost, even if they do not want his help. This monomaniacal desire directs everything Henry does, from taking in the elderly Finns to befriending Sam to building a tree house for the Carmichael boys, whose mother, a real estate agent, laments over the decrease in neighborhood home values since the fire and hates Henry.

Fellow Mortals is truly a character-driven novel with multiple voices and perspectives. Mahoney is an exciting and genuine new voice in fiction with a debut that is equal parts astonishing and riveting. Because all of us are human, we can all relate to Henry. You may have never done anything of the magnitude as the fire he caused, but perhaps you can put yourself in Henry's shoes. His actions are always authentic and convincing. The same is true for the victims. Mahoney is never critical of any of those whose lives are overturned by the fire. In the end, we come to understand each one of them, especially their overheated emotions, just as we identify with Henry.

With piercing prose, characters so vivid they light up the page, and a plot so hot it sizzles, Fellow Mortals is an intense and scorching page-turner that is sure to set the book world on fire. Mahoney reminds us that one dark and random act does not define us. It is what happens next that matters. As Alexander Pope famously wrote, "To err is human; to forgive, divine."

Kevin Fanning says

N.B. Dennis is an old friend and I'm ride or die with him since small times.

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SO. Mahoney's first book is a story about neighbors, and how their lives come together and apart after a fire.

The white lower-middle-class suburb Dennis chose as his setting here is the kind of neighborhood I grew up in, and I would have bet money beforehand that Mahoney would be UTTERLY UNABLE to make me feel any emotion whatsoever for this type of setting or the characters who inhabit it.

Luckily we didn't make an official bet or anything. He sketches the characters and their changing relationships beautifully, in small moments that are by turns sad or funny or weird or creepy. Both the dialogues between characters, as they try to suss out each other's agendas, and the internal monologues, as they try to suss out their own, are light and accurate and find their marks gently and gracefully. Like is the dude is not even trying.

I am excited to read more from this promising young author.

Larry H says

I'd rate this 4.5 stars.

This is a book whose beauty and power crept up on me and took me by surprise. And I stumbled onto it while browsing in an actual bookstore, so I hope they don't all close, because how else am I going to find these gems?

Henry Cooper is a friendly mailman, always quick to lend a smile, even a hand. One beautiful afternoon

while on his mail route on Arcadia Street, he lights a cigar (forbidden by his wife), and absentmindedly tosses his match to the ground. In just a few minutes, that careless action lights several houses on fire, damaging the homes of people he has come to know on his route. Henry actually saves some people from the fire, but that doesn't lessen the impact of what he has done, as a young wife is killed.

While on suspension from his job awaiting the results of an investigation, Henry wants nothing more than to help those whose lives he has affected. He and his devoted wife, Ava, take in elderly sisters Joan and Nan Finn, while they try to decide what to do next. While he is snubbed by some families, the one person he tries reaching out to most of all is sculptor Sam Bailey, whose wife, Laura, died in the fire. Sam is practically rudderless and unsure of what to do with his days, but he is revived by his work, sculpting mysterious figures from the trees near his house. Sam doesn't know how to react to Henry—he wants to be angry and hurt, even vengeful, but Henry's affability and his need to make Sam feel like he belongs wears him down.

Fellow Mortals is both a story about many different kinds of relationships as well as how people deal with the aftermath of a crisis. Ava is frustrated by Henry's openness and need to help those affected by the fire, but most of all, she wants to protect him from himself. There's the angry and overprotective neighbor, Peg Carmichael, who cannot forgive Henry and blames him for everything that goes wrong in her life. Billy and Sheri Kane, a young couple down on their luck both financially and emotionally find that the fire has damaged more than part of their home. And Sam tries to lose himself in his work while fending off advice from those who seem to know better.

This is a beautifully spare, tragic book. It has the potential to veer into melodrama but Dennis Mahoney's writing ability keeps the story engaging and surprising without sacrificing authenticity. At first there were so many characters to keep straight and no one seemed particularly sympathetic, but the story quietly grew on me, and really affected me. It's amazing how one simple, careless action has the potential to ripple throughout so many lives, and cause a chain of events to occur long after the first action happened. And one thing that truly appealed to me about this book is that there was as much power in what remained unsaid and undone as what the characters actually said and did.

This is a book that will make you feel, make you think, and maybe even make you cry. It's definitely one worth reading.

Patrick Barry says

A postman accidentally sets a fire that kills a young mother and destroys several homes. This story is about how fire affects people and how the letter carrier seeks forgiveness from the people he has affected. Some people are more receptive than others. In some sense he is trying to assuage his feelings of guilt, but his compassion is genuine and the ways he seeks atonement varied and unique. I really eyed the book. I am big on stories of/on forgiveness. Five stars.

Emily W says

This book is an incredibly *human* novel. Following the lives of eleven characters after a fire, it examines the reactions and emotions that each person feels after a disaster- some losing everything, and some losing barely anything at all. By the end of the book, each character is as real as a neighbor or a classmate is, and

the subtle nuances behind emotions and backstories are never over-looked. The characters are the best aspect of this novel, and if you're looking for a black-tea-and-cloudy-afternoon type of book, this is it.

It's certainly not a happy read, but it isn't the heaviest either. Life sucks sometimes, but honestly, it's the best thing we have. This novel doesn't shy away from any of that, portraying both dysfunctional marriages and the joy that love brings in a matter of chapters. This is an honest read, but it is never a boring read.

Although this book, at its very core, is about life and how we deal with it, it is anything but mundane. The characters are engaging and unforgettably life-like, making it hard to read this book in any more than two or three sittings. The present-tense narrative only helps make it more relatable, whether or not you've ever experienced any of the events in the novel.

The subtly elegant writing is also an enjoyable part of this book. It always artistically paints the scene, yet it never too hard to understand. Metaphors are perfectly toned, and the symbolism is never too chokingly heavy. Both casual readers and English majors alike could, and will, easily fall in love with this style of writing. *Fellow Mortals* isn't just a book, it is literature.

Overall, this book should be read with a cup of tea and on a comfortable couch. It is not magical, light-hearted, or adventurous, but is memorably human. The characters come alive, in their best and worst, and truly make this novel shine. The writing style does not take away from this, rather enhances each personality with emotions and reactions indescribable any other way.

Eric Devine says

This was one tender and beautifully written examination of the frailties of human nature. The characters, especially Henry, are vibrant and unique. The setting is not overwhelming, but used appropriately, and the story, of accidents and atonement, is seamless. I live and die by Young Adult literature, so this was a nice departure for me. Mahoney is a voice to watch for, his turns of phrase with this novel are still catching in my mind.

eb says

Mahoney writes beautifully--he's lyrical, but in the least showy, most natural way imaginable. *Fellow Mortals* is kind and earnest; it feels both refreshing and old-fashioned. I loved the characters and the premise. I'm leaving off the fifth star only because the ending veered into sentimentality, for me, and didn't seem quite as strong as the astounding first three-quarters of the novel.

Nathan says

I am going to have a hard time writing about this book because it has so many Big Ideas brilliantly hidden among the person-sized ideas in Acadia. But I must write, because you are going to be reading about this book in 2013, and I want to be on record so I can say "I told you so!"

Mahoney has a great American voice - his writing nods to a number of great American authors of the last century, and he provides a refreshing course correction by sidestepping the self-referential, irony-laden

manner that has crept into the modern novel. This is solid writing made extraordinary by fresh insight and prose that rises to the level of poetry at times.

Fellow Mortals is the story of a handful of people who find themselves in struggles - some large, some small - with fate, destiny, serendipity, every word we use today when we would have said "the gods" in earlier times. And that concept resonates throughout with subtle but brilliant references to the unfortunate humans in mythology who displeased the gods and suffered their punishments.

A number of characters and plotlines interweave, providing kaleidoscopic impressions of the themes of marriage, rebuilding after loss, striking the balance between jaded pessimism and blind optimism. The brilliant part is that none of these themes are presented explicitly - they all emerge organically out of the experiences of a group of people after a fire in a small neighborhood. There is enough suspense to pull the reader forward, but at every point there are incredible vistas on the human experience.

There's an amazing balance here between naturalism and idealism, with these characters feeling both real and dramatic, and I have no idea how Mahoney did it. And even the secondary characters have a marvelous presence - I fell deeply for one in particular, and I will only tell you that the character who finishes the book is not only the one you least expect, but ultimately the perfect choice. I was engaged throughout the novel, but unprepared for the catharsis - in the truest, Greekest sense of the word - at the end.

I'm pretty sure I've failed to present a coherent case here; I just needed to ramble for a little about this book that I enjoyed so much. When you can get your hands on this one, read it.

Michael says

The plot described this book to be about an aftermath of a fire that left a young wife dead. Although it sounded intriguing, it failed to interest me in any level. Besides the opening pages, nothing about this book stood out from how it progressed to random characters that did not contribute to the storyline. I will say that it was one of those books that started off promising but quickly went from promising to forgettable. There were some characters that I liked but I forgot their name, due to the lack of caring what happened to them. Honestly this book should have done a better job at developing characters, rather than throwing out drama without any buildup.

Sadly this book only got two for effort but I don't see me reading more books by Mahoney.

Jenny says

The first few pages of this unique novel start off through the eyes of Billy Kane; it wasn't until a few pages in, when Henry Cooper appears on the scene, that I was well and truly drawn in. By throwing a match and a cigar into some dry bushes while on his route, Henry, a mailman, caused a fire that killed a woman, burned down two houses, and damaged two others. Henry is desperate to do everything he can to help the people whose lives he affected: Sam, now a widow; the Finn sisters, whose house was destroyed; the Carmichaels, a family of four; and couple Billy and Sherri Kane. No matter than some of them (Peg Carmichael) want

nothing to do with Henry; others accept his help immediately (the Finn sisters, who move in with Henry and his wife while they look for a new place to live).

Of all of the people whose lives the fire affected, Sam Bailey is the one Henry must try hardest to reach. Sam's wife Laura died in the fire, and Sam has retreated into the woods behind their old house, where he builds a cabin and carves trees into sculptures. Henry insists on helping him, and the two develop a relationship that is at first uneasy, but eventually becomes something resembling a friendship.

There are a few additional twists and turns from there, but I don't want to give it away. This is an enclosed novel in terms of place (it does not stretch far from Arcadia Street, where the fire took place, and a few other locations in the town), but the sense of place is keenly developed, and the characters are entirely believable. Innocence and guilt, loss and forgiveness, human decency: the characters wrestle with these throughout. Comparisons to Stewart O'Nan (*Songs for the Missing*, *Last Night at the Lobster*) and Leah Hager Cohen (*The Grief of Others*) are apt.

Quotes:

[The Finns] are weirdly good to Henry - Joan appreciative and childlike, Nan ironclad but temperate - as if he rescued them from something that he hadn't been the cause of. (13)

"Ask Nan. She knows about everything."

Oatmeal cookies, vegetable shortening, ironing, bleaching, fiber, dogs - all of her knowledge slightly out-of-date but basically correct, like one of those old Funk & Wagnalls encyclopedia sets they come across at yard sales. (17)

Sam's eyelids sag. H looks more drained than confrontational, a man who hasn't slept well in weeks, almost too exhausted to sustain a real emotion. (45)

"So I was standing in line behind an old lady with a folder full of soda coupons."

"I know that lady. There must be a thousand of her." (Sam and Ava, 203)

He's a hundred miles off in the center of the web, distant in a way that makes her feel alone. (204)

"So what do we do for Ava?" Sam asks.

"Whatever we think is right." Nan sighs.

"But how do we decide?"

"Sam," Joan says, with an air of disappointment. "How often in your life do you really not know?" (259)

The yellow of the kitchen has a quietness about it, like another lit room from another afternoon, but it's not quite a memory and not quite a wish. It's something either side of what she has now, a sense of having just seen Henry moments earlier, a feeling that he'll pass by the window any second. (277)

Kristen says

Beautiful book.

Sandra Hutchison says

FELLOW MORTALS is a keenly-observed portrait of the impact of catastrophe and loss on a very small community. I noticed right away that Mahoney is a talented writer, able to swoop among various well-drawn characters' points of view (even a dog's!) without raising any qualms. For the first third or so of this novel I was admiring the style but a little worried about whether there was really going to be any plot to speak of, but soon after that the pace picked up and the novel became suspenseful enough to keep me reading pretty intently. There is excellent, sometimes darkly funny dialogue ("I hope you have anemia" is my favorite line), but Mahoney is perhaps even better at expressing all the things that people DON'T say to each other, at least not out loud. Highly recommended. I look forward to reading more by this author.

Mark says

This was a compelling first novel, with interesting characters, but some of the plot just seemed so contrived. So much so that by the end I was guess what was going to happen, and rolling my eyes when my prediction came true. Dennis Mahoney is certainly a writer to watch and there were some brilliant lines in *Fellow Mortals* that stayed with me. My actual rating would be more like three and a half stars. A fine debut, but with some of the faults of first novel plotting.

Robbins Library says

By throwing a match and a cigar into some dry bushes while on his route, Henry Cooper, a mailman, caused a fire that killed a woman, burned down two houses, and damaged two others. Henry is desperate to do everything he can to help the people whose lives he affected: Sam, now a widow; the Finn sisters, whose house was destroyed; the Carmichaels, a family of four; and couple Billy and Sherri Kane. Some of them want nothing to do with Henry; others accept his help immediately.

Of all of the people whose lives the fire affected, Sam Bailey is the one Henry must try hardest to reach. Sam's wife Laura died in the fire, and Sam has retreated into the woods behind their old house, where he builds a cabin and carves trees into sculptures. Henry insists on helping him, and the two develop a relationship that is at first uneasy, but eventually becomes something resembling a friendship.

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Mark says

Henry Cooper is a friendly mail-carrier, in his 40s. He is well liked on the route and on one, fateful, sunny afternoon, everything changes. He decides to light up a cigar, that he finds in his postal vehicle, a vice forbidden to him by his wife and tosses down the match. As he continues walking house to house, he smells smoke...

The careless match causes a fire and several houses are burned, killing a young woman. Henry's life is in ruins and the rest of the novel is the aftermath, as he tries to make peace and amends to the people in the neighborhood. It is a tough, up hill battle. Not an easy read. These are prickly characters but the good ones shine through, just enough, to make it a worthwhile read.
