



# Ellen Foster

*Kaye Gibbons*

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"When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy." So begins the tale of Ellen Foster, the brave and engaging heroine of Kaye Gibbons's first novel, which won the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Institute of Arts and Letters. Wise, funny, affectionate, and true, Ellen Foster is, as Walker Percy called it, "The real thing. Which is to say, a lovely, sometimes heartwrenching novel. . . . [Ellen Foster] is as much a part of the backwoods South as a Faulkner character—and a good deal more endearing."

## Ellen Foster Details

Date : Published May 3rd 1990 by Vintage Books (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780375703058

Author : Kaye Gibbons

Format : Paperback 126 pages

Genre : Fiction, American, Southern, Young Adult, Coming Of Age

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## From Reader Review Ellen Foster for online ebook

### Diane Barnes says

Ellen Foster is like Scout Finch without the support system of Atticus, Jem, and Calpurnia. She's funny, courageous, level-headed, fair-minded and intelligent. With very little help from anyone, she gets herself out of a very bad situation and into a good one and teaches herself some valuable lessons along the way. I love Ellen Foster.

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### DeB MaRtEnS says

Ellen Foster, the child and narrator of this novel, is a wonderful creation. She is everything that an adult would like to believe about an abused child being able to flourish once free. The author makes it believable that Ellen, at eleven, twelve and thirteen, has the clarity of mind and freedom from emotion to recount her traumatizing life with full memory, matter-of-factness and an outstanding world view.

Don't get me wrong, I loved the plucky young fictional Ellen. I loved the insight that the author gave Ellen, in her quest for a better life. However, I know it is a fabrication, wishful thinking....

Abused kids don't think. Abused kids don't really feel. Abused kids watch. They are taught to never remember abuse, because they wouldn't survive it. They are the helpers, the uneasy kids, the ones who have no idea how to deal with bullies - unless they choose to emulate a parent, which means broadcasting and home will be even a greater hell. Abused kids would not arrive at the level of global understanding that Ellen Foster does by the end of the novel, if she's lucky, until she is at least thirty and more likely fifty. I know.

There is truth in the father, "More like a mean baby than a grown man. ...All the time I knew he was evil and I did not have the proof." And the grandmother, who takes her in, is monstrous: "Her power was the sucking kind that takes your good sense and leaves you limp like a zombie." Fabulous descriptions.

However, my favourite part of the novel revolves around Ellen deciding that she will choose her own new name. Her psychologist doesn't understand and talks about "identity", which makes no sense at the time. But Ellen actually had spotted the woman she wanted as a new mother (not ever possible in real life) at church. Surrounded by children, as she stood there Ellen asked her cousin about this lady's name. "She said they are the Foster family and that lady would take in anything from orphans to stray cats." I chuckled.

Ellen Foster is the abused Pippi Longstocking of the South, an adorable quirky confabulation who overcomes difficulty, circumvents evil and triumphs in developing tender and enlightened compassion for her Black friend, whom she understands will always have a hard life. It's a lovely tale and even though it is a far-fetched representative of the life of an abused kid, I still enjoyed it.

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### **Diane S ? says**

3.5 I loved this book pretty much from the first sentence, but it was this sentence that entrenched Ellen in my heart. ""What did you expect? Marry trash and see what comes of you. I could have told anybody." No young child should ever have the wisdom or the knowledge to say such a thing, and this perfectly explains how her life had been with her drunken father and sick mother.

This novel is in turn heartbreaking and amusing. Some of the things she says, the way she views things through her own special lens, filtered by her experiences alone. an amazingly short book but a powerful one.

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### **Carol says**

It is hard not to fall in love with 11 year old Ellen *Foster* as she narrates her struggles thru her young life of abuse and repeated disappointments in search of a safe home and someone to love her. She is so brave and bright and mature for her age, and will make you laugh in spite of it all. Great book!

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### **Duane says**

Old Ellen is how this 11 year old refers to herself, and as the reviewer on the back of the book cover says, "she's as much a part of the backwoods South as a Faulkner character--and a good deal more endearing". She tells her story in the first person and in the first sentence of the book she says, "When I was little I would think of ways to kill my Daddy". She meant it too, and believe me, he deserved it. Her family was about as rotten as any family I have come across in literature. What a read, I would recommend it to anyone. I give it 4.5 stars.

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### **Laura says**

What did I think? That's the question asked when reviewing a book on Goodreads. I freakin' loved it. It is now on my favorite shelf. I loved how she wished for eyes in the back of her head and she thought her head size was "just this side of a defect", how she gave herself a new name and how she "lived to see what would happen next". Ellen Foster her story, her voice....what is there not to love about this 10 year old?

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### **Angela M says**

This is a short but powerful and a lot of the time a painful story . Ellen Foster is a precocious eleven year old girl whose courage and strength and infinite wisdom carry her through things that no child should bear .

I wanted to pull Ellen out of those pages and take care of her , get her away from her alcoholic father who for the most part has abandoned her and her miserable grandmother who takes her in for a period of time. But

ultimately it's Ellen who pulled me up from the despair I felt for her as she tries to find that safe and comfortable home she wants so badly . I loved how she cared about her little friend Starletta and knew so much more than the adults around her about equality .

If you have had this on your to read list for a while , you should read it . If you don't have it on your list you should read it anyway . Just a beautiful little story with so much to give .

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## **Linda Lipko says**

If you are looking for a book to take your breath away, this is the one.

If you are looking for an exceptionally well-written novel wherein each phrase, each sentence, each paragraph contains poetic beauty, then this is the one.

If you are looking for a book that resonates deep within your soul, leaving you laughing, crying and simply not wanting it to end, then this is the book to read.

And, I'll go out on a huge limb to say that if you choose to read only one of my recommendations this year, please let this be the one!

Oh, my, this book is so incredibly powerful that I don't know enough superlative adjectives to describe it.

In my opinion, the 1987 debut of Gibbons is analogous to the beauty, poetry, and charm of Harper Lee's one and only Pulitzer Prize winning book *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

While the difficult topics of neglect, abuse, abandonment, poverty, the definition of values, and the searing problem of abiding inherited prejudice would be dark, dramatically depressing topics, in the hands of a skilled author, the reader is left with hope, with a love of the character and with the sure conviction that as humans, we are quite capable of overcoming terrible adversity.

Immediately upon reading the first sentence "When I was young, I would think of ways to kill my daddy.", the reader is hooked. Then, the author brilliantly follows through by telling the story of spunky, precocious, wise beyond her years, ten-year old Ellen Foster.

We follow Ellen through the suicide of her mother, the beatings and emotional abuse of her father, the relatives who did not want her and the trials of moving from one place to another.

The true beauty of the story is that of hope, courage and wisdom.

Ellen has one true friend, a lonely "colored" girl called Starletta. It is through this relationship that Gibbons weaves the negative power of prejudice, and the positive ability to overcome what was taught vs what is true.

Read this book and weep, and cry and laugh and smile and come away knowing you will be haunted by the beauty for a long, long time.

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## Irishcoda says

The first line of Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons reads: "When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy." Wow! Talk about a powerful hook! Eleven year old Ellen has been through more than any child should experience. Her father is alcoholic and abusive toward Ellen's mother. Ellen just about raises herself in this dysfunctional household, the "hero" in the alcoholic family. After her mother dies, she goes to live with her teacher and things would have been fine except her grandmother interferes and gets custody of her. The grandmother blames her for the death of her mother, grandma's daughter...as if the poor kid hasn't been through enough as it is. To add to the misery, grandma dies and Helen has to move on yet again, this time to an aunt that doesn't really want her. Ellen sets about finding herself a new family. She has a refreshing voice. I read that she has been compared to Holden Caulfield but I wouldn't go that far. She's a lot more resourceful and "together" than Holden was, a truly admirable character. Now I want to read Gibbons' other books!

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## Londa says

*"When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy."*

One of the best opening lines for a book I have ever read. Knocked me off my center of gravity right away, and I was left wondering what kind of evil little girl was I going to be reading about. With an opener like that you might also think this book was somber and hopeless. Somber...*Sometimes*, hopeless...*NO*. It turned out to be filled with hilarious laugh-out-loud moments.

I was right about one thing. There is plenty of evil in this book, but Ellen isn't the source of it. Her family is filled to the brim with nastiness at both ends of her genetic pool. Ellen lets the reader in on how she is dealt with by her family and, in turn, how she deals with them.

Ellen has to grow up a lot in these 126 pages, and Gibbons has written what I consider to be a perfect novella. How she managed to tell such a rich and wonderful coming of age tale in so few words, is truly amazing.

This was my first 5 star of 2014 and I highly recommend it to everyone.

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## Betsy Robinson says

This is the first-person story of Ellen Foster, a ten- to eleven-year-old Southern girl whose mother commits suicide with the agreement of her abusive father. Ellen is tough, smart, and a survivor. After she is sent from the happy foster home of her art teacher to her "mama's mama," a mean old woman, she says, "... it was just her and me. Me to look after her not the other way around like you might expect. That did not surprise me because I had just about given up on what you expect. I just lived to see what would happen next."

In a *NY Times* article about author Kaye Gibbons' problems with mental illness, her editor is quoted as saying "Kaye is constitutionally incapable of falseness. Every word that flows from her lips is true." You can feel the truth of her truth in every word of this wonderful book.

Here's the publisher's book page: <http://algonquin.com/book/ellen-foster/>

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## **Rebecca Foster says**

This was a random library book sale purchase, chosen almost entirely for the title. I set aside my usual dislike of child narrators and found an enjoyable voice-driven novella about a fiesty ten-year-old who loses both her parents (good riddance to her father, at least) and finds her own unconventional family after cycling through the homes of some truly horrid relatives. Just as an example, her maternal grandmother sends her out to work picking cotton.

The book is set in the South, presumably in the 1970s or 80s, so it's alarming to see how strong racial prejudice still was; Ellen almost feels compelled to look down on her best friend, a black girl named Starletta, but can't deny she's drawn to her. "Sometimes I even think I was cut out to be colored and I got bleached and sent to the wrong bunch of folks."

You could breeze through this one in an afternoon. I don't quite see why it got so many accolades when it came out in 1987, but then again I'm not a huge fan of either child narrators or Southern fiction. Read it for the title character's voice and the sweetly naïve story of how she got her name.

**Favorite lines:** "The day [God] made my daddy he was not thinking straight. ... my family never was the kind that would fit into a handy category."

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## **Kathy says**

I've read lots of reviews of this book that were really positive. All the quotes on the book itself are of course glowing with praise. It was an Oprah's Book Club selection. It got published. A friend chose it for book club. Many people apparently think this is a really amazing book. I'm not exactly sure what I'm missing here. I didn't hate it, but I was just kind of bored and not impressed. The good thing is that it was a very short and easy book to read so I didn't feel like I wasted a lot of time. If you want to read a book about poverty, abuse, and a dysfunctional family in the South with a girl that manages to get through it all successfully, I would highly recommend "The Glass Castle." That's good reading. This just seemed overly simplistic and tidy. There were so many details missing. With all the talk about race, it seems strange that I was confused for for a lot of the book about what race the main character even was. I didn't feel like I really got a grasp on any of the characters. I'll be interested to go to book club and get an idea of what I'm missing here, because I seem to be in the minority.

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## **gaudeo says**

I give it 3 1/2 stars. The most engaging aspect of this book is its protagonist's voice: clear, unadorned, unsentimental. Her tale is truly heartbreaking--and therein lies what seems to me the book's primary flaw: the book is too short. I want to know in greater detail about Ellen's parents and the tragedy that befell her mother. I want to know more about the various homes she migrated through before finding her "new mama." I want to know more about her friend Starletta and her family. And the issue is not that I simply don't want to let go of the characters; I truly feel the need to know more about them in order to care about Ellen fully. I won't forget the origin of Ellen's name, but I fear that because of the brevity of this book, I may forget everything else about her.

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## **🌸Julie says**

This would make a great book club pick. It's a quick read and simply told, but with a lot of depth, and a powerful opening line that is a real attention grabber. Ellen Foster is only 11 years old but is an "old soul" and there is a lot to be learned from her character. The story is told through her voice and the author really gets into her head giving a sense for all she is thinking and feeling. I felt it softened the tone coming from her perspective, but it really makes you think about the lifelong effects of child abuse. I normally have a hard time reading about this topic because I find it so distressing but Ellen's character is so charming and feisty that it was hard not to root for her in her search for a "new mama". Naturally there is sadness, but it's ultimately an uplifting story about finding strength through adversity. I found it particularly touching how she came about the name of Ellen Foster. 4 stars.

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## **Connie says**

"When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy."

Ellen Foster grabs you with that first paragraph, and doesn't let go as she narrates her story. Told with humor and honesty, the orphaned girl learns what is important about people in a rural southern town in the 1970s. It's not possessions or the color of their skin, but the goodness in their hearts.

Even though Ellen's childhood has been terribly difficult, she finally finds herself in a good, safe situation. She realizes that her black friend Starletta has even more to overcome, since racial prejudices do not change quickly.

This slim volume about a self-reliant eleven-year-old packs quite a punch. The book is semi-autobiographical, based on Kaye Gibbons' challenging childhood in North Carolina.

Interesting interview of Kaye Gibbons by the Star Tribune. It does contain some spoilers since she talks about her childhood.

<http://www.startribune.com/entertainm...>

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## **[Shai] The Bibliophage says**

I bought this book around 2006-2009 and it was just laying there on my book stack. I just read 2-3 pages and lost interest. After several years, I found this book on my storage and put it out to try if it can capture my interest now. Thank goodness that I gave this book a chance because I can't put it down once I start to read it. I was just busy so it was hard for me to finish reading it right away.

Ellen is not your conventional type of kid because she thinks and speaks in a manner that is not like her age. I really find her story very interesting from what happened to her mom's overdosed until she finally found her adoptive mother.

I was not surprised that this book has a fair rating here and that there are several reviews who didn't find this book to their liking. The way it was written was not that easy to understand due to the way how Ellen tells her story. Ellen's way of speaking is sort of unintelligible that's why I lost interest then. But who could have thought that this incomprehensible way of Ellen could make the book unique and quite engaging to read.

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## **Lucie says**

"When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy." That's quite an opening line!

I chose this book because I was wanting to read classic-American-literature and was also hovering around award-winners. This novella is both.

Ellen has survived a childhood filled with abuse and neglect, yet her spirit never fails. She has a results-oriented, get-it-done attitude which causes her to hatch a plan... she's going to find herself a new family.

There are so many beautiful moments within this story, made all the more beautiful when contrasted against the difficult ones. It was interesting to learn why Ellen had given herself the last name of Foster. Her 11-year-old mind did not yet understand that a "foster family" was not a family with the last name of Foster. :)

It's those types of sweet moments that will touch your heart. I found this story to be more heart-warming than heart-breaking. Ellen will stay with me for a very long time.

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## **Lisa Vegan says**

Little gem of a book and ultimately a very clever story about a horribly abused and neglected foster child. Ellen is incredibly resilient and she's determined to find herself a loving home. The story isn't depressing at all despite what its content would suggest. Loved this book.

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## **Patricia says**

"Ellen Foster" is one of those books I have to re-read every few years. The understanding of a pre-pubescent and otherwise unlucky girl as she deals with the insanity of adult reality in the flatlandish southern US

speaks of a seasoning beyond her years. Her transparent naïveté is obviously predicated on the awareness of the writer herself, but then, the book is using the disingenuousness natural to a child to make observations about the adult world. This device, hardly new to the world when Kay Gibbons first published "Ellen," nevertheless breaks with an irony that is at once hilarious, infuriating, frustrating, and sad.

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