



Familiar

J. Robert Lennon

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A haunting, enigmatic novel about a woman who is given a second chance—and isn't sure whether she really wants it.

Elisa Brown is driving back from her annual, somber visit to her son Silas's grave when something changes. Actually, everything changes: her body is more voluptuous; she's wearing different clothes and driving a new car. When she arrives home, her life is familiar—but different. There is her house, her husband. But in the world she now inhabits, Silas is no longer dead, and his brother is disturbingly changed. Elisa has a new job, and her marriage seems sturdier, and stranger, than she remembers. She finds herself faking her way through a life she is convinced is not her own. Has she had a psychotic break? Or has she entered a parallel universe? Elisa believed that Silas was doomed from the start, but now that he is alive, what can she do to repair her strained relations with her children? She soon discovers that these questions hinge on being able to see herself as she really is—something that might be impossible for Elisa, or for anyone.

In *Familiar*, J. Robert Lennon continues his profound and exhilarating exploration of the surreal undercurrents of contemporary American life.

Familiar Details

Date : Published October 2nd 2012 by Graywolf Press (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9781555976255

Author : J. Robert Lennon

Format : Paperback 205 pages

Genre : Fiction, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Novels, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Familiar for online ebook

Leo says

Elisa Brown is driving when suddenly the crack in the windshield disappears, her body is slightly different, she is wearing different clothes, she is driving a new car. She arrives home and her life is looks familiar, but it's not. For once, his son Silas is not dead anymore.

You'll agree with me that this is a really intriguing and promising premise and obviously, it was what draw me to this book. Has Elisa entered a parallel universe? Gone crazy and invented another reality? Elisa attempts to answer this question throughout the book but the book isn't here to answer them. It seems like the whole premise is a macguffin to explore the life of Elisa and her family. I wouldn't considered this a sci-fi book but a middle-life-crisis-book or whatever.

I kept waiting for the book to get to the good part, to hook me, but it didn't happen. The exposition of Elisa's new life feel pointless. If she was supposed to learn anything in this alternate universe or whatever, I didn't catch it. And the whole ending was a bit weird. That Patrice character seemed to out of place and this is not precisely a conventional story.

I mean, now that I think about it, the book left me indifferent and that's not a god thing.

P.S.: I just thought of a book with a "similar" premise that also examined our choices in life and how we have become and I unlike this, I found extremely engaging: *Replay*, by Ken Grimwood.

Edit: this is definitely the dissapointment of the year so I'm downgrading to one star.

Bibliophile says

I've read and enjoyed all of Lennon's novels for the past fifteen years, and I still can't quite figure out what it is that I find so appealing about them. His work is unconventional without being showy, and has grown increasingly strange in his last two novels. In an afterword to "Familiar", he describes the early draft as "restrained", "taut" and "edgy". Instead, it became a novel about the "psychological effects of parenthood".

It's a chilling account of a family that has completely malfunctioned. The parents are utterly detached from their children and each other. The underlying hostility is so disturbing and heartbreaking that I found it difficult to read at times, and had to wonder how Lennon could bear to write it. Very good, very sad. Feeling rather depressed now, comforting myself with the fact that I don't have kids.

Nate Trier says

Really really enjoyed this book. I would describe it as an "existentialist" novel - the protagonist finds herself in a second chance at her crumbling life and has to choose whether to carry on in carefully constructed happiness or to scratch the surface and try to satisfy her thirst for answers.

Raises great questions - if you had the chance to do it all over again, would you do it better or would you make the same mistakes? Do we make our lives or do our lives make us? What do you owe to other people

vs. what do you owe to yourself? How do you decide what to sacrifice?

Highly recommended.

Susan says

Couldn't put this one down. I never did decide whether Elisa really slipped into a parallel universe or had a psychotic break but in the end that seemed less important than how she fought her way back from either situation. Everyone in the book had a skewed perception of reality -- tilted by drugs, or alcohol, or religion, or science, or sex, or therapy, or a participation in a virtual world. Unlike Elisa their perceptions appeared to be coupled with a smugness borne of certainty. She was a very acceptable heroine -- terrified and full of self-doubt but tenaciously moving forward. Scary to consider, however, that whatever choices you make (in this universe anyway) you might end up in the same place.

Melanie says

Good weird stuff. At times I found Elisa hard to like, and like others I just couldn't understand why she didn't just sit down and tell her husband what she was experiencing. I understand that their relationship had serious issues, but obviously she can see that in her "new" life things are different and they've obviously been going to couples therapy and making attempts at fixing their marriage, so...

I also suppose I should avoid reading authors' own ideas about what their work is about, because in the "On Writing Familiar" at the end of the book, Lennon states that the book is about how parenthood changes you. Not at all what I took away from it, and kind of a disappointing summary of everything that goes on in this complicated novel.

To me it was more about one woman's journey, about identity, about how two different choices made in one point in time may play out drastically differently down the line, about the different people we could become, about the complications in any relationship, and even some cool metaphysical ideas about memory and reality.

The very last two pages however felt very oddly wrapped up to me, where Lennon goes from describing an intense scene in the present to just summing up for the reader everything that happens in the next few years within in a matter of paragraphs. Almost as if he couldn't figure out how to end the book (and I know endings are hard) and didn't want to leave the reader hanging, but didn't want to write out the rest of the events either.

K Baker says

What a waste of time this book was. I was half way through and couldn't decide whether or not to finish it. I wish that I hadn't. The ending is totally unsatisfying, the characters unlikeable and the plot drags on. Can't remember whatever made me decide to read this book, but I must have been in a parallel universe at the time.

Paul says

Good premise solidly executed, but I would have rated it higher, I think, if it was a short story or novella.

Lori says

from publisher / signed by author

Read 9/24/12 - 9/29/12

4.5 Stars - Highly Recommended to fans of never-knowing-where-the-story-is-going who enjoy that through-the-looking-glass feeling

Pgs: 208

Publisher: Graywolf Press

Release Date: Today!!

What good is a second chance if you aren't going to take advantage of it?

In J. Robert Lennon's *Familiar*, Elisa finds herself driving home from her youngest son's grave when everything suddenly changes - her car is different, her clothes are different, her body is different. Pulling into the driveway, her husband comes out to greet her and even he appears different. Yet everything seems so... familiar.

She soon discovers that in this reality, she and her husband are struggling to stay together while both of her sons are alive, though estranged from them. Unsure whether she's slipped into a parallel universe or losing her mind, Elisa tries to acclimate herself to this new life as best as she can while attempting to make it as similar to her old life as possible.

Lennon's got a knack for fucking with my mind. I'm going to just put that right out there. When I had listened to Castle on audio, I tried like hell to guess where the story was going to end up. And every time I thought I had it nailed down, he threw another curve ball and left me standing in the dark, scratching my head. Things were no different with *Familiar*. As Lennon allowed Elisa to fall further and further into his rabbit-hole, I realized that I was less and less certain of what was taking place. Was Elisa really living in some mirror-version of her old life? If I found myself leaning that way, Lennon would do something that made me ask if she suffering a nervous breakdown instead and losing touch with reality. Would she ever find her way back to the life she left behind, and did she even want to? As Elisa memories from the old life started to merge and blend with those of the new, and she began questioning her sanity... I decided to simply let the story take me where it wanted.

It's a book that means to get inside your head and nestle down in there, nice and cozy-like. The characters are deliciously flawed, the situations they put themselves in are sometimes maddeningly robotic, and with each turn of the page, you're forced to ask yourself "what if this were happening to me"....

Though Lennon gives good suspense, he continues to leave me aching for more with his endings. With Castle, I found it sort of frustrating. Now, with *Familiar*, I think I'm starting to see what he's up to. Why put a nice little bow on things when you can make the reader do a little post-read homework, right? In this way, the story doesn't end with the final sentence of the book. It continues to breathe and expand as you chew on

it...

Laurie says

I got to the end of this and thought wtf? I felt exactly the same way when the tv went black on Tony Soprano. I hate it when that happens. If you don't need your stories to be satisfying, this is for you. I am not sure what this is about exactly, even after reading the whole darn thing, so I can't really give it much of a review. I think it says something about being alone and cut off from the people in your life no matter what body you inhabit or what the general plot lines of your life are. That's the story in a nutshell. I am disappointed I did not see it as a thoughtful treatment of memory as I hoped I would.

Gary Schroeder says

“Familiar” uses the conceit of what appears to be an alternate reality to explore a middle aged woman’s regrets and disappointments. The alternate reality device is a crack in a windshield that alters Elisa Brown’s perception of her life during a business trip. It may be that she’s crossed some sort of rift between universes, or (more prosaically) she’s having a nervous breakdown. Whichever it is, she’s thrown into a life different from the one that she’s been used to for the last 45 years.

Author Robert Lennon gives us more than one way of viewing the cause of what’s happening to Elisa. One is supernatural, the other not. As far as the story’s concerned, it doesn’t really matter what the answer is. What’s important is that her new circumstances force Elisa to carefully reexamine fateful choices and accidental occurrences in her life. These include her career choices, her relationship to her husband and her children, all of which are quite different in the “new” life she finds herself living.

In the course of watching Elisa navigate a different life, “Familiar” covers a wide span of topics, including unhappy marriages and infidelity, couples therapy, dysfunctional families, spiteful, ungrateful children, body self-image, wish fulfillment, video games, internet culture, sci-fi conventions, and the differences between what is real and imagined in everyday life. Lennon’s covering a lot (and I mean a lot) of ground here, especially considering that “Familiar” clocks in at a relatively brief 225 pages.

I think he pulls it off. Elisa’s character is well developed, complex and feels quite substantial. The emotional turmoil that her alternate timeline forces her to confront is painful and sometimes bleak, not unlike real life for those of us stuck in a single timeline. And while parts of the book dealing with her estrangement from her horribly screwed up sons verged on depressing, the author kept me engaged with a steady stream of dense character dialogue and forward movement. A warning, though, the book’s themes are far more likely to resonate with an older reader with some life experience under her belt. Less so for a younger reader who’s hoping for a Matrix-like exploration of alternate realities.

Amy says

If you want a book that starts out fantastically and really draws you in and keeps you turning the pages all the way through, only to summarily STOP without warning, Familiar is your book. I wanted to throw it through the window because I was so disappointed in the non-ending.

Osvaldo says

Four and a half stars.

A literary novel written with the crisp tempo of genre, *Familiar* mines the world of weird science fiction for its ability to defamiliarize the truisms of parenthood and relationships and highlight the inherent strangeness of it. Like looking in a mirror and not recognizing yourself, Elisa finds herself in a parallel world and struggling to make sense of the familiar, which has become strange. Given over to a life where the things that made her sad (the death of her son Silas, her relationship with her other son Sam and her husband Derek) have been significantly changed, but the resulting confusion brings no relief.

Ultimately, I see this book as conveying the experience of the futility of wishing for a different life, for a different series of events—like Candide living in the best of all possible worlds—Elisa finds that all choices, all branching paths have their own pitfalls and disappointments. Foremost in this realization is the inevitable failures that come with parenting (a main focus of the book)—the inability to ever be the best parent you can be or imagine yourself being, the terror of your own children becoming monsters you are responsible for and that forever change your life and your relationship with your partner and to the world.

This is a sad book. Lennon's writing conveys a sense of drowning in one's own life, of agency without agency through his depiction of the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of change.

The video game parallel set up in the book is really strong in conveying this, b/c much like many narrative video games, all choices lead to the same narrow set of possible conclusions. It is for this reason that the conclusion of *Familiar* itself is unimportant. . . instead it is about the experience of being in strangeness. Similarly, Elisa's involvement in online forum communities depicts the simultaneity of lives or personas, made different, but remaining the same—constructable but from the same limited pool of resources.

I loved this book, but damn did it resonate with my fears of becoming a parent.

Joanna says

I picked up this book because the concept seemed intriguing - a woman driving down the road suddenly finds herself in the middle of a life that is like her own, but not. Has she had a mental breakdown, or has she slipped into a parallel universe? The concept stays interesting, but unfortunately the plot doesn't hold together at all.

While it is interesting to watch the story unfold, discovering the ways the narrator's life is different and seeing what happens as she tries to make various changes to shape her new life into the mold of her old one, or a new and different life altogether. But the characters lack real emotion and depth, and the key conceit of the novel remains frustratingly unresolved. You would think that the author would not have embarked on this story without some idea of an ending, and yet it seems as if that is exactly what has happened. In the end, *Familiar* leaves the reader feeling cheated and unsatisfied.

Sara says

A naturalistically written book that plays with the true strangeness of memory, character, and perception. About halfway through I started to worry that the author was heading off toward some cheap alternate universe story cliches but *Familiar* is a much more thoughtful novel than that. It is genuinely disturbing in the ways it subtly questions the comfort of our memories and our settled evaluations of our life events. As the story progresses, it is decreasingly clear what of the protagonist's problems are external or internal, but by the end it does seem that no matter what has "really" happened, it's herself she has to deal with.

I think this is one of my top four books read this year. It beat out *The Marriage Plot* by a mile. It makes a good double feature with Julian Barnes' *Sense of An Ending*, but I felt let down at the end by the Barnes novel (much as I love some of his work). *Familiar* told me less at the finish, and said more.

Connie Mayo says

Do you like endings where things are actually explained? Where it seems like the right place to end it? If so, this book is not for you (or me).

I liked the sci-fi feel when Lisa finds herself different but the same - in fact, it seemed pretty original. Instead of a *Freaky Friday* move where she is in another persons body, she is herself - but heavier, different clothes, car, haircut. As if her life just took a different path years ago. But then the story just failed to live up to that premise. There is a lot of wandering around, Lisa trying to piece things together, figure out how she feels about this alternate life. But so what? There are some good questions posed about why our lives turn out the way we do, but the book just fritters it away.
