



Secrets of a Family Album

Isla Dewar

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Obsessively neat Lily, a writer who writes about writers, is asked to interview the enigmatic Rita Boothe, journalist, photographer, self-styled culinary expert and wit. Sitting in Rita's living room, leafing through a book of photographs from the early seventies, Lily comes across a picture of an incandescently sexy young woman sitting in the back of a limousine swigging Jack Daniels. It is her mother, Mattie. Lily isn't shocked. She's envious. She wants to be like that--beautiful, exuberant. Mattie, though, is no longer the meltingly gorgeous creature she was. She and her husband scrape by and bicker. Upstairs in their neglected house, Grandpa flirts on the Internet. Marie, Lily's sister, is facing a custody suit. Rory, the brother, hates coming home--those endless catch-up conversations. Usually it is Lily, the dutiful daughter, who sorts out the family. She knows she's flawed, but boringly so. Now she wants to be flawed in an interesting way, to be a woman of wicked mystery and intrigue. Like the one in the photograph. SECRETS OF A FAMILY ALBUM is a beautifully written novel that explores the struggles and triumphs of one extraordinary family.

Secrets of a Family Album Details

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From Reader Review Secrets of a Family Album for online ebook

Lee says

There's a quote on the cover stating "move over Maeve Binchy: there's a new writer on the block..." I'm a Maeve Binchy fan and, like Binchy's novels, this author examines family dynamics but with a different take. I found a lot of truth in the assumptions, perceptions, sibling rivalry, and expectations relatives have of one another. Loved the part about you just have to have mince pie at Christmas, even though nobody eats it - it's a tradition! Reminds me of my mom and having to have cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving, despite the fact it's not well received.

Nicole says

Martin White lives with his son, John, and John's scatty wife Mattie. But Martin, in a forgetful moment loses the TV remote, then refrains from admitting to the act. This begins the chance connections to realign the family constellations.

Mattie and John host the annual get together with their children, Lily, Marie, Rory and the various extensions of husbands and children. At first it seems a tale of the usual family misconceptions carried into adult life that all families experience. Holiday stresses emerge. Family members struggle to define themselves beyond the intricate network of attachments and silly childhood conceptions formed in rash but defining moments. So Lily escapes for a break from the increasing family tension into her work. She has planned to combine a return to the family home to find the local residence of her next interviewee.

Lily interviews Rita Boothe, once a famous, wit & photo essayist, for a book on lost icons. During the interview she finds a side of her mother's youth unknown to the family. Rita remembers the photo image and shows Lily a portrait of Mattie in a pose of pleasurable abandon. Lily feels a flash of envious jealousy for the this ability to live without planning. She begins to dream of letting her control slip, of not being the responsible one, the eldest child.

Mattie's old infatuation with the glamorous Rita kindles a friendship after a chance meeting following Lily's interview. Rita and her son are just as disjointed in their family connections until this chance meeting changes the two families momentums. Then the limitations of imagined family alignments come clear when reflected back in revealing discussion of how each person really remembered those events.

Family connections poised to shatter, scattering the many people into disconnected, grumpy, dissatisfied groups is pulled back by the differing view points. Admiring what is seen as desirable in depreciated family traditions causes old perceptions to slip. New ideas are allowed in, conversations and regrets discussed. Reflecting images of previous insults peel back and the two families start enjoying their own families again. Then the TV remote returns.

Anne says

If you can imagine the tv sitcom 'Modern Family' as an episodic book about a Scottish family, it might be

something like 'Secrets of a Family Album.' I had read and liked some fairly dark mysteries by this author so was surprised to find the cover blurb on 'Secrets etc' comparing her to Maeve Binchy, an author of light, Irish family sagas. I can see the comparison, but Dewar is wittier and a bit more wry or even cynical than I recall Binchy's stories. 'Secrets' recounts a year in the life of Mattie and her husband and their three grown children from one Christmas family gathering to the next year's. Because holiday gatherings bring out the quirks in any family, they are a good place to introduce a family, it's often told stories, sibling rivalries, and most of all the misunderstandings among family members who withhold the complete truth of their lives.

Recommended for fans of Joanna Trollope, Jennifer Weiner and, yes, Maeve Binchy.

Amira Bani says

"Maybe that's the difference between loving someone and being in love. when you're in love it's all euphoria. but love, without the little 'in' before it, is bound up with guilt and responsibility and loyalty."

such a light flowing book, I easily made friends with the characters of it.

Lorna says

Boring family life wittily described
with some hilarious bits. Worth a bit more but cant give on such a limited scale.

Andrea says

This book has different writing style from what I was used to read, but it's still good. It's about a family in Scotland, who has their own issues and secrets. At beginning, the parents are "having a row", their children are concerned about this but they have their own problems, one wants to please everyone, has issue with being perfection. One is single mother and is trying her best to be best mom as she can, but the father came back after 4 years, and want the kids back. What the mother will do? Last, the son, who is living in Paris, his girlfriend wants to get married and start a family. The guy want everything to remain the same, how will he overcome this new change?? Hmmmmmmmm???? *grins* Oh yeah, will the parents ok, too??

Karschtl says

Great book. I really loved how the author depicted the family members. Every one has good and bad character traits. And some things that are well intended are received by others as negative. That's often the cause for misunderstandings in families.

Ann Chappe says

I picked this book up from the library, forgetting that I had read it some years ago. But it actually repays a second reading and I am enjoying it just as much second time around. Perceptive descriptions of relationships and family life

Kirsty Paton says

If I were to sum this book up in one word it would be 'ok'. Even though it is not the worst book I've read, I did find it hard work to keep reading it to completion. The author does use humor in the book nicely and does well with developing the characters. However, with that said, it was difficult to empathize with many of the characters where many of them came across as self absorbed and childish. This made it difficult to relate to the characters.

Susan says

I often find Isla Dewar's novels slow to get into with detailed descriptions e.g. of houses and a lot of introspection by the characters. But somehow I am drawn into the storyline and this book was hard to put down, with perceptive observations of the nuances of family life. Not one character stood out for me, but I had to laugh at Grandpa losing the remote control and lying down on the grass to snooze in the sun and his family thinking he had died. I could identify with Mattie's wish to maintain traditions, John feeling hard done by, and Lily's near obsessions. For me the most likeable was Marie, struggling to keep her family together. Very well written.

Rachel says

I love Isla Dewar's writing. This book is an almost perfect picture of family life, complete with all the petty jealousies and squabbles that most families must experience.

Lisa says

An easy light read. I enjoyed the characters.

Frank says

A scottish family with a range of vastly different members all pulling in different directions. An easy read but will leave an after glow

Hilary Tesh says

If I had to pack a chest of books to keep me company on a desert island, most of Isla Dewar's books would be in there. (The exceptions would be Izzy's War and A Winter Bride - why she should want to change her style to romantic tosh when she can write books like Keeping up With Magda, I can't comprehend!) This book takes a snap shot of an extended family over a year plus, as they adjust to changing circumstances and changing relationships. One of the characters describes them as a flock of starlings that fly up, whosh about and then settle back down again, apart yet always together - the process of whooshing is recorded wittily, funnily, anxiously and at all times totally believably. Wonderful.

Trekktvang says

This book was 200 pages too long.

Probably one of my worst reads, but still worth reading depending on what you want from it.

A short summary:

All the characters have had close to zero development in their desicion-making, social intelligence and responsibility compared to their childhoods, up till this point when the protagonist suddenly discovers a photograph, that she draws false conclusions from, but still lets it become a drastical life-changing moment for her due to her lack of communication with, and prejudice of other characters. This discovery and the impact it has on Lily, the protagonist also starts a chain-reaction of life-changning moments for most other characters.

Some stream of consciousness analysis:

Lily, the protagonist, a perfectionist and in many ways the moral standard for the rest of her family that she keeps by constantly doing the right things and being the problem fixer in her family. So far her "right" desicions have brought her to a "perfect" apartment in London, where she lives togheter with her husband Art, or Arthur. (which is his name at night when they play out some lame ass crazy role-playing fantasy that the narrator at one stage uses as a symbol of Lily's own secret intresting life that she is herself unaware of, but if that is to the author the height of a marrige I hope I never get married) They do not have any kids which slighlty is a problem for Art, but Lily has postponed it for seven years and is afraid of how "children look at her" and see her insecurity that she so desperatly tries to hide.

Her only secure place is "home," her childhood home which she finds weird to still call home, but does as it is the only place where she feels secure. Mainly due to the fact that things never change such as the bathroom door and some other stuff still needs to be fixed in the house, and her father John, who always promises to do so, but never does. Wheter or not this is an intentional metaphor of relationships that have been slightly broken for a long time, but never been touched or fixed remains unclear as it is only mentioned one time, and in such a long book it sort of gets lost by all the other excess descriptions of buss-rides, houses, streets, etc. But it would have been a very nice metaphor, especially if it was developed a little more, as it could give more justification to why and how some relationships, such as the marrige between Mattie and John (Lily's parents) have been going on for so long but they still have so many misconceptions about each other and very childish moral behavior, as they end arguments where they both think "he/she started it first" such as the argument about the TV remote control. When they finally bond, it is by both hating on and talking shit about their daugther Lily, after she has bought a car that, Mattie wanted. Such childish behavior is to some extent intresting, but I feel that every time the characters make intresting desicions that allow for deeper

justification of the characters development and their reasoning or lack of reasoning, the author tends to rely on clichés, which tends to be childish moral behavior.

Examples of unjustified childish behavior from characters:

-the argument between Mattie and John, that seems to go on forever, and the times where they can talk about it, such as when Mattie comes back to bed and wants to make-up with John, but John farts and says he doesn't want to be close to Mattie, and so Mattie again misinterprets it as John hating her etc. The argument prolongs again. Such behavior is reasonable in a relationship between teenagers where insecurities can be misinterpreted and blown up like a balloon until it pops and the world of lies falls apart after people finally talk to each other and find out the truth. This is a typical cliché and therefore it is sad that it is perpetuated for all the characters as they in a predictable manner always, without any exception misinterpret and envy the lives of other people, and nobody are until the end of the novel able to see and appreciate what they have for themselves.

The ironic thing is however that in a novel where the focus and depth is primarily on the judgment of themselves and their comparison, all the characters that we get an "in-depth relationship with" seem to believe in the cliché that "the grass is always greener on the other side" yet there is no-one, with that depth who has the contrasting belief, that they are better than everybody else. Such a character could potentially develop many interesting themes, especially since the narrator is omniscient and has the ability to go deep into the thoughts and justifications of all characters, and would therefore be able to portray the difference in people who believe in either cliché, and from there be able to create interesting discussions about whether both are equally wrong, right etc. And from there be able to send a more powerful message through the rise or fall of the different characters.

Now the message of the novel seems a bit unclear, it started with a chapter called "beauty and acceptance", where Lily remembers the conversation vividly when she thinks back to it four years later, and at one point Lily refers to it as "when we had that conversation about beauty and acceptance" which exaggerates the importance of the words "beauty" and "acceptance" into oblivion since it by those words she remembers the conversation and starts her whole journey of her identity crisis and the struggle of being "interestingly flawed" which to her seems beautiful. But after that chapter those two words don't succeed each other until the very end, and they sort of lose the power they in a way had, when it's suddenly Mattie, at the end of the novel, who picks up the thread and sort of unenthusiastically understands John's beauty when he fiddles with his kite, and the whole problem of being accepted instead of beautiful seems to have diminished, and as a reader end up very confused when it suddenly has lost the gigantic importance it seemed to have at the beginning of the novel, and Lily's take on it is completely left out, although "she started it" and the whole thought process was through her mind.

The novel is also poorly written, and the author seems to assume that her audience are completely retarded and have no way of reading in-between the lines or understand even the simplest points, like when two characters are fighting, or when they have reconciled again, instead we are provided with seemingly endless unnecessary commentary that does nothing but stating the obvious, and it comes both before and after an event which completely disengages me as a reader. This commentary is also lengthy at times, and it seems like the characters are never allowed to speak for themselves without the author feeling the need to overexplain every side of the argument, this is why I think the novel could have easily been at least 100 pages shorter, by just removing unnecessary commentary. This paragraph for instance could have been 3 lines, but in case her audience is really as retarded as the author thinks I wanted to give an example so that they can more easily understand. That the paragraph is more than 3 lines means that it is longer than necessary and therefore might be dragging things too long, no jk. but it's really that bad sometimes, I know I should give an example, but I rather want this to be the example because I feel it is more engaging than

actually quoting the book.

The novel could have been shortened another 100 pages if it was structured properly and that the author actually had some idea of what themes she wanted to bring up, and then decide to focus her attention to developing these, beauty and acceptance is definitely one of the major themes, but as mentioned before it is really only brought up at the end, and although most of the decisions the characters take are driven by a longing to be accepted and beautiful, like Lily's purchase of the car and then later getting a tattoo because she wanted to be "interestingly flawed" the commentary that had the opportunity to dwell deeper into this theme with the possibility of getting through a solid, profound message, rather focuses on commentating the obvious which makes it at some point sound like a bad sitcom where obvious things are repeated for comical reasons, but in this case it rather ends up as a tragedy as it seems like the author is not aware of her repetitiveness, at least she does not seem to make any remarks about that.

The novel has also similar to this review, a lack of structure where thoughts are just simple continuations of other thoughts, this is called stream of consciousness and used perfectly in Catcher in the rye, to portray the thoughts of one individual and his struggles to cope with growing up. In this novel however, the whole writing suffers from it, and some things mentioned at the end of one chapter appears in the beginning of the next, which of course is fine as the novel is following a linear narrative, but its often uninteresting things like the concept of "egg in a cup" that suddenly appears and similar to a bad sitcom overrides every other theme as every character has its comment to make about it and then it disappears and had no relevance for developing the characters, or doing anything to the story, which is fine if it's entertaining, but it just happens over and over again with so many different things, and since the novel has next to no metaphors, except for maybe the TV-remote, the house and the starlings, it just seems so unnecessary, and in the end, due to the extremely long novel, becomes boring. This is what I am also trying to do with this review to further emphasise how important structure is, I started a list a couple of paragraphs ago, that I never finished or developed, but I have made many reasonable points since then, but since it lacks organisation it is frustrating to follow as a reader and what could have been perfectly sound, reasonable points drown in the need to constantly overexplain and be driven by the stream of consciousness that is an authors worst enemy if not done intentional.

The chapter names are like keywords of the chapters but sound like bad episode names for a bad sitcom such as "the perfect sandwich and Reading the Hush," "a bare tummy and Miles Armstrong's dilemma," "Middle-age Fury and Sibling Rivalry" the only chapter name I found to be interesting and not just a bad spoiler was "Grandpa's Death, another Non-Event" that sort of played on the words that it was of little importance, but then again it can also mean that it was a non-event, it did not happen, which is exactly what happened, and I was once again left surprised by how few surprises there are in this book, or at least surprises that are not 100% predictable based on the behavior all the characters seem to have.

In conclusion, this review is meant to show how terrible it is to not have a clear organisation, Shakespeares sonnets would never have been remotely relevant were they not tied to a strict scheme which made his borderless love understandable through borders we can all relate to. The comparison to Shakespeare is only made to show how even the brightest of minds were limitless in creativity, but not in organisation, and the lack of organisation in this book is outstanding.

When that is said the book has a to some extent nice story, if you are seeking yet another brainless story built on western clichés you are more than welcome to read this book, and I actually think you will find it entertaining in the similar fashion a child finds even the most predictable children shows entertaining.
