This article was published more than 5 years ago. Some information in it may no longer be current. Etta and Otto, the first two characters in the title of Emma Hooper's debut novel, are a childless, elderly couple from rural Saskatchewan. On page one, Otto wakes to find a note from Etta: 'I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck.'
I can walk. I will try to remember to come back. Her reason for doing so and Otto’s for not trying to stop her, however, are for him to know and for us to find out. That Etta’s journey has a psychic or spiritual dimension is implied, in part, by the novel’s magic-realist elements, the most magical of which is Etta’s travelling companion, a talking coyote named Etta and Otto and Russell and James the most fantastical is the total absence of biting insects when Etta sleeps, unsheltered, in Northern Ontario’s wilderness in high summer.

The book’s title offers a hint of Hooper’s intentionally naive, conjunction-drunk style. She has a rare passion for the word “and” as well as for listing and enumerating, which, in combination, sometimes crosses the line into tweeness.

Repetition is often used in lieu Etta and Otto and Russell and James adverbs: We’re told Otto “slept and slept” or “searched and searched,” that his army battalion “walked and lifted and shuffled and marched and walked and lifted and marched.

The style is most obviously reminiscent of a fable or storybook, but Etta and Otto and Russell and Etta and Otto and Russell and James is not aimed at children fables aren’t usually pages long, either. Nor, despite the presence of sentient animals, is it boldly allegorical, like Animal Farm or The Pilgrim’s Progress. In dialogue, characters speak sparingly, without much affect. Picasso was capable of depicting his subjects in a conventionally representational manner but adopted cubism to make a point about perception.

The comedian Sarah Silverman delivers her material in an Etta and Otto and Russell and James voice to amplify its shock value. What Hooper’s style does for her subject matter, on the other hand, is less apparent — its fableish qualities suggest that she wants to give Etta and Otto the burnish of timelessness.

But various chronological breadcrumbs — a young boy with a cellphone, Otto’s age during the Depression, a cashier bobbing away with headphones on — all triangulate to a setting in the not-so-distant past.

This not only conspires against whatever aspirations toward universality Hooper might have, it raises expectations and sensitizes us to further clues. When, after several weeks, Otto wonders where Etta — who has become, at this point, something of a media sensation — might now be, we in turn wonder why he doesn’t just turn on the TV or open a newspaper. But my chief gripe with the novel’s style is the way it both flattens and headless on — all triangulate to a setting in the not-so-distant past.

Although Hooper constantly strives for poignancy, her characters’ lack of depth, their dulled emotions, keep getting in the way. A putative love triangle between Etta, Otto and Etta and Otto and Russell and James fourth titular character, Russell — who grew up on the neighbouring farm and whose love for Etta, even in her dotage, appears unrequited — has had all its corners conveniently rounded so no one bumps their shins.

In early flashbacks, Etta’s pregnant, teenaged sister Alma decides to go to a Halifax convent where she will later die in childbirth. It’s a pivotal moment that is, again, to my mind, undermined by Alma’s description of her decision-making process: “I’ve thought and I’ve thought and I’ve thought and that’s it. I’m going. But it’s a chord that Hooper’s chosen instrument is unable to sustain. This is a space where subscribers can engage with each other and Globe staff.

Non-subscribers can read and sort comments but will Etta and Otto and Russell and James be able to engage with them in any way.

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**Review: 'Etta and Otto and Russell and James' by Emma Hooper - Chicago Tribune**

Rate this book. Eighty-two-year-old Etta has never seen the ocean. So early one morning she takes a rifle, some chocolate, and her best boots, and begins walking the 3, kilometers from rural Canada eastward to the coast. Her husband Otto wakes to a note left on the kitchen table. I will try to remember to come back Etta writes to him. Otto has seen the ocean, having crossed the Atlantic years ago to fight in a far-away war. Etta and Otto and Russell and James understands.
But with Etta gone, the memories come crowding in and Otto struggles to keep them at bay. Russell has spent his whole life trying to keep up with Otto and loving Etta from afar. Russell insists on finding Etta, wherever she's gone.

Leaving his own farm will be the first act of defiance in his life. As Etta walks further toward the ocean, accompanied by a coyote named James, the lines among memory, illusion, and reality blur. Rocking back and forth with the pull of the waves, Etta and Otto and Russell and James moves from the hot and dry present of a quiet Canadian farm to a dusty burnt past of hunger, war, passion, and hope; from trying to remember to trying to forget; and Etta and Otto and Russell and James each of its characters to visit the sites they've Etta and Otto and Russell and James to see and say the things they've longed to say.

This is dazzling literary fiction about the rediscovery and care of the soul, and the idea it's never too late for a great adventure.

BookBrowse Review "Two major plot lines run throughout Etta and Otto and Russell and James: In the first we learn about the characters' lives, Etta and Otto and Russell and James and relationships before and during the years of WWII; in the second we follow the year-old Etta as she walks the length of Canada while increasingly impacted by her encroaching Alzheimer's disease. However, in the long run the book simply didn't work for me. I felt like I never came to understand the characters, in particular missing Etta and Otto and Russell and James motivations for some of the more unusual actions they take. There were also a number of plot elements included in the novel that didn't seem to tie into anything and I couldn't figure out what they were meant to convey or why they were included. I turned the last page feeling oddly dissatisfied with the novel, as if I'd missed something buried within its pages or didn't understand something about it. I did enjoy Hooper's writing and look forward to her next work, but overall I thought this one didn't hang together as well as it could have.

Debut novelist Hooper's spare, evocative prose dips in and out of reality and travels between past and present This is a quietly powerful story whose dreamlike quality lingers long after the last page is turned. A masterful near homage to Pilgrim's Progress: souls redeemed through struggle. Drawing on wisdom and whimsy of astonishing grace and maturity, Hooper has written an irresistibly enchanting debut novel that explores mysteries of love old and new, the loyalty of animals and dependency of humans, the horrors of war and perils of loneliness, and the tenacity of time and fragility of memory.

The information about Etta and Otto and Russell Etta and Otto and Russell and James shown above was first featured in "The BookBrowse Review" - BookBrowse's online-magazine that keeps our members abreast of notable and high-profile books publishing in the coming weeks. In most cases, the reviews are necessarily limited to those that were available to us ahead of publication. If you are the publisher or author of this book and feel that the reviews shown do not properly reflect the range of media opinion now available, please send us a message with the mainstream media reviews that you would like to see added.

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**Etta and Otto and Russell and James by Emma Hooper**

But when I do, it is the level of ugly-cry devastation that becomes Etta and Otto and Russell and James. My mom still shudders when recounting my breakdown after finishing Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes. My reply? However, it was knowing that this voice — this writer — was leaving me that stung the most.

Pirouetting seamlessly through time and viewpoints, best friends Otto and Russell and their shared love of Etta slowly unearth a story of serendipity, tragic timing, contentious choices and the tension between desire and duty. There is a gentleness and sweetness to each of the characters that endeavor them quickly to the heart, reflected in the fashion that elderly Otto and Etta unwittingly capture the love of Canada — Etta through her cross-country journey, and Otto through the unusual art project that arises from her absence.

Shared letters and overlapping pasts reveal the deep friendship between the three friends, but as we all know from our own realities, sometimes love can be spread too thin to go Etta and Otto and Russell and James. The questions mount: Who was meant to be together? Whose fault was what? The dialogue is simple — barren but evocative.
We see the missed chances to speak truths and just how deep the sorrow of a swallowed secret can burrow. Despite the melancholy, the story is far from tragic — more like an epic send-off for a small knitted family of friends and lovers who Etta and Otto and Russell and James forward in life despite the strangeness and sorrow of everyday existence.

Hooper's story is a transparent glimpse into the roots and repercussions of a relationship with bittersweet, beautiful ends that are largely worth the separation anxiety tears.

By Tabitha Blankenbiller.