



# Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel

By Emma Hooper

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## Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel By Emma Hooper

This “poetic, poignant” (*US Weekly*) debut features last great adventures, unlikely heroes, and a “sweet, disarming story of lasting love” (*The New York Times Book Review*).

Eighty-three-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 3,232 kilometers from rural Saskatchewan, Canada eastward to the sea. As Etta walks further toward the crashing waves, the lines among memory, illusion, and reality blur.

Otto wakes to a note left on the kitchen table. “I will try to remember to come back,” Etta writes to her husband. Otto has seen the ocean, having crossed the Atlantic years ago to fight in a far-away war. He understands. But with Etta gone, the memories come crowding in and Otto struggles to keep them at bay. Meanwhile, their neighbor 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.

Moving from the hot and dry present of a quiet Canadian farm to a dusty, burnt past of hunger, war, and passion, from trying to remember to trying to forget, *Etta and Otto and Russell and James* is an astounding literary debut “of deep longing, for reinvention and self-discovery, as well as for the past and for love and for the boundless unknown” (*San Francisco Chronicle*). “In this haunting debut, set in a starkly beautiful landscape, Hooper delineates the stories of Etta and the men she loved (Otto and Russell) as they intertwine through youth and wartime and into old age. It’s a lovely book you’ll want to linger over” (*People*).

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## Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel By Emma Hooper Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

## Q&A with Caroline Leavitt and Emma Hooper



Photo credit: Caroline Leavitt



Photo credit: Martin Tompkins

**Caroline:** I always want to know what sparked a particular book? What was the question that haunted you?

**Emma:** I think the question that drove a lot of this book was “Why not?” Why not walk 3,000 miles? Why not go find the caribou? Why not make paper maché animals until all the space in your yard and heart is filled up? These Why Nots are what built the story. First them, and then their partners, the just-plain whys. Okay, there’s no reason why Etta can’t walk all the way to the ocean one way or another, now we need to figure out why she’d want to... It was like a persistent three year old asking why? why? why? I suppose that’s a bit of a cheeky answer, because that’s, I imagine, how most every story is made, but, still, in this case, that’s what happened, my imagination said:

Why not have a character walk across Canada?

And my brain replied:

No real reason why not... now tell me why she would want to...?

And so on.

**Caroline:** This is your debut, and it's an astonishing one. What was it like writing this book? What kind of writer are you? Do you make outlines? Do you have rituals? And do you already have something else you are working on?

**Emma:** Writing this book was very... sporadic. I've got three other jobs, as a freelance musician, an academic at Bath Spa University and a violin teacher, so the writing of this book took place in all the little gaps and spaces in between other things. Lots of writing on the train! (I'm actually writing these answers to you on the train right now... :)).

I don't make outlines, I prefer to start each writing session having no idea what's going to happen next... keeps things interesting for me, and I think the spontaneity allows for a more vibrant, living story. I do have a lot of organising 'helpers' tacked up around my desk and office though. For this book I had a big piece of paper with the names and birthdates of all of Otto's siblings, for example... .

Because my writing takes places at all sorts of different times and in all sorts of different places (sound-checks for gigs are another good place to squeeze in a couple hundred words...) I don't have straight-forward writing rituals. (Though I'm envious and in awe of authors who do.) I do have a few portable rituals though; listening to music is one of these. If I'm having trouble getting my head into the writing space I've got three or four musicians whose work I know puts me into the right zone; I'll pop on some headphones and sink into writing that way, often.

And yes! There is something new I'm working on... it's a new novel set in a tiny fishing island outpost off the coast of Newfoundland (which is itself off the eastern coast of Canada). It's got mermaids and sea monsters and a lot of rain in it. I'm fairly in love with it at the moment...

**Caroline:** I love the whole idea of the persistence of love and memory. Otto struggles remembering the war. Russell, his friend can't forget a particular woman. And Etta needs to see the ocean, hoping she can remember to come back. Can you talk a bit about memory and its relationship to the book, please?

**Emma:** In *Etta and Otto and Russell and James* I wanted to explore memory as it pertains to and shapes our ideas of identity. Our sense of self is built out of these stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in the past, and sometimes these stories and memories can get so heavy that they stand in the way of who we want to be or could be now. Etta needs to rewrite her memories so that they are hers and not overwhelmed by Otto's. Russell needs to let his go so that he can move on and out and away.

**Caroline:** Etta is 83-years-old and one of the most alive characters I've read. Tell me how you went about crafting her.

**Emma:** Well, Etta and Otto are both loosely based on my maternal grandparents. My grandpa did come from a farm family of 15 kids and his hair did go white after his trip to the World War Two front, and my grandma did teach in a tiny prairie school. Many of the recipes included are her own as well. Of course much of Etta's character is fiction too; I think she is who I want to be at eighty-three.

**Caroline:** What's obsessing you now and why?

**Emma:** Sea monsters! Both real and mythical. The giant squid is particularly fascinating; I was recently at a film festival where I got to be in a room with one of the only two people ever to have seen a live one. Ever! He said it was shining gold in colour. Amazing. I love that there are these real life magical things still being discovered and explored.

**Caroline:** What question didn't I ask that I should have?

**Emma:** Hm... lots of people ask: "what actually happened at the end of *Etta and Otto and Russell and James*." But I believe pretty strongly in Barthes' idea of the death of the author (as in, interpretation is the key to truth in art, not authority authority), so I wouldn't have answered anyway. So I guess that's the question I'm glad you didn't ask...

As for what you should have... maybe what's for lunch? Because I think that's an excellent question and I do not know the answer, but wish I did...

#### Review

*"Etta and Otto and Russell and James is incredibly moving, beautifully written and luminous with wisdom. It is a book that restores one's faith in life even as it deepens its mystery. Wonderful!"* —Chris Cleave, #1 *New York Times* Bestselling author of *Little Bee*

*"The pages do turn quickly in this book...in Etta and Otto and Russell and James — a first novel by Emma Hooper — you're very interested in the characters. And you want to find out more about them. So as you turn the pages, you delve deeper into their hopes and where they are at the moment in their life. So it's a much different page-turner in a sense, but this is a lovely, lovely book."*

—Nancy Pearl, NPR's "Morning Edition"

*"[A] sweet, disarming story of lasting love... Hooper's steady hand creates the perfect setup for the unexpected."*

—*The New York Times Book Review*

*"Quirky, offbeat... Modern life is full of people spouting rubbish about spurious emotional and spiritual 'journeys.' Etta's trek as she comes to the end of her life and reckons with the past, has, in contrast, a real and worthwhile dignity to it."*

—*The Financial Times*

*"In this haunting debut, set in a starkly beautiful landscape, Hooper delineates the stories of Etta and the men she loved (Otto and Russell) as they intertwine through youth and wartime and into old age. It's a lovely book you'll want to linger over."*

—*People*

*"Heartfelt... In simple, graceful prose, Hooper has woven a tale of deep longing, for reinvention and self-discovery, as well as for the past and for love and for the boundless unknown."*

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“[Hooper’s] crisp, unadorned prose beautifully captures her characters’ sentiments, and conveys with compassion but also a degree of distance their experiences of love and pain, longing and loss... this novel pulsates with an energy that can best be described as raw but also highly restrained. “

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Hooper has conjured a character who is a gift... As the lines blur between Etta’s and Otto’s memories, and even between their physical bodies, readers emerge with a deeper appreciation for life and for its suffering against its backdrop of majesty.”

—*Dallas Morning News*

“A bit like a fairy tale, *Etta and Otto and Russell and James* is whimsical, even magical. A bit like the Canadian prairie, it is spare, yet beautiful.”

—*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

“A poetic, poignant tale.”

—*US Weekly*

“Fictional journeys toward enlightenment and self-discovery fill miles of book shelves, but few are as freshly told as the road trip traced in *Etta and Otto and Russell and James*...It’s filled with magical realism, whimsy and the idea that you’re never too old to take risks.”

—*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

“Hooper’s debut is a novel of memory and longing and desires too long denied...To a Cormac McCarthy-like narrative—sans quotation marks, featuring crisp, concise conversations—Hooper adds magical realism.... The book ends with sheer poetry...A masterful near homage to *Pilgrim’s Progress*: souls redeemed through struggle.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Hooper’s spare, evocative prose dips in and out of reality and travels between past and present creating what Etta tells Otto is “just a long loop.” This is a quietly powerful story whose dreamlike quality lingers long after the last page is turned."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Hooper, with great insight, explores the interactions and connections between spouses and friends—the rivalries, the camaraderie, the joys and tragedies—and reveals the extraordinary lengths to which people will go in the name of love."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"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."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

#### About the Author

Raised in Alberta, Canada, Emma Hooper brought her love of music and literature to the UK, where she



received a doctorate in Musico-Literary studies at the University of East-Anglia and currently lectures at Bath Spa University. A musician, Emma performs as the solo artist Waitress for the Bees and plays with a number of bands. She lives in Bath, UK, but goes home to Canada to cross-country ski whenever she can. *Etta and Otto and Russell and James* is her first novel.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Ricardo Boddie:**

Here thing why this specific Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel are different and dependable to be yours. First of all reading through a book is good but it really depends in the content from it which is the content is as delightful as food or not. Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel giving you information deeper including different ways, you can find any book out there but there is no e-book that similar with Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel. It gives you thrill studying journey, its open up your personal eyes about the thing this happened in the world which is perhaps can be happened around you. It is easy to bring everywhere like in recreation area, café, or even in your means home by train. In case you are having difficulties in bringing the published book maybe the form of Etta and Otto and Russell and James: A Novel in e-book can be your substitute.

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you can read and believe you are the character on there. Therefore not at all of book are make you bored, any it offers up you feel happy, fun and rest. Try to choose the best book for you and try to like reading in which.

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