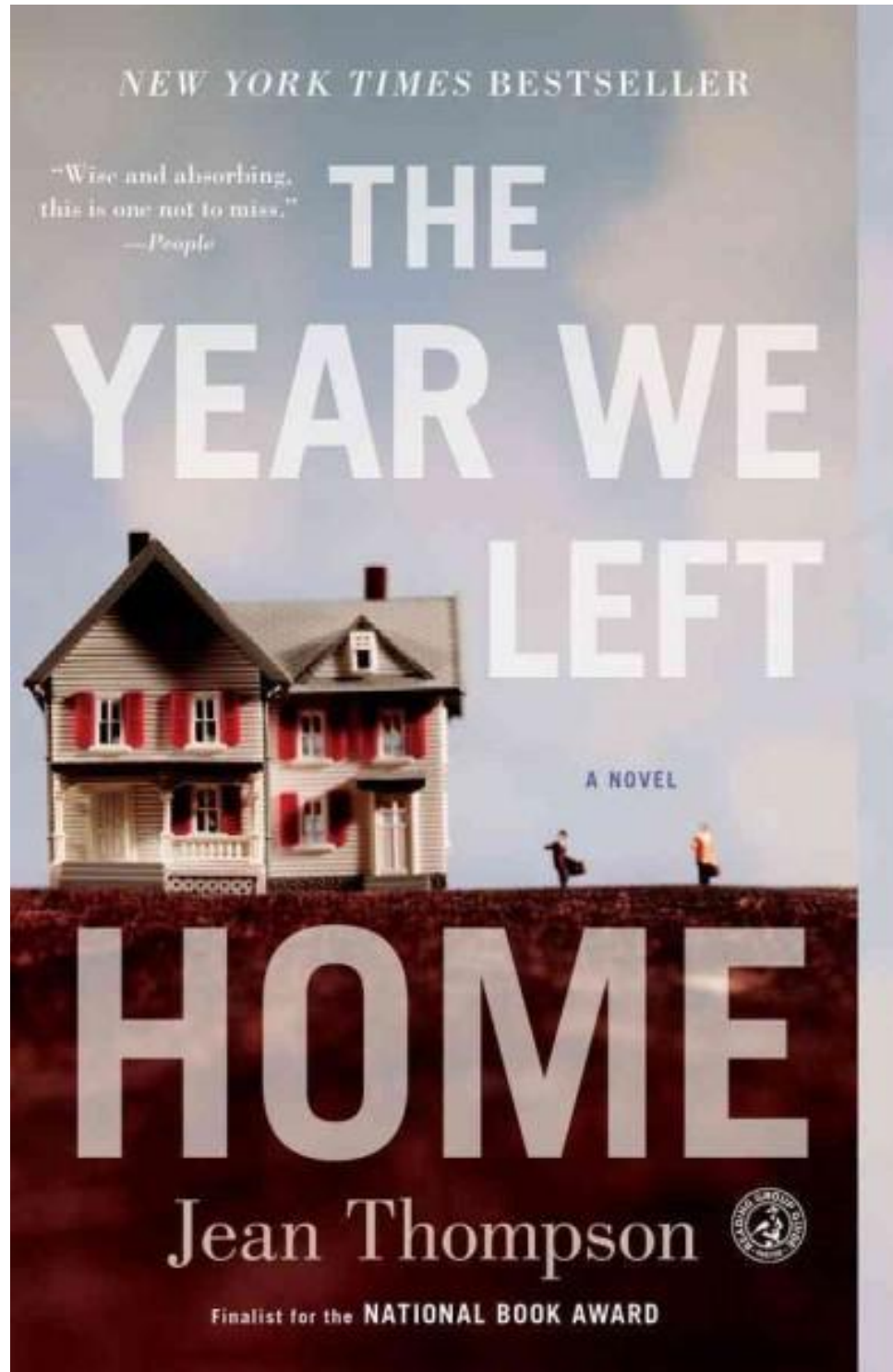


## About the book...



*The Year We Left Home* is National Book Award finalist Jean Thompson's mesmerizing, decades-spanning saga of one ordinary American family that captures the turbulent history of the country at large.

Named a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a *People* magazine "Pick of the Week," and an Indie Next and Midwest Connections selection, *The Year We Left Home* is the career-defining novel that Jean Thompson's admirers have been waiting for: a sweeping and emotionally powerful story of a single American family during the tumultuous final decades of the twentieth century.

Stretching from the early 1970s in the Iowa farmlands to suburban Chicago and across the map of contemporary America, *The Year We Left Home* follows the Erickson siblings as they confront prosperity and heartbreak, setbacks and triumphs, and seek their place in a country whose only constant seems to be breathtaking change. Ambitious and richly told, this is a vivid and moving meditation on our continual pursuit of happiness and an incisive exploration of the national character.

## About the author...



Jean Thompson is the author of the upcoming novel [The Humanity Project](#) (Blue Rider Press, 2013), the recent novel [The Year We Left Home](#) (Simon & Schuster, 2012), the acclaimed

short fiction collections [Do Not Deny Me](#) (Simon & Schuster, 2009) and [Throw Like a Girl](#) (Simon & Schuster, 2007) as well as the novel [City Boy](#); the short story collection [Who Do You Love](#), a 1999 National Book Award finalist for fiction; and the novel [Wide Blue Yonder](#), a *New York Times* Notable Book and *Chicago Tribune* Best Fiction selection for 2002.

Her short fiction has been published in many magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker*, and been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories* and *Pushcart Prize*. Jean's work has been praised by *Elle Magazine* as "bracing and wildly intelligent writing that

explores the nature of love in all its hidden and manifest dimensions."

Jean's other books include the short story collections *The Gasoline Wars* and *Little Face*, and the novels *My Wisdom* and *The Woman Driver*.

Jean has been the recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, among other accolades, and taught creative writing at the University of Illinois--Champaign/Urbana, Reed College, Northwestern University, and many other colleges and universities.

## **A Conversation with Jean Thompson**

**Why did you choose to have Ryan narrate the majority of the sections? Is there anyone's perspective you considered writing from that you didn't end up including?**

I wanted the primary narrator, the one who begins and ends the book, to be a young person who comes of age in the course of telling the story. I wanted him to have a certain ambivalence also, one he's not entirely aware of at first. He wants individual freedom and self-expression, but there is

also the gravitational pull of what is familiar and comfortable—home. Those two forces are often in conflict. Anyone I wanted to emerge as a narrator? It would have been interesting to write from Norm or Martha’s perspective, or perhaps their daughter Pat’s. But I just couldn’t stretch my own experience enough to do a credible job. No farm in my past.

**Your narrators are very diverse. How were you able to capture the variety of viewpoints so authentically? How do you research your characters?**

No research involved, but all writers rely on a process of active observation, wondering what makes certain people, or types of people, tick. One trait or detail leads you to imagine another, and so on. If the characters are convincing and engaging to a reader, then I’ve done my job. But characters, like actual people, are always something of a mystery.

**Whose perspective did you enjoy writing from the most? Which was most challenging?**

The answer to both questions is Chip. He is such an outlandish character in many respects, so damaged, and at the mercy of so many impulses. I

enjoyed the freedom to take his consciousness, and his story, in any direction I chose. At the same time, he was such a wild card, it was difficult to keep the character coherent, sometimes literally.

**After your recent, extremely successful, award-winning story collections, what made you decide to write a novel?**

For the last ten years or more, I've alternated writing short stories and novels. There's no ideology or strategy involved, just a sense of trying to keep things fresh for myself. Of trying to stay un-bored, if you will.

**Where did the idea for this particular novel and its characters and themes originate?**

With a wedding I once attended, very much like the one that begins the book. In some ways it was a vague memory, in others, quite clear, and there was something about it that made me recall it after all this time and wish to revisit it and reinvent it. Then the tale grew in the telling. But I almost always begin a book, or a story, with something specific, a scene or an incident that gradually acquires meaning. For instance, how does the wedding celebration give you insight into how the family functions, and also the larger, extended

family, and then the community, and from there, perhaps, our national identity.

**Many of the sections could potentially stand alone—did you write a particular section first, and then realize there was potential to develop an entire novel? Or did you begin with this format in mind?**

I wanted to write an episodic novel, one that covered a long period of time, but in leaps and bounds, and with gaps in between. I think that's often how we experience our own lives, at least looking back on them: the when-I-was-in-college chapter, the job-I-hated chapter, and so on.

**Your last story collection, *Do Not Deny Me*, was one of the *New York Times*'s Notable Books for 2009. When writing this book, did you feel any extra pressure, after receiving such an honor?**

The only real pressure is self-inflicted, and is transacted between myself and the blank page.

**Have you spent any time in rural Iowa? What made you decide to set the novel there? What experiences have you had with small town life?**

I've been an occasional visitor, and an observer from many highway travels, and of course, it's only one state over from Illinois, where I live, so I have some store of second-hand knowledge. I'm probably most comfortable with Midwestern settings. Small town life? Again, I'm mostly a voyeur. I do think small towns offer a natural stage for an author, a kind of enclosed space in which to work out a story. Also, the economics and populations of so many small towns have changed rather quickly over the course of a few generations, and that was something I wanted to write about.

**A few years ago, you eloquently refuted Stephen King's assertion that the short story was dying. What do you think is the place of the short story in today's literary canon?**

I do think that a lot depends on stories finding their place in the great hullabaloo of contemporary publication. Anthologies are useful, because even the most ardent reader would find it hard to search out everything published in the smaller magazines. Large circulation magazines that used to feature fiction now seem to have fewer and fewer pages, and most of those are advertisements. I grew up



reading the old *Saturday Evening Post*, and while no one would argue that many of those stories had literary qualities, there was at least the concept that reading could serve as entertainment. Now, of course, we are overwhelmed and browbeaten by many, many forms of entertainment. But there are still first-rate, excellent stories being written, and, as the poet Richard Hugo said, "Excellent things need no defense."

**One of your characters, Elton, remarks, "The only people who have enough of a soul to *make* something with a soul are the ones on the outside looking in. You can't be at home in the world and see what you need to see about it." (p. 401) Do you agree?**

I do and I don't agree. There's such a thing as mainstream art, that reaffirms values. Outsider art challenges those values. I'm probably more interested in the latter, but I'd rather see a well-made portrait than—an artist friend told me about this one—an installation of sod in a parking lot. In the novel, I wanted to show a variety of experiences along this continuum, that is, conventional lives that take surprising turns, and outlaw lives that end up circling back home.

**Are you working on anything at the moment?**

Yes, but it's still like a big unshaped glob of clay, and at this point it might turn into anything, an elegant vase, or a ceramic frog.

## Reviews

### *Kirkus Reviews*

In Thompson's unforgettable, offbeat novel, an extended Iowa family struggles for emotional and economic stability over three decades, beginning with a modest Lutheran wedding in 1983 and ending with a bittersweet homecoming.

An Illinois writer who has drawn acclaim for story collections including *Do Not Deny Me* (2009) and *Who Do You Love* (1999) and novels including *City Boy* (2004) and *Wide Blue Yonder* (2003), Thompson has crafted a dazzling book that works both as an epic page-turner and a series of tightly focused, chronologically arranged stories. Long before the recent recession, the Ericksons, a family of Norwegian descent based in the town of Grenada, are up against it—both as part of a

farm community and through ties to the banking community that's under violent threat from foreclosed farmers. As the Ericksons' story unfolds, marital problems, alcoholism, posttraumatic stress syndrome and a horrific car accident leave their mark. Among the siblings, Ryan, whose ponytailed academic hopes were derailed by an incident with a political-science student in Chicago, has succeeded in computer programming only to find himself on a career bubble. A second chance with an old girlfriend proves more ill-advised than the first. Torrie, the bright upstart in the family, suffers a devastating brain injury in the car accident. Cousin Chip is a maladjusted Vietnam veteran just waiting to go off. For all the setbacks the family suffers, their strong ties to each other and their geographical roots ultimately lift them above circumstance. And there are enough unexpected turns, foremost Torrie's awakening as a visionary photographer, to complicate any lessons about fate. Thompson's ability to put these characters empathically on the page, in their special setting, over an extended period of years, with just the right dose of dark humor, rivals Richard Russo's. Touted as her commercial breakthrough, the novel is a powerful reflection on middle American life—on

the changes wrought by the passing years and the values that endure.

*Library Journal*

National Book Award finalist Thompson's third novel (after *City Boy* and *Wide Blue Yonder*) spans over three decades as it explores the subtle changes in one family from small-town Iowa. The novel opens as oldest daughter Anita marries a banker "outsider" from Colorado, hoping only to start a family as her younger brother, Ryan, idealistically dreams of escaping to college. Their cousin, Chip, returns home from Vietnam damaged but still an eccentric, roving restlessly from Seattle to Mexico. Matriarch Audrey wants only happiness for her brood, which is ultimately derailed by Ryan's growing dissatisfaction, Anita's failing marriage, and youngest sister Torrie's life-changing accident. Verdict In this episodic novel told from multiple viewpoints, the individual scenes are powerful and are imbued with great detail. Yet, as a whole, these episodes do not develop into more than scattered chapters in the life of an ordinary family. Nonetheless, this will appeal to readers of literary fiction.

*Publishers Weekly*

Bookended by two wars—Vietnam and Iraq—Thompson's third novel (after the collection *Do Not Deny Me*) sketches the travails of an Iowa family over three decades. Matriarch Audrey neatly sums up the episodic novel's grand theme: "she'd been born into one world, hopeful and normal, and now she lived in another, full of sadness and failure." The novel opens as oldest daughter Anita, the beauty of the family, celebrates her marriage. Over the years, however, Anita confronts dissatisfaction with herself and disillusionment with her pompous husband. Her younger brother, Ryan, a high school senior as the novel opens, longs to escape his rural roots, dating a hippie poet and majoring in political science before realizing that the farmers who came before him might hold more relevance than he'd imagined. Cousin Chip comes back from Vietnam troubled and aimless, his wanderings from Seattle to Reno, Nev., to Veracruz, Mexico, offering a parallel to the spiritual restlessness all the other characters feel. Told from the point of view of more than a half-dozen characters, the vignettes that make up the narrative are generally powerful in

isolation, but as a whole fail to develop into anything more than a series of snapshots of a family touched by time and tragedy. (

A masterful wide-angle portrait of an Iowa family over three decades.

*BookPage Reviews*

**The stuff of real life, honest and gut-wrenching**

Jean Thompson's poignant *The Year We Left Home* chronicles life as it unfolds for the Erickson family over a span of 30 years. The book begins in Iowa circa 1973. The novel's matriarch and patriarch are salt-of-the-earth folks, each of their four children "some gradation of blonde, long-boned Nordic-ness." Servant-hearted and fiercely loyal to family who abide in the area, Mom and Dad are subtly written into the background as Thompson narrates the passing years.

As the parents gray with age and irrelevancy in the lives of their children, their progeny play more of a central role in the story. Readers become intimately acquainted with Ryan, Blake, Anita and Torrie as they experience all of life's stages. Thompson's nuanced prose

echoes each of their distinct voices as she explores the most heartbreaking times in all four characters' lives.

Ryan, endowed with good looks and brains, leaves the nest with aspirations outside the rural Midwestern perimeter. For most of the book, readers reside with him after he's landed in Chicago. Ryan struggles with an undercurrent of guilt: He has lost connection to his roots since leaving home, and there are moral missteps, marital skirmishes and paternal responsibilities that weigh heavily on him.

Meanwhile Blake, a carpenter, Anita, a housewife, and the youngest, Torrie, who is forever changed after a tragic accident, remain close to their roots. Although they have the luxury of familial support, they only lean on one another in the worst times.

Thompson paints a compelling, realistic picture of four siblings slugging through issues such as alcoholism, infidelity and handicaps in *The Year We Left Home*. Thompson tackles the stuff of real life, and it's clear that she has great compassion for her characters. Their gut-wrenching, honest inner monologues and

resilience imbue them with humanity. Readers will undoubtedly see slivers of themselves in this flawed family, and while the content in *The Year We Left Home* may be heavy, it's not without an occasional glimpse of a silver lining.

## **Discussion questions**

1. Early on in the novel, Ryan muses “what really counted was the life you made for yourself, and the person you decided to be.” (p. 11) Does this prove to be true? How does this play out in his life, and in the lives of his family members? How does this concept change for him?
2. “Something in him always stood apart, and he was not who people assumed was.” (p. 27) How is this true for Ryan throughout the novel? How do the characters define themselves, and each other?
3. Which narrator did you like best: Anita, Ryan, Chip, Torrie, Audrey, Matthew, or Blake? Why do you think Thompson chose to have Ryan narrate the majority of the sections? Was there someone you wanted to hear more from?



4. Anita feels that she and her mother are always on the verge of a conversation: "Is this what it means to be a wife, a mother, a woman? Is it what you expected? Should I have gone about it differently?" (p. 105) Why don't they ever actually have that conversation? How might things be different for them, and other women in the novel, if they discussed such things with each other?

5. Why do you think Megan ruins Ryan's career with her essay? Is she crazy, or clever? Hurt, or just trying to stand out?

6. Why does Anita go to the Goodells' auction and give her relatives five thousand dollars? Does she feel responsible because her husband is a banker? Talk about Anita's concept of family and loyalty.

7. Martha's words at Anita's wedding startle Ryan: "You never can tell, looking at it from the outside. How miserable people can be in a marriage." (p. 14) How are her words prophetic? Do you think she was referring to her own marriage, which seemed so happy?

8. Discuss the many different ideas of marriage in the novel. Why does Anita marry Jeff (p.

183), and why does she stay with him? Why does Ryan get married (p. 221), and then have affairs that lead to divorce? What about Blake, whose wife everyone seems to look down on?

9. Ryan thinks to himself, "You decided that your life would go in a certain direction, and maybe it did. Or maybe you were kidding yourself, and the world was mostly a matter of being in the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time." (p. 221) Do you agree? How much of Ryan's life is shaped by his choices, and how much does he simply allow to happen to him?

10. The author states: "Everybody in America is one of two things, either in or out." (p. 288) How does this theme of insider and outsider play throughout the novel?

11. Why does Anita bring in Rhonda to live with her family? How is it true that sometimes a family needs an orphan?

12. For a while, Anita seems to be drifting through the duties of a wife and mother. What spurs her to take classes to become a realtor and get involved with Alcohol Anonymous? Did Jeff's descent into alcoholism empower her to

take charge of her life, or do you think she would have done so regardless?

13. Throughout the novel, Chip is consistently an outsider who never seems to have much going for him. However, he often provides poignant insights to Ryan and others, and doesn't seem to experience the lack of fulfillment that plagues many other characters. Why do you think this is?

14. Why do you think Ryan and Chip remain close throughout the years? Is Ryan more like Chip than he might want to admit? How so?

15. Why does Ryan buy the Peerson house?

16. Referring to the Peersons, Blake remarks, "They didn't think in terms of happy." (p. 409) Do you agree that the older generations were more content with what they had, and less concerned with searching for happiness elsewhere? Discuss the characters' conceptions of happiness, and whether or not they are able to find it. What constitutes true happiness?

17. Discuss the title of the novel. Why do you think Thompson chose this title? How does it capture the spirit of the novel?

## Enhance Your Book Club

1. Torrie and Elton are both photographers who capture everyday objects in unique ways with their cameras. Try taking some shots from an unusual perspective, or take a second look at an object you might walk past every day without appreciating. Or take a trip as a group to a local photography or art exhibit to appreciate other's perspectives.
2. Read one of [Jean Thompson's](#) short story collections, such as [Do Not Deny Me](#). How does it compare to this novel, both in format and thematically?
3. Was there an event you wanted to know more about? Discuss with your group where you would add another section to the novel. If you're feeling creative, try writing an additional section that you feel helps enhance or develop the story.

## Readalikes

[To Be Sung Underwater](#) by Tom McNeal (2011)  
Judith Whitman is a middle-aged woman who appears to be living the good life. A movie

editor, she lives with her husband and teenage daughter in Los Angeles. Yet her marriage and career feel stale and stagnant, and Judith longs for more. When her husband comes home with a new bedroom suite for her daughter, Judith's life begins to take a bizarre turn. She rents a storage unit and decorates it with her daughter's former bedroom set, which was hers as a teen. As she sits inside the unit, she is mentally transported to her own teenagehood, when life was simpler and her heart belonged to a boy named Willy. Judith wonders what it might be like to reconnect with the lover of her past, and whether or not the grass is always greener on the other side.

[Outside Wonderland](#) by Lorna Jane Cook  
(2011)

Lorna Jane Cook tells the story of three siblings who have lost both their mother and father in tragic accidents. The children are sent to live with their grandmother, who raises them as the entire family attempts to cope with its grief. Meanwhile, the children's deceased parents watch over them from the afterlife as they make decisions that affect them into adulthood. Alice, an aspiring Broadway actress, struggles with the decision to commit to a

single father, while Griffin, a gay man, flees from his own commitment when his partner announces he wants to adopt. Meanwhile Dinah, the younger sister, gets pregnant after a secret affair.

[Ten Thousand Saints](#) by Eleanor Henderson (2011)

As teenagers in Vermont during the 1980s, Teddy and Jude are best friends, obsessed with doing drugs and the idea of moving to New York City someday. An overdose claims Teddy's life, and nearly kills Jude, too, leaving the latter more intent than ever to fulfill their dream of living in Manhattan. Before Teddy's death, his one sexual encounter with Eliza resulted in her pregnancy, causing Jude to feel the responsibility to look after her. Jude and Eliza befriend Teddy's older brother, Johnny, a punk musician with a strong stance against drug use. Together, the three teens navigate the challenges of the 80s and the complex relationships with their eccentric parents as they try to break free from their small New England town.

*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen (2001)

A troubled family comes together for one last traditional Christmas celebration in this award-winning novel by Jonathan Franzen. When autocratic, upright Alfred gets Parkinson's disease, his put-upon wife Enid summons their three adult children back to the family's Midwestern home from New York, Lithuania, and Philadelphia. Investment banker Gary suffers from depression; Chip is currently involved in an Eastern European fraud scheme; and chef Denise has serious relationship problems. All three bring emotional baggage and conflicting values back with them, which serve both to support the domestic drama and launch a satirical look at contemporary American society. Through painful confrontations with their pasts, the major characters ultimately "correct" their futures during what may be the most memorable holiday any of them will ever have.

*Strangers at the Feast* by Jennifer Vanderbes (2010)

*Strangers at the Feast* takes place with the Olson family on Thanksgiving Day, 2007. Ginny Olson is hosting the family's Thanksgiving for the first time, and she has just returned from a

trip to India where she adopted a mute seven-year-old girl. The guests at the feast include her mother, who is not used to relinquishing control of the dinner; her father, who never quite recovered from Vietnam; her brother Douglas, who recently lost a great deal of money in a real estate investment; and Douglas's angry wife, Denise. The family does not get along well, and when Ginny's oven fails, they are forced to relocate to Douglas and Denise's enormous home. When they encounter two young African American men along the way, they do not realize that the day is now on a tragic path that will end in violence.

[The Smart One](#) by Jennifer Close (2013)

Weezy and her husband become increasingly perplexed by life challenges that compel their first daughter to move back into her childhood room, their second daughter to cancel her wedding, and their son to become enmeshed in a relationship disaster.



Ann Arbor District Library