



The Planets

Jennifer Finney Boylan

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A Kurt Vonnegut for the '90s, an earthbound Douglas Adams. James Boylan's debut novel is wildly inventive, original, and deeply, outrageously funny. When lovesick Edith Schmertz takes an ill-fated leap out of an airplane on Easter Sunday, she sets in motion an inexorable chain of events, sending many human orbits spinning wildly out of control.

The Planets Details

Date : Published March 31st 1992 by Vintage (first published April 1st 1991)

ISBN : 9780679739067

Author : Jennifer Finney Boylan

Format : Paperback 265 pages

Genre : Fiction



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Russell says

This is one of the funniest books I have read (back in the mid 90's). Found it on a library shelf when I had run out of JG Ballard books to read and thought it looked interesting. I tried to look it up years later and found out that James had become a she after he originally wrote it - I have not read any of her other works but if they are as good as this one then I am in for a real treat.

Justin says

I loved this book! My first five-star rating on Goodreads!

The story takes place on Easter Sunday, 1984 in Centralia, Pennsylvania, a ghost town abandoned since an underground coal mine fire started burning in 1962. (This is a real place, and the coal mine fire actually is still burning to this day.)

The story is formatted into ten chapters; nine which correspond to one of the nine (eight?) planets, and a brief intermission chapter titled "Asteroids". For each chapter/planet there is a theme, for example Venus would be "love"; Mars, "war"; etc. Each chapter focuses on telling a specific story of one character, and these stories combine to make one large story overall. Despite the various plot lines that run simultaneously, the book still feels like one complete work. Everything affects everything else one way or the other, even if the characters do not realize it. Kind of like a butterfly effect.

Because of this structure, I found myself flipping back to previous chapters to get a refresher on some details that I had either forgotten or wanted to make sure. It was almost like a mystery, trying to figure out what would happen with the foreshadowing provided.

The author has this amazing ability to bring even this "dying" setting, as if it were, to life. The emotions and feelings of the characters feel authentic. The locations are imaginative and fascinating.

The characters all seem to be a bit twisted in some way. They all are dealing with some sort of psychological issue inside. The story also includes quite a few absurd elements and situations, but nothing is too outlandish and much of it is very funny.

I also loved how the author tied in allusions of the planets and their symbology into the story itself. One that I noticed (and was kind of proud for noticing) was the daughters mentioned in the Mars chapter. Their names are Phoebe and Demmie, which are, of course, allusions to the moons of Mars, Phobos and Deimos.

Despite the somewhat tangled storyline, the book is a smooth and easy read. The writing grabbed me from the get go and carried me all the way through without ever feeling like the story had run out of steam.

I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys stories that are bit off-beat or zany, but are still coherent and amusing enough to be enjoyable. Reading this book reminded me of some of David Foster Wallace's work, so if you enjoy that, you may enjoy this!

Helen says

This is a super weird book. I read it because I'd been to Centralia in Pennsylvania and this book is set there. Centralia is a small town that is built on a coal mine, which caught fire and burned for AGES. The book is about some kind of weird relationships, and some strange goings on, not entirely sure what it is about actually - read it a long time ago. The second book in the series is less understandable and I think I (literally) lost the plot! Perhaps I missed something.

Sari Lynn says

A wild and wacky romp through a small town in Pennsylvania. The characters are an odd bunch of misfits, including a police officer in a wizard's cape, an ex-con known as "The Outcast" who has a penchant for holding up hardware stores on donkey-back, a legal secretary who dislikes wearing clothes, and a batty old woman living in an abandoned school.

Boylan writes well. If you like the off beat, you will enjoy this book.

Catheryn says

This book needs to be made into a movie! It would be a hoot and a hit! James Finney Boylan is my favorite author and he is brilliant at character development. I actually missed the characters after I finished the book and I have enjoyed this book each time I read it. Now if I could only get it signed!

Chloe says

****This is one of my favourite books.****

The Planets is a fantastic mixture of funny and bizarre. I mean really really funny and really really bizarre*. I winced, I cracked up, laughed out loud, etc. I love how all the crazy random people and events all managed to come together in the end.

(The sequel is not quite as good, but still good.)

My edition is an older one, so the author is listed as James Finney Boylan.

* Demmie gives herself a shaving cream beard and plays electric guitar. Billings covers himself in newspapers to disguise himself as a ghost, but decides he'd better cut a mouth-hole so he can still sip his beer.

Charity says

This is one of those novels where no coincidence is too extreme, where characters from one chapter drop in out of the blue (literally) in the next, and where time has a wonderful elasticity that brings random events together in a sort of cosmic interrelatedness that suggests the movement of the planets. Out of print.

Ellen Shull says

Wackiness ensues. If you've read any of Boylan's other books, you know what I'm talking about. Sometimes the pacing was a bit off, and I can't say I really related that well to the various "everyman" sorts that populated the book, but there were more than enough clever situations and turns of phrase to make up for it.

evan says

A fast read. The plot is almost too clever at times and I often felt like I knew where it was going long before it got there. The author managed to surprise me a few times though. The characters while definitely "quirky" weren't limited or defined by their quirks. Some went deeper than others but they all felt alive and I can see why he wrote a sequel for a few.

Not sure about the whole planets theme and the structure is supposedly based around some piece of music I don't know so I can't comment on that. It doesn't get in the way and if you were so inclined I'm sure you could use it to analyze it. I just like being carried along by the plot and the occasional bursts of playful language and interesting ideas about relationships and personal interactions.

Overall, probably not worth hunting too hard for (it's out of print) but definitely worth picking up cheap.

Oh, for the record it turns out that James Finney Boylan is now JENNIFER Finney Boylan and now writes memoirs and articles and appears on talk shows.

Richard says

If you like dark humor, you will love this book! I laughed out loud at least twice each chapter. However, when I would read the hysterical passages to my partner she didn't even crack a smile. You REALLY have to like dark humor to enjoy this book. Each adventure is totally absurd, and yet, you find yourself saying, "well, that could happen." Having read *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*, I was eager to learn more about Jennifer/James writing. I loved this book and can't wait to read the sequel: *The Constellations*.

Kevin Tole says

A very funny and well written book

Jessica says

I put this book on my to-read list years ago after seeing something about it being a novel set in Centralia, the central Pennsylvania town that is largely abandoned because of a coal-mine fire that's been burning underneath the town since 1962. The author's name didn't register for me at the time, but when I went to check *The Planets* out from the library I discovered that it isn't just some one-off novelty book about a wacky locale - the author has since become far more famous for *She's Not There*.

The Planets is beautifully written and engaging, and it manages to be a book in which every character is deeply weird without, for the most part, feeling forced. Funny things happen, and a couple of the characters do skew a little too caricature-ish, but everything is just a little too sad or world-weary for *The Planets* to be a "funny book." We get a chance to see inside most of the characters' heads, and almost all of them are more complex than their friends, neighbors, and families give them credit for.

I went into this book without much more than curiosity to see what an author would do with Centralia as their location, and ended up getting totally sucked in. I haven't read anything else from Jennifer Finney Boylan yet, but I look forward to reading both *She's Not There* and more of her fiction soon.

Ashley says

Cohesive chaos. Depressing hilarity. It's interesting, knowing that James truly was Jenny all along, to observe the duplicity the author creates for her characters. I read *The Planets* after picking *She's Not There* up for the first time since my human sexuality class in college. Finney Boylan writes poignantly with a dry and searing sense of humor and ease. This may be the fastest I have ever read a novel. I plan to devour anything and everything I can find by her.

Jess Moss says

Jennifer Finney Boylan (or James Finney Boylan on the older copy that I own) certainly comes up with interesting characters! This was an entertaining light read. Nothing profound about it, but very amusing characters.

jess says

I started reading this book as part of my recent obsession with Centralia, Pennsylvania. This is a small town that has been home to underground burning coal mines since 1962. Much of the town has been bought out and bulldozed by the government. Oh, this is the nonfiction right here. It is stranger, indeed, than the fiction.

Secondarily, I read this book because it is the work of a trans lady, and it is not about transsexuals! Sometimes transsexuals can write about things that don't have anything to do with being a transsexual. I know, it might be hard to believe this, but she does it!

I like the quirky characters, the weird ways their weird lives tangle and untangle and tangle. it's a little predictable, and the plot relies too much on the weirdness of the setting & characters to push the story along, but the faults are forgivable. Some of the more subtle metaphors and obscure gestures were lost on me. One more thing, the cumulative weirdness made it sometimes difficult to suspend my disbelief and fall into the story, but when I found myself believing in the Outcast robbing banks with a burro, it was pretty magical.
