

Etta and Otto and Russell and James – Reading Group Guide

About the book

Otto Vogel wakes before dawn on his farm in central Canada to find a letter from his wife Etta. She will try to return, but has never seen water and has gone to the ocean. When their beloved neighbor Russell Palmer learns from Otto that she has left, Etta's friend embarks on a mission to find her while her husband chooses to stay home.

The two men had formed a deep bond as boys after an accident on a tractor left Russell partially crippled. They alternated days at the schoolhouse, run by a young teacher named Etta Gloria Kinnick, until the Second World War called every young man in town expect Russell to serve. Over time Etta learned of Otto's experience in the Europe through a tender correspondence that blossomed into romance when he returned on leave. But it was Russell who was there to support her emotionally when Etta suffered a devastating loss, and the three have shared a wizened compassion since Etta married Otto and they began to grow old in rural Saskatchewan.

Now Etta makes her way on foot towards Halifax in the east, meeting a coyote named James to guide her; Russell tracks her down only to discover that his real journey lies elsewhere; Otto finds a curious passion for the craft of papier-mâché as he prepares for his love to return; and all three experience a form of reconciliation that reaches beyond the limits of distance and time.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Etta's sister Alma only appears in early scenes of the novel before she relocates to a convent and dies in childbirth, but her significance to Etta remains throughout. How do the fish skulls that Alma introduces to her act as a talisman for Etta? What might it mean that they continue to speak French to her "like Grandma" as the novel progresses (page 14)?
2. Once James the coyote begins to speak on page 49 and a dishwasher in a diner describes Etta as "maybe a witch or maybe a lady-Santa-Claus [...] She was singing, I think. She was fine. She was magical" (page 88), Emma Hooper has already begun to immerse the reader in a world of magic realism. What other subtle magic do you see in the novel? What role do you think this stylistic choice plays in the narrative?
3. Otto and Russell first learn about the war abroad through radio interviews on pages 94-96, where they hear a story about imprisoned children and babies who float through the prison window because they are so light from malnourishment. Discuss the meaning of this story. Where else does storytelling or oral history factor into the novel?
4. Etta and Otto correspond by letter while Otto is fighting in the war and also while Etta is traveling to the sea. In what ways do letters at the beginning and the end of their relationship mirror one another? Why do you think Emma Hooper chose the epistolary form to convey many of the details in her novel?
5. When Russell finds Etta and tries to convince her to come home, she responds: "You're not actually here to fetch me [...] You're here [...] because it's your turn, finally. It's sad that you felt you needed my permission for that, but, oh well. Go, Russell, go do whatever, wherever. Go do it alone, and now, because you want to and you're allowed to and you can"

(page 144). What has Etta learned on her trek that prompts her to encourage Russell to travel? What meaning do you think Russell is seeking when he rides north in search of caribou?

6. Etta and Otto both become famous for endeavors they would rather pursue privately. What qualities do Etta's pilgrimage to the sea and Otto's papier-mâché projects share? What qualities distinguish them? What might these august achievements say about the nature of celebrity?
7. Russell does not return to his farm before the end of the novel, but on page 226 Otto receives a final letter from him claiming that he "should be home" before autumn and on page 290 he solicits directions to the airport. Do you think Russell will come back to reunite with Etta or Otto? How might his travels in the Northwest Territories have changed the way he interacts with them?
8. In one of his letters, Otto admits to Etta that he has "this idea that all these boys who have come to fill the places of the ones we've lost will fill their places exactly and be shot through or stabbed in the dark or blown up just like the last ones, exactly like them, one to one" (page 248). The vision betrays that death on the battlefield has disillusioned Otto. Do you think Emma Hooper is trying to make a statement about the nature of war? How has war impacted you or those close to you?
9. As Etta's journey gains national media attention, one journalist named Bryony decides to travel alongside her. Do you think Bryony's account on pages 253-255 of learning that her brother was incarcerated when she believed he was at university helps to explain that decision? Compare the loss of Bryony's brother to Etta's loss of her sister Alma.
10. On pages 255-256 Hooper reveals that Etta miscarried a child she conceived with Otto. How does this fact illuminate the scene where Otto claims that "*this would not have happened with Russell*" and asks, "*Do you think this happened because you still love him?*" on page 111? Do you think her traumatic experience explains Etta's love affair with Russell?
11. When husband and wife sleep in the same bed, Etta tries to "sleep without any part of her touching any part of [Otto]" so that she will not have to relive his memories in her dreams (page 36). But Etta often dreams of the war on her travels, and her point of view seems to fully merge with Otto's while lying in the hospital on pages 258-260. How do you interpret the way that husband and wife share the same experience through dreams even when thousands of miles divide them?
12. In the final pages, Etta and Otto appear to rendezvous underwater when he goes to sleep at home and she arrives at the ocean in Halifax. What do you think Etta means when she reassures Otto that "it's just a long loop" (page 304)? Do you think either character dies following this tender farewell? Interpret the end of the novel.

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Etta's list of items she brings with her gives the reader a sense of what she values in her life. Create your own list of necessities as if you were embarking on a personal journey and compare what you generate against the lists of others.
2. Write out a travel itinerary for one site you still want to see in your lifetime. How far would you be willing to travel on foot to reach your destination? How would leaving home like Etta impact your own friends and family? Discuss.
3. Emma Hooper performs as a solo artist under the name Waitress for the Bees. Explore her music on the internet at <http://waitressforthebees.bandcamp.com/> and compare the style and imagery to that of *Etta and Otto and Russell and James*.

A Conversation with Emma Hooper

1. You wrote the novel using three different points of view and alternating narrative timelines. What challenges or rewards did this intricate structure give you as you worked?

They say "A change is as good as a rest" and I found this to be immensely true while writing this book; being able to swap between times and voices ensured that whenever I hit a wall with a certain person or plot, instead of having to quit for the day and go for a run or a bowl of cereal, I could switch perspectives or timeframes for a renewed sense of energy and excitement. The hope was that it would work the same way for readers...

The challenge was not getting lost or tangled up in my own storylines. There were certainly times when (like Etta...) I had to stop and think, 'wait...who's thinking this? Where are we? Who are we...?!'

2. The reader suspects when Etta pulls out a piece of paper annotated with her name and the names of her family members that she is slowly losing her memory. Yet Etta is haunted by dreams of her husband's combat in Europe that occurred half a century ago. How did you balance the roles of memory and forgetfulness in a novel with an aging protagonist?

One of the things that is most striking, to me, about memory loss, is how sufferers often lose the present, or short-term, while staying firm and clear in the long-term or distance. I wanted to explore this idea one step further, with Etta is losing her own memories, and with them her sense of self, and soaking up Otto's instead, particularly those distant, long-term memories of war and water. This is, ultimately, what spurs her to undertake the journey for herself, to re-write the history she's remembering on her own terms.

3. You grew up in Alberta, relatively close to the fictional home of Etta, Otto, and Russell. How did the geography of Canada inspire your writing? Did you draw from personal experience when mapping out travel in the novel?

My mother's family is from rural Saskatchewan (to be honest, the vast majority of Saskatchewan is rural...), and I spent many, many childhood vacations there, out walking in the wheat and sun (and mosquitoes). It's a landscape unlike any other I have encountered, with a dry emptiness that is so vast and striking. Even though it's not where I spent most of

my time growing up, when I'm nostalgic for home it's for these sorts of open spaces, that kind of dry air.

I have never walked across Canada from that point, but I have taken the train all the way from Alberta through Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick to the water, observing the drastic changes in landscape as well as the just plain massive hugeness of this place that all counts as "home".

4. You tightly intertwine the lives of Etta, Otto, and Russell from childhood, but James shares a relationship only with Etta. At what point did you realize that a talking coyote would be Etta's guide during her journey?

I tend not to plan ahead very much in my writing, so I found out about James at just about the same time as Etta did; I like letting my imagination take over in a sort of cruise-control in that way, asking myself as I write, 'so, what happens now?' 'oh, she meets a coyote.' 'And then?' 'He licks her feet.' 'and then?' 'he talks.' 'and then...?' etc. Writing a novel for me is just really asking 'and then?' over and over again and trying not to question or doubt my own crazy answers.

5. Folklore and magic realism feature prominently in the novel. How do you feel these traditions have influenced you as a writer? What authors have inspired you most?

My imagination runs away with me a fair amount in 'normal' life...the other day I saw some metal piping hanging from a window and I thought: those look like robot arms...like robot arms hung like carcasses at a butcher's...like we eat robots like we do animals...hmm...and then I'm off, imagining what that world would be like, getting to invent and, at least temporarily, inhabit it. A whole other world! It's very exciting. I love the idea that you can imagine anything, *anything*, you want and then work backwards to make it work within a comprehensible universe.

I also had a moment recently where I saw some garbage bags by the side of the road that looked like sea lions. I knew they weren't, actually, but, it got me imagining a world where we'd put sea lions out at the side of the road every week. Why? Why not? This is one of my very favourite parts of being a writer.

I've been inspired by many authors in many different ways. Reading Dave Eggers in university opened my eyes to the idea that narrative-form could be playful and non-linear, and that comedy and tragedy could work off each other within the same work. Marquez made the magical mundane in a really beautiful way while Borges was the first to show me how prose could reflect back on itself in structural spirals. Right now I'm very fond of Karen Russell and the half-real half-imagined universes her writing occupies...

6. How would you best describe your process? Do you keep a single space dedicated to writing or do you move around? What time of day do you find yourself most productive?

I try to have a dedicated space. I have a great little loft with a lovely old desk and a rug with owls on it and a hand-made-by-a-child pencil-jar; however I almost never use it. I do a lot of

my best writing in little bits and pieces between other things. On trains to London or in scrappy notebooks in the middle of walks or in dim, sticky bars during band sound-checks. When I do work at home, it's most often on the floor... I really like curling up on rugs with my laptop for some reason. Maybe because I had cats as a kid?

I do, also, like café writing. There was a period of time when every week, my friend Simon and I would agree to meet at a new, different café in Bath, and sit at different tables and not speak to each other. The idea was that the peer pressure of having the other person there writing/working would spur us on. And it worked (for me at least...). We would agree on a stop-time, and, once that rolled around, we'd quit working, go sit at the same table, and allow ourselves to socialize a bit. At this point we'd also give that particular café ratings according to things like level of noise, tastiness of hot chocolate (which is what I usually ordered), availability of gluten-free snacks (which is what Simon usually ordered), etc. We put it all into a giant spreadsheet we still have somewhere... It's worth noting that this is something I kept up when I moved to London for a year and was working on the book's edits. In this case it was my friend Jason I'd meet, fortnightly, and we'd share one silent table instead of two (London cafés are more crowded), but the overall formula was the same. And we've got a spreadsheet of café ratings for London too...

As for time of day, any but the middle, really. Morning and night are great. During the middle of the day I'm too distracted and just want to run around or nap... (Usually I'm meant to be giving a lecture or playing a rehearsal or something like that though, sadly.)

7. Otto's descriptions of war focus more on emotion than the details of combat, and censored fragments of letters and dreamscapes in the novel make his experiences impressionistic. These qualities lend your war scenes a sense of universality. What message about war in general beyond the conflicts of the Second World War do you want your readers to take with them?

My hope was/is that the impressionistic nature of the scenes would blur any definite details, so there are no concrete things to hold onto like 'good guys' or 'bad guys' or clear cut right and wrong. People talk of 'the fog of war'; I was hoping to depict something along those lines, 'the blur of war', where there are no certainties, no easy-to-pin-down exact signifiers, more visceral than academic, like wordless, instrumental music, or like Otto's letters with all dates and people and places, all distinct references, removed.

8. You are an accomplished musician and educator who wears a lot of hats. How has your formal training in music influenced your writing? How has your prose influenced your songwriting?

Well, I *do* hold unreasonably high standards for lyrics... I have song-writer friends who are afraid to show me theirs for fear of harsh criticism... (Though actually they're all amazing, my song-writer friends. Check out Cajita, for example... beautiful. With great lyrics.) Rhythm is a big part of my writing. I'll often go back and change phrases because they have too many or not enough syllables, or the emphasis falling in the wrong place, regardless of the actual meaning of the words. The rhythm of prose can pull you in and along just like it can in music. This is something people acknowledge in poetry, I think, but that gets less

attention in prose. However, I think it's equally important in the latter, maybe even more so, for me, since long chunks of writing need that rhythm to keep pulling you along and through, both as writer and reader. This explains, among other things, my love of repetition...

9. Otto's newfound hobby of papier-mâché is a unique development for his storyline. From where did the idea originate to incorporate this craft into his anticipation for Etta and Russell's return?

There are two answers to this question, the superficial and the slightly more deep. Superficially, papier-mâché is *fun* and I love it. Who doesn't like making and smashing piñatas? I won my grade 8 science fair by making a papier-mâché dolphin to scale with all its organs in place...I think doing and making hands-on crafts is good for the head and the heart. On another level, a running theme in this book is the 'swap' that Etta and Otto are undergoing, both in terms of the stereotypical gender roles of their generation, and also the roles they've played throughout their own, specific lives. Etta does this by 'doing' and 'going', and Otto by 'creating' and 'nurturing.' Hence the papier-mâché (and the baking, and the guinea pig too).

10. Each character responds differently to Etta's choice to walk halfway across the country, and she is received with everything from humility and anger to hope and sensationalist conjecture. What do you want readers to take away most from her bold decision?

In the words of my Etta, I would love for them to, "go do whatever, wherever. Go do it alone, and now, because you want to and you're allowed to and you can." This could be writing a book or starting an astronomy degree or cutting your own hair or learning Mandarin or any other thing they've always wanted to do.