



The Last First Day

Carrie Brown

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From the author of *The Rope Walk*, here is the story of a woman's life in its twilight, as she looks back on a harrowing childhood and on the unaccountable love and happiness that emerged from it.

Ruth has always stood firmly beside her upstanding, brilliant husband, Peter, the legendary chief of New England's Derry School for boys. The childless couple has a unique, passionate bond that grew out of Ruth's arrival on Peter's family's doorstep as a young girl orphaned by tragedy. And though sometimes frustrated by her role as lifelong helpmate, Ruth is awed by her good fortune in her life with Peter. As the novel opens, we see the Derry School in all its glorious fall colors and witness the loosening of the aging Peter's grasp: he will soon have to retire, and Ruth is wondering what they will do in their old age, separated from the school into which they have poured everything, including their savings. The narrative takes us back through the years, revealing the explosive spark and joy between Ruth and Peter—undiminished now that they are in their seventies—and giving us a deeply felt portrait of a woman from a generation that quietly put individual dreams aside for the good of a partnership, and of the ongoing gift of the right man's love.

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From Reader Review The Last First Day for online ebook

Tonya says

Ruth has always stood firmly beside her upstanding, brilliant husband, Peter, the legendary chief of New England's Derry School for boys. The childless couple has a unique, passionate bond that grew out of Ruth's arrival on Peter's family's doorstep as a young girl orphaned by tragedy. And though sometimes frustrated by her role as lifelong helpmate, Ruth is awed by her good fortune in her life with Peter. As the novel opens, we see the Derry School in all its glorious fall colors and witness the loosening of the aging Peter's grasp: he will soon have to retire, and Ruth is wondering what they will do in their old age, separated from the school into which they have poured everything, including their savings. The narrative takes us back through the years, revealing the explosive spark and joy between Ruth and Peter—undiminished now that they are in their seventies—and giving us a deeply felt portrait of a woman from a generation that quietly put individual dreams aside for the good of a partnership, and of the ongoing gift of the right man's love.

Nothing too outlandish about this one. Really quiet. I mean, an old couple. It is the first day of school, of his last year of being headmaster. And the wife looks back. Regret? Sadness? Beautifully written, it simply took my breath away and this is one I will pass on to my girls when they get a bit older, it is too beautiful to not share.

I have not read anything by Carrie before but I was taken back by how much I cared about Ruth and Peter, I didn't think I would feel that much for them. Now I will have to take a look at her other books!! Happy reading! Sometimes the ordinary can be the extra-ordinary!!!

Meg says

We meet Ruth and Peter on their last first day at the Derry School for Boys. Peter has been headmaster for 40 years (and a teacher for 10 years before that). A wonderful story.

JanB says

4.5, rounding up to 5

This is a beautifully written book and very powerful. The story begins as Ruth and Peter, both in their 70s, and facing his retirement as headmaster of a boy's boarding school, causes Ruth to reflect back on her childhood, young adulthood, and her life as Peter's wife. She struggles with a painful, complicated childhood and feelings that she is never quite good enough. She wonders if her life has had meaning as the headmaster's wife and performing all the duties that went with the role.

The first part of the book begins as the first day of a new term is beginning, one that will likely be Peter's last ("the last first day"). The latter part of the book reflects back on Ruth's childhood and early adulthood. Towards the end I couldn't put the book down and stayed up far too late to finish it. As Ruth reflects back on her life, we meet the wonderful Dr. Wenning, a psychiatrist she worked for in her younger years, who became her life-long friend and confidante, the one who helped her make a sort of peace with her past, as well as other characters who helped shape her life.

Secrets and painful details of a life never revealed to others paint a picture of flawed and fully fleshed out characters, ones I felt I knew and cared deeply about. The tone is sad, yet also hopeful and beautiful. The themes of the legacy one leaves behind, a life well-lived, though far from perfect, and an enduring love story resonated with me. It's a good reminder that a life well-lived may not be celebrated in the media or recognized (or even seen) by others but it's demonstrated by "little things", kindnesses shown to others, like sitting by the bedside of an ill child all night long, or never leaving the bedside of a dying friend.

This will be on my favorites list this year. It's a story I won't soon forget. The writing reminded me a bit of Stewart O'Nan who also writes about ordinary people in an extraordinary, introspective way. This is probably best for people who are middle-aged or older, who will be able to identify with the themes.

Candice says

Carrie Brown has a wonderful way with words and reading her books is as much a feast of descriptions as it is a story. I think my favorite phrase in this book was "inconsolable silence." I also was intrigued with the construction of the book. It begins as Ruth van Dusen, in her seventies, is getting ready for her husband's first day of school - his last first day. The day is spent doing routine tasks and reminiscing, all leading up to the opening day ceremonies at New England's Derry School for Boys. There are allusions to Ruth's early life and as I read this first part I was hoping that there would be a fuller explanation of Ruth's childhood. Part Two covered that nicely. Life was neither easy nor always good to Ruth, but she had some very special people in it - her husband, Peter, and a woman she worked for, Dr. Wenning.

I could identify with some of Ruth's insecurities as a faculty wife. There's the question of whether one will fit in, or make friends, or do the right thing. Since Ruth was several years older than I, she was also part of the generation where headmaster's wives were expected to cook, bake, play hostess and cheerleader all without monetary compensation. As a graduate of Smith College, Ruth sometimes bristled as all she was supposed to do, but as a member of that generation she seldom complained.

A beautifully written portrait of a life and a marriage.

Laurel-Rain says

Ruth and Peter van Dusen have stood together for more than fifty years, and on the first day of the term in the Derry School for Boys in Northern Maine, they are still together, but facing what lies ahead for them, now that Peter will likely retire soon. Will this be his final year? And, if so, what will become of them? They have lived in the headmaster's cottage for forty years. Where would they go?

We meet Ruth first, in this story that weaves the past and present together, but begins in the year that Ruth and Peter are in their late seventies. They have been childless all their married lives, and despite Ruth's own university education at Smith, Peter has mostly been the primary breadwinner.

As we follow them into the past, we learn more about how their lives became intertwined, almost serendipitously, in their childhoods.

Was it love at first sight for the two of them, in the small Massachusetts town where they first met? And were they drawn together because it was forbidden? Or was there an explosive spark that was inevitable?

When something tragically alters their lives going forward in that year when they were in their seventies, they are forced to move on....and perhaps, to look backwards, to find the core of strength that has sustained them.

In their younger years, as Ruth struggled to find her own place, she returned regularly for many of those years to Dr. Wenning, the psychiatrist for whom she worked back then, but who has remained a confidante and support system for Ruth, helping her make sense of her past. The secrets she carried with her always would inform her present and future, but she seemed to make peace with them.

I enjoyed the back and forth flow of "The Last First Day: A Novel," as it helped me understand more about this couple, who could seem, in their twilight years, to be just an ordinary husband and wife facing retirement. They are so much more...and at the end, I was sad to say goodbye to them. I liked how, in the ending, the author took us back again to reveal additional details about them. I wanted to know more about the past secrets that were never revealed, however, but perhaps the mystery was more like real life. A journey through the years from 1945-to the twenty-first century, the story centers on themes of family, careers, and women's issues. Four stars.

Annette says

Based on a recommendation about the writing style, I picked up the book. The story was dead on as were the characters. Ruth and Peter are perfectly flawed. I loved the way the author described the everyday objects that Ruth fusses over. There is such care and beauty in her words. Ruth and Peter are old, but we are lucky enough to go back in time and find out how they meet. What shapes them, and then based on the now revealed past, you love them both even more.

Highly recommend if you love the fine writing, and complex characters.

Anton DiSclafani says

This book is so incredibly surprising (and beautifully written). It starts out as one book, and finishes as another kind of book, without you ever quite knowing how, exactly, it happened. I stayed up way past my bedtime last night to finish.

Eileen says

From the back cover, author Ron Rash writes ‘ Brown has accomplished one of literature’s most difficult feats – to write compellingly and convincingly, about human happiness’. The novel takes place at New England boarding school, where the two protagonists are Peter, the headmaster, and Ruth, his wife of fifty years. I was quickly drawn into the story, which is certainly not plot driven, but most engaging nevertheless. Reflections and reminiscences over a lifetime are divulged, and so the plot unfolds. It was refreshing that the love story was told mostly in retrospect, so the reader is party to Ruth’s perspective as she looks back over their life together. Carrie Brown writes well. She conveys an emotion or a feeling quietly, but with great skill.

Nancy says

Yep. This is a good one. Love the construction. Love the language. Love the characters. Sorry to see it end.

Bill Kupersmith says

It seemed clear early that Peter, the headmaster, is in love with the school, & Ruth, his wife, in love with Peter. He is already in his late 70s & I thought he'd held onto his job much too long. But this book doesn't really deal with the end of Peter's school career - the second half is mostly Ruth's back story, childhood & young adult life. I wanted to like this book but I thought there were too many loose ends & details that simply did not ring right for me, such as that the 12 year old Ruth would have been so innocent of what her father was up to or that she'd not have made an effort later to find out the facts of her birth & who her mother actually was.

Susan says

This book was very oddly structured. For the first 150 pages almost nothing happens except a lot of flashbacks in Ruth's mind. Then abruptly we go all the way back to her traumatic childhood and spend the next 150 pages rushing hurriedly through some very disturbing events. I felt like I was reading two separate although related short stories. It was an interesting portrait of an intelligent woman who came of age at a time when women didn't have many options besides supporting their husbands, but ultimately I have no idea what Carrie Brown was trying to say.

Suzanne (Chick with Books) Yester says

The Last First Day by Carrie Brown is simply amazing! The story innocently invites you in and wraps itself around you in a warm comfortable embrace. The story is a quiet one, but powerful. And I have to say, this is one my favorite reads of the year.

It is a love story, it is a story of the reflection of life as one looks back in their twilight years, and it is beautifully written.

The book opens with the first day at the New England Derry School for Boys, the school where Peter and Ruth have spent most of their adult lives, the place where Peter started as an enthusiastic teacher, with Ruth as the dutiful wife and where now, as the couple is in their eighties, and Peter approaching the need to retire as headmaster, is the place they must learn to live without. As Ruth drags the vacuum cleaner out to get ready for the annual first night get together at their home with the faculty, memories slowly emerge. And that is how we learn of the love story of Peter and Ruth. Through Ruth's eyes, the story of their lives unfold in perfect harmony with the present tense to let us experience their love, their passion, their struggles and commitment over the decades. It's also the story of Ruth, how she accepts her life, the role she chose for herself, and the life that she had no choice over.

The book itself is in two parts. The first part is Peter and Ruth on that "last first day" at Derry School, with the smattering of memories of their lives. The second part starts Ruth's story from the beginning- from when she was twelve, living out of a suitcase with her father, and her first sighting of Peter. We learn so much about Ruth in part two and understand her so much better. The love story, of Peter and Ruth, which really emerges from its' humble beginnings in the second part of the novel, is sweet & wonderful, sad & devastating, and ultimately blossoms into a full shared life together.

"What had Peter seen in her all this time?
It was a mystery, wasn't it, why people loved one another?"

I read this book in a day and a half... This is a story that will linger with me for quite some time. I loved the way Carrie Brown made this complex story flow so easily from the page, slowly unfurling & perfectly putting the words down on the page. It is honest, it is heartfelt, I thought it was wonderful... and I did cry at the end.

Alisha Kennedy says

A story of how fate brings two people together and where they end up after fifty years of marriage. Written beautifully, but a slow paced uneventful novel.

Kirstin says

www.justtoomanybooks.wordpress.com

The Last First Day is a love story. Not a story about new love, or falling in love, but about what love looks like over a lifetime.

Ruth and Peter are in their 80s. Peter has spent decades as the headmaster at the Derry School for boys. Ruth has never had her own career but was proud to be the headmaster's wife- offering hospitality to the faculty, comfort to sick students, and generally mothering the boys. Now, Ruth is looking to the future with apprehension and the past with regret. The one thing she is sure of is the love she and Peter have built over the years.

Then, the book does flash back to Ruth and Peter when they first met. Their history sheds more light on their choices and regrets. It also makes helps explain why their love has been so lasting.

The love story of this book is beautiful. Our culture mostly focuses on falling in love, and not what it takes to stay in love- or what love looks like when its old and grey. For that alone, I would recommend this book. In addition, the writing in this book is FANTASTIC. Brown uses very vivid descriptions that make scenes leap off the page. She uses words judiciously- a single detail tells a whole scene. I would read this book again (and I'm sure I will) for the writing alone.

Walk into any bookstore and love stories are a dime a dozen. But a book like this is a rare and pleasing find. No question its making the list of my Top 10 novels this year.

Diane Barnes says

I bought this book a few weeks ago at my library's big book sale. I don't usually browse mindlessly, since I know the titles and authors I'm looking for, but I picked this one up for some reason and added it to my stack. I was not familiar with the title, had never read the author, the cover was not particularly bright and alluring, but this one jumped into my hand for some reason and made it through two culling sessions before I walked out the door with it in my bag. Then at home it kept staring at me and whispering " Read me next, pick me!" Oh for Pete's sake, I thought, leave me alone. So yesterday, I picked it up. I swear I felt it squirm with happiness in my hands.

It turned out to be the story of a strange and difficult childhood for Ruth, followed by a long and happy marriage (60 years!) to Peter, the headmaster of a boys school in Maine. Perfectly written, with beautiful sentences to mull over, a plot that starts slowly but becomes surprisingly suspenseful as it progresses, and a warm feeling of a life well lived at the end. I turned the last page with contentment.

Now I'm the one squirming with happiness, because I have found a new author to love. Carrie Brown, whatever magic you injected into this book to make me read it, thank you.

Sally Ewan says

A man and his wife have been at a boys' boarding school for over fifty years, as he is first a teacher, then headmaster. This is the story of their ending there and then their beginning, as the author chooses to introduce the characters and then tell about the wife's childhood. An interesting story, full of heartbreak and pain--as a child, the wife, Ruth, was orphaned and sent to live with the family of her future husband. Their relationship proceeds through various difficulties and estrangements, and though they ultimately marry and love each other deeply, you do wonder about the power of love to conquer all pain.

Since I'm at a point in life where I'm reflecting on who I once was and where I am now and the lines that connect those things, I found this an interesting book. Ruth felt lonely and abandoned and unsure of God, and I am glad that I have been given the gift of faith.

Susan Zinner says

I love the way Carrie Brown writes...full of the gentleness of ordinary life. This novel reminded me a bit of "To Serve Them All My Days," as the subject matter (life as a schoolmaster in a boy's boarding school) is the same. She writes, however, from the perspective of the wife of the headmaster who has had a really difficult life as a girl and finds the love of her life in her sweet husband. I still love "The Hatbox Baby" more, but this one is excellent!

Barbara says

It took me a bit to get into this book, and I'm glad I persevered. It's a woman's meditation on her life: was it a happy life, did she make a difference, was she a good wife and person? Ruth, the narrator is in her early seventies and the wife of the headmaster of a boys school in Maine. Brown created Ruth as a woman who

came into education in the same generation as Gloria Steinem. To make Ruth's rumination rich and thoughtful, she made the fictitious Ruth graduate from Smith College a couple of years after Ms Steinem. Ruth continuously questioned the validity of her life versus her Smith peers, who like Ms. Steinem were making definite impacts upon society. I found the second part of the book very moving. It's the story of Ruth's extraordinary and tragic childhood. For me, Ruth was real and reminded me that every adult has a deep and complex story behind them. In totality, this is a love story. It's a story of compassion and understanding. It's a story of a marriage. If you want a book with a lot of action, this isn't a book for you. It's contemplative, quiet, and beautiful.

Larry Bassett says

Carrie Brown's first book *Rose s Garden A Novel*, published in 1998, focuses on a man in his seventies as he adjusts to being a widower. This book *The Last First Day: A Novel* is also about septuagenarians. The fact that I am reading them back to back is just a coincidence. Or is it? Life can be a little weird sometimes! What is it all about?

What on earth had Peter seen in her all this time? It was a mystery, wasn't it, why people loved one another? But she had closed her eyes, resting her head on Peter's shoulder, remembering the sensation of his gaze on her that day, the heat of it. That old love between them.

There are nice things about reading works by the same author in proximity with each other. Brown has a nice way of describing nature. As I have said before, she can remind me of another of my favorite writers: Annie Dillard. She also has a skill for looking at the world through the practiced eyes of the elderly. Her older characters are unmistakably of advanced years with wisdom and experience that befits their age. And the infirmities that come as well with aging. Her elders may be slowed down physically but often still sharp and observant mentally.

Does a book about aging necessarily have to also be about loss? For inevitably there are things lost with age. But there are a wealth of memories that are not lost and *The Last First Day* revels in flashbacks that are tender and delicious.

They made love before dinner, that business not so easy as it once was, it was true, but then you didn't really mind so much about that anymore, either. You did the best you could. Yet the old longing was still there between them . When Peter pulled her against him, her back to his belly, when he kissed her neck, ran his hand down her side, following the dip of her waist and the rise of her hip, she still felt that old heat.

There is no doubt you have to be in a certain accepting frame of mind to find a story of aging beautiful. It is one of those glass-half-full experiences, for sure. Brown's skill with words carries (pardon me!) the day for me. But books about the process of aging are probably not the best if you are feeling low.

At the halfway point in the book the story changes dramatically from that of an elderly couple coming to the conclusion of their life together to more than a half a century earlier when they first meet. The woman Ruth is twelve years old when she experiences a traumatic change in her life and comes into contact with Peter who would eventually become her husband.

(view spoiler)

The fact that there is a spoiler in the story is part of what makes it an endearing tale for me. Ruth made up a story about her past and her family but it turns out that the true story is the best one of all.

It was true, she knew, that being abandoned— not once, but twice, if you counted both the mother who had given her up and the father who had gone to jail— was an indisputable tragedy in her life. Sometimes she thought about the woman who had given birth to her, imagined that she, like Ruth, longed to be reunited, mother and daughter. But mostly she didn't like thinking about it, about whatever had made the woman who was her mother give away her baby. The idea of it was too close to the abortion Ruth had needed to choose for herself.

I am torn between three and four stars for this book and don't really want to do the 3½ star cop out. The first half is so overwhelmingly focused on making adjustments to what life has offered you without really making it clear what life has offered you and what you have settled for. It is tender and true to the accommodations needed in the aging process. Then there is the big reveal and the topsy-turvy aspect of life that makes it all so clear that major adjustments have been demanded and accepted. I loved the turnaround.

In the end sometimes you just have to make do.

That night, they went to bed early. They left the dishes and the cake on the table. In the morning, Ruth threw the rest of it in the garbage can.

This is a book that I mostly liked even when it seemed gloomy and then really liked when it made lemonade. Four stars.

I'll just say this once: you have to read the first half to appreciate the second half.

Now I'm done!

Billy landes says

Not one of my favorites. A story on aging is one thing but the emptiness of Ruth's life was depressing. Plus I have a hard time reading when there are no quotation marks.
