



The Truth According to Us

Annie Barrows

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In the summer of 1938, Layla Beck's father, a United States senator, cuts off her allowance and demands that she find employment on the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal jobs program. Within days, Layla finds herself far from her accustomed social whirl, assigned to cover the history of the remote mill town of Macedonia, West Virginia, and destined, in her opinion, to go completely mad with boredom. But once she secures a room in the home of the unconventional Romeyn family, she is drawn into their complex world and soon discovers that the truth of the town is entangled in the thorny past of the Romeyn dynasty.

At the Romeyn house, twelve-year-old Willa is desperate to learn everything in her quest to acquire her favorite virtues of ferocity and devotion—a search that leads her into a thicket of mysteries, including the questionable business that occupies her charismatic father and the reason her adored aunt Jottie remains unmarried. Layla's arrival strikes a match to the family veneer, bringing to light buried secrets that will tell a new tale about the Romeyns. As Willa peels back the layers of her family's past, and Layla delves deeper into town legend, everyone involved is transformed—and their personal histories completely rewritten.

The Truth According to Us Details

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From Reader Review The Truth According to Us for online ebook

Phrynne says

I really only read this book because I knew the author co wrote The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society but I am very glad I did read it because it is good. I fell in love with many of the characters especially Willa and Jottie and in the end I sat and read way past my bed time because I had to find out what happened to everyone. The ending turned out to be realistic rather than happy ever after but that was okay. This is one of those books which sucks you in with perfect descriptions of the town, the heat and the quirky residents. When it is finished it lingers in your mind.

Holly says

What can I say? This books starts out with it being the summer of 1938.....and boy, did I feel like I was there in thick of that sweltering heat. That's what I loved most about this book: it made me me feel like I was in West Virginia. I could see everyone so plainly. I saw everyone sitting out on their porches, drinking their iced tea, and stopping by saying hello. All the characters were right there in my sight: Jottie, Layla, Willa & Bird, Minerva & Mae....all the secondary characters, they were all so well done, I felt like I knew them.

There were only a couple things I didn't like. Some of the "history" portions that were being typed up by Layla, I didn't think we needed to read those. Some of the stories were funny but I thought what the character actually wrote about them were kinda....eh. Plus, as much as I loved the story, I did feel like it could have ended with about 80 or so pages less.

This isn't a story that's action packed or with a lot of things going on. It has different pov's: 12 year old Willa, her aunt Jottie, & Layla. I could hear their different voices, which I thought was well done. I loved Willa & Jottie the most. I can actually say I liked most of the "cast". Anyway....it's a good story to get lost in. Like I said, I felt very "into" the book. I enjoyed this one for letting me escape to 1938.....I even enjoyed the weather:)

** I received an ARC through a goodreads giveaway in exchange for an honest review.

Victoria says

This book could have used serious editing--as in cutting at least 150 pages--and more diligent focus on characters, narrative and plot. As you'll note from the description, the author was partly responsible for The Guernsey Literary Society, a book that simply oozed with charm and lovable characters, and I am left to wonder how much input this author had in that book's success. How many ways did this story disappoint?

1. Length. It took over 250 pages before anything really happened. I think half a book to establish characters and setting, especially when these fall so far short in the end, is indulgent. Where is the pay off after devoting this much time to a story? Continually reading about how hot it is in West Virginia in summer doesn't set much of a scene.

2. Characters. There are some quirky and charming characters in this story—twin sisters Mae and Minerva to name just two—yet they are not fully developed, they appear like wallpaper and I think their humor and

story lines would have added immeasurably to the story. Just as the character of Layla, one of the main protagonists, falls flat. Her spoiled brat persona thrown in the trenches of public assistance should have made for a better metamorphosis.

3. Narrative. The writing wasn't bad and it did contain the occasional brilliantly crafted phrase, however, it was terribly confusing to change narrators constantly in midstream, as in within a chapter, and so often. I'm a fan of multiple narrators from chapter-to-chapter, but those are usually accompanied by a heading to announce a differing point of view. Not so here. The use of letters between Layla and her family were a bit copy cat, but still successful. The history of Macedonia as written by Layla, less so.

4. Plot. So much wrong here. At its heart, the main plot point is about an event that took place 18 years prior and its lingering effects for the Romeyn family. Without giving anything away, the secret is not that difficult to discern early on, so the reader is left to wade through the morass it created without any real discovery or enlightenment. It is also brought to light in one scene, that's it. After almost 20 years buried, you get about 10 pages of dénouement.

5. More plot issues. There was so much information to mine here and I don't feel as if the author gave us any depth on any of the subjects. This takes place during the Depression with a main character working for the WPA's Federal Writer's Project, during prohibition with bootleggers run amuck and a small town's main industry facing unionization. You would think that a book with that much going on would have been so much more remarkable, but you would be wrong. I was especially intrigued by the WPA project as I had not been aware of this particular aspect of FDR's plan, but after reading this book, I can't say I'm any more informed. I realize this would have made for a longer book, I would have heartily endorsed using the previously requested cutting of 150 pages devoted to these subjects.

I won this book through an ARC giveaway which I truly appreciated and I really wanted to love it based on Guernsey, but instead, I was deeply frustrated throughout the reading and felt that I had devoted hours to a story without any sense of fulfillment.

DeB MaRtEnS says

Quaint. However, the novel dragged so badly that I simply gave up.

Sharon Siepel says

How can I even begin to describe how much I enjoyed reading this book? The Truth According to Us by Annie Barrows unravels the secrets of a small Depression-era West Virginia town through the eyes of 12 year old Willa and Layla, a young woman assigned by Roosevelt's Writer Project to research and write the history of town in time for its 150th birthday.

Though the book mainly focuses on one family in particular, readers are introduced to many citizens of Macedonia, all with the quirks, agendas, and stories of their own.

For fans of The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, Barrow's does occasionally use letters as a means of communicating different character's perspectives. However, the book does not rely as heavily on these letters as Potato Peel Pie did.

I was drawn in from the beginning and had a very hard time putting down this nearly 500 page book. All the characters are so engaging that you feel like you are rocking on the front porch, drinking ice tea with sweat trickling down your back while eavesdropping on their conversations.

Perfect novel for book clubs, as there are many aspects of the book that are worth discussing: the characters, family relationships, what loyalty looks like, how history is remembered and recorded, the Depression, the Federal's Writers Project, etc.

Connie says

As the title suggests, the characters in this book are delving into secrets to find out the truth--and there may be more than one truth. The narrator is twelve-year-old Willa Romeyn, a likable, precocious girl in the small West Virginian town of Macedonia. She has been eavesdropping on conversations, and sneaking around trying to find out the truth about her father Felix's occupation, family secrets, and life in general.

Another truth-seeker is Layla, a young woman boarding with the Romeyns who is writing a history of Macedonia for the Federal Writers Project, a program that helped unemployed writers and photographers during the Great Depression. She's interviewing the townspeople where she gets both the official version of history, and the colorful stories that will make a better book. Layla's letters to her friends and family about her experiences are lively and fun.

The Romeyn household is run by Jottie, Felix's sister, who is a delightful maternal woman. The man she loved died in a mill fire in 1920--and finding the truth behind the tragedy helps drive the plot. Felix Romeyn is a charming womanizer who mysteriously comes and goes with his job.

Author Annie Barrows makes us feel that we are in 1938 West Virginia, and the sense of time and place is a strength of the book. Mill workers are being laid off during the hard times of the Depression, and the men want to unionize. Although Prohibition is the law, even young Willa starts learning the truth about bootleggers. It shows small town life with its warmth and its sniping.

The book gets off to a slow start, but gets more entertaining, so be patient. The story has a large number of characters, some of whom have little bearing on the plot. The novel has a lot going on--plot elements set in both 1920 and 1938, Layla's letters, and excerpts from Layla's book about Macedonia. Some of the secrets of 1920 continue to haunt the Romeyn family in 1938. So if you're up for a heartwarming, but slow-moving, Southern family story, then this is the book for you. 3.5 stars.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

4.5 stars. A tale of secrets and intertwined lives in the small, one-factory town of Macedonia, West Virginia in 1938. This historical West Virginia novel is by the co-author of The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society.

The story is told from the alternating viewpoints of 12 year old Willa Romeyn, her 36 year old aunt Josephine (Jottie) Romeyn, and Layla Beck, a young woman from a wealthy and prominent family who is boarding with Jottie for the summer while she writes a history of the town for the Federal Writers' Project.

The FWP was an actual New Deal program, designed to support writers during the Great Depression, who were assigned projects like writing local histories and state guides, and assembling photos and oral history records of slavery.

Willa is a precocious young girl who takes it into her mind that she will be happier if she knows everyone's secrets, even though her uncle Emmett tries to warn her:

"My advice is this: Don't ask questions if you're not going to like the answers."

I folded my arms. "Well, honestly! How can I know I'm not going to like the answers until I ask the questions?"

His smile flashed bright. "Easy. You ask yourself if there's any answer that would endanger something that's precious to you, and if there is, don't ask the question."

Endanger? Nothing was endangered. "That's silly. No one would ever find out anything that way!"

"Finding out isn't all it's cracked up to be, Sherlock," he said.

Jottie takes care of Willa and her little sister Bird because the girls' father, Felix, flits in and out of their lives so much. She carries a world of pain from the past and has shut herself off from the social life of the town, but is slowly making tentative steps to reintegrate herself, even though she's torn about it.

Layla is a lovely, spoiled socialite who is forced to take a job when she refuses to marry the useless rich guy her father (a senator) picked out for her. Her uncle Ben gets her a job with the FWP. The novel is interspersed with letters between Layla and her relatives and friends, which add a nice touch of humor to the story. Layla, like Willa, soon finds out there's more than one side to every story. The local librarian points out to Layla:

"All of us see a story according to our own lights. None of us is capable of objectivity. You must beware your sources. . . The question becomes what do you want *The History of Macedonia* to be?"

"Me?" said Layla. "Why, I have no stake in the matter. There's nothing particular I want it to be." The moment the words left her mouth, she realized they were false. She wanted *The History of Macedonia* to spurn the dull and to amuse the witty, to advance the Romeyns and to trounce the Parker Davieses, and to announce that she, Layla Beck, had perceived that all that they had been blind to.

Historical fiction set in small towns isn't in my normal wheelhouse, but this book made me smile and made my heart ache, sometimes at the same time. It's interesting and insightful, and even when on the surface nothing particularly dramatic seemed to be happening with the plot for the first half of the book, I was still fascinated with the different personalities and the sense that peoples' secrets and perceptions were inexorably approaching a tipping point.

Almost until the very end of the book, I was strongly inclined to round it up to 5 stars, but I thought the ending was just a little flat, especially the epilogue and the scene on which the entire book ends. So that, combined with some slow spots and the feeling that Willa's personality and voice were a little too advanced for a 12 year old, prompted me to round down. But overall, it's still a very strong story and well worth

reading.

The truth of other people is a ceaseless business. You try to fix your ideas about them, and you choke on the clot you've made.

I received a free copy of this ebook from the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for a review. Thank you!

Content note: One non-explicit sex scene, and I think I recall seeing one F-bomb. Overall I consider this a clean read.

?Karen says

3.5 stars. A charming and quaint story with memorable characters set during the depression.

It's a dripping hot summer in 1938 and Layla Beck is being punished by her father, a Senator, for not agreeing to marry the boring chap he has chosen for her. The punishment is a job with the WPA writing a history of a small Virginia town, celebrating its sesquicentennial. This lands Layla in a prominent household of the community as a boarder, and soon she has set the family on its ear, striking up a relationship of sorts with the father, a divorced man of questionable means and motives, making his 12-year-old daughter, Willa, quite jealous and protective of him.

The writing of the history means interviewing lots of local folk since there is nothing already written about the town to guide her. Also revealed in bits and pieces is the story of the Romeyn family and its many secrets. It follows that the reader begins to see two or more sides to all the tales revealed, and you wonder where the truths lie, until the big reveal.

ARC from NetGalley and I also listened to the audio at the same time.

Susan Johnson says

It's summer time, hot, and you want to lay out on a hammock, sip a lemonade and read a good book. This is a great one to do that. Written by the co-author of The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society it takes place in the small town of Macedonia, West Virginia, during the Great Depression.

Layla Beck is the spoiled daughter of an U.S. Senator who one rebels by refusing to marry the man selected for her to marry. Sen. Beck is so enraged that he cuts her off without a dime and signs her up in the WPA/Federal Writers' Project run conveniently by his brother. Layla is assigned to write a history of Macedonia to honor its sesquicentennial (150 years).

We hear much of Layla's stories in letter she writes to family and friends. Grumbling all the way, she moves into the home of Jottie Romeyn and what a house it is. Living with Jottie is her brother, Felix (a travelling salesman), and his 2 daughters, 12 year old Willa and 6 year old Bird. Jottie raises the girls as Felix is gone quite a bit. Also residing in the house are Jottie's twin sisters Minerva and Mae. They go live with their husbands on the week-ends but can't be separated any longer than that. It's a brand new world for Layla.

The Romeyn's father used to run the mill, and main employer, in town. There was a fire and a close friend of Jottie and Felix's was killed supposedly while robbing the mill. As Layla writes the town history she starts to

uncover the mystery of the fire and also very funny anecdotes about the town. The story of a Confederate General hiding in a house of ill repute is a hoot.

Ultimately the story is a coming of age novel for Willa Romeyn and the power of forgiveness. It's a wonderful book that will keep you turning pages. It's a great story.

Angela M says

This book is so very much about time and place , that this small town called Macedonia in West Virginia in 1938 , is almost another character . Such a clear sense of place is depicted ! With descriptions like this you can't help but see it :

"Bird and I trudged along Academy Street in silence . I suppose if you'd never seen them before, all the houses on our street looked the same, big and white - brick. If you gazed through the polished lens of experience, though , each one was different. You could tell where the Lloyd boys lived , just from the frayed stump of rope that dangled from their maple tree. The swing had crashed to the ground when all three of them plus Dicky Ritts rode on it at once . Grandpa Puck's porch was bare because he believed that burglars would steal his rocker if he left it out . Every evening , he toted it out to the porch to sit in the cool , but he wouldn't tote Grandma Puck's. She had to sit inside. At the corner was the Caseys' house , empty and sad. Mr Casey got sick and died, and Mrs Casey and the children had to go live with her brother. Sometimes on Sundays, Mrs . Casey came back to water her peonies. It didn't help much ; they were dying."

I was not only taken to this place but fully immersed into the lives of the characters , fully immersed into the time and what was happening not just here but in the country in 1938 . The depression, people losing jobs ,organized labor, bootlegging and locally the secrets held in the Romeyn family . Although a different time and place I had the same feeling of being immersed when I read The Guernsey Literary Potato Peel Society coauthored by Annie Barrows and the late Mary Ann Shaffer. It was a feeling of being there and knowing the characters.

Layla Beck , the spoiled rich daughter of a Senator is working for the Federal Writer's Project and sent to Macedonia to write a history of the town . While her activities seem to be the focus here , the story is not really about the history of the town . Although interesting in its own right and fun to meet the cast of characters that want their version of history in the book , for me the real story is Willa's right from the start . She's 12 and precocious and sweet and inquisitive and a reader ! She's read Gone With the Wind many times over and reads The Beautiful and the Damned . No way I could not love this young girl .

While there's no major action at least not in the present , the story just seems to flow with only a few parts feeling a bit slow . We learn from the beginning and along the way that there are secrets to be found out about and 12 year old Willa Romeyn is determined to discover everything about her father , Felix . Her Aunt Jottie's point of view is an interesting juxtaposition to Willa's as Aunt Jottie knows only some of the secrets , the history of this town and may not be the truth that Willa discovers. Jottie's flashbacks to childhood days and as young adults sheds light on what may or may not have happened when the sock factory that her father was president of burned and killed the man that Jottie loved . Layla's point of view is divulged in letters and these make for an interesting perspective from an outsider .

This is ultimately a story about truth and lies we tell each other and ourselves , about redemption and forgiveness and leaving childhood behind as Willa points out in the first pages but as I mentioned earlier this was a wonderful and so well written depiction of a specific time and place .

Thanks to Random House Publishing House - Random House and NetGalley.

Rebecca Foster says

(3.5) They say there are only two basic plots: a stranger comes to town, or the hero sets off on a journey. Well, here's the first of those in action. This atmospheric historical novel is set in the sweltering summer of 1938. Layla Beck, a spoiled senator's daughter, has been sent to Macedonia, West Virginia by the WPA to document the town's story in advance of its sesquicentennial. Her uncle pulls strings to get her the job even though he thinks his flighty niece is "exactly as fit to work on the project as a chicken is to drive a Buick."

From a lunatic Civil War general onwards, Macedonia has certainly had a colorful history. The problem is that all the local lights want to skew history to present themselves in the most favorable light. This applies to the family Layla boards with as well, the Romeyns. Felix and Jottie's father ran the American Everlasting Hosiery Company until a devastating fire some 20 years ago – blamed on Jottie's old sweetheart, Vause Hamilton.

Now Felix's twelve-year-old daughter Willa, who narrates much of the novel, wants to get to the bottom of things. What really happened during that factory fire? Why are the Romeyns snubbed around town? Has her divorcé father turned to bootlegging, and can she stop Miss Beck from bewitching him? Like Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Flavia de Luce in Alan Bradley's mysteries, Willa is a spunky heroine whose curiosity carries the plot.

Once again Barrows makes good use of the epistolary format by inserting the letters Layla sends and receives during her time in Macedonia. Third person narration also gets us into the mind of Jottie, one of the strongest characters. However, later sections of the novel get a little bogged down in Jottie's romantic history, and overall it is too long by at least a quarter. Barrows is better at capturing everyday speech and routines than momentous activities like a factory strike, but she certainly evokes the oppressive heat of a long American summer.

As Willa concludes, "The truth of other people is a ceaseless business. You try to fix your ideas about them, and you choke on the clot you've made." This novel reminds us that others – whether strangers or family – are always a mystery, and history is a matter of interpretation.

(Originally published with images at my blog, Bookish Beck.)

Esil says

Somewhere between 3.5 and 4 stars. Annie Barrows wrote the Ivy and Bean books which I read over and over with my daughter when she was younger. And reading *The Truth About Us* was like reading a version of Ivy and Bean for adults -- which is mostly a positive thing. Barrows tells an excellent story -- a good yarn! Told from the perspective of Leila, Willa and Jottie, the story takes place in 1938 in Macedonia, a small town in West Virginia. Leila comes to Macedonia from Washington to write a history of the town. Her father is a senator who has sent her into the world to work because she won't marry the husband he chose for her. She stays in a house with an assortment of people, including 12 year old Willa and Willa's aunt Jottie, and Willa's charming but unreliable father Felix. While the town folks feed Leila the history of Macedonia they would like to see recorded, Leila comes to see that the town has quite a few interesting secrets and for her

part Willa is inspired to learn more about her family's own secrets. Meanwhile, Jottie is trying to untangle herself from all of this historical baggage. The story has lots of good twists and turns, the description of the setting brings West Virginia -- and its relentless hot summers -- to life, and the characters are engaging -- especially Willa who is lovely with her spunk, strong feelings and curiosity and Jottie whose love for her family and pain over an earlier lost love are palpable. A few small caveats. First, the characters other than Willa and Jottie felt a bit unidimensional -- this includes Leila who was a bit of a naive and then enlightened stereotype. And, second, for those who read historical fiction partly to learn something about a time in history, this would be history "lite"; the coming Second World War, the tail end of the depression, and the fear of communism are lurking in the background, but they only form a vague backdrop to the story. And, finally -- back to my comparison with the Ivy and Bean books -- despite the drama and suffering depicted, there's a sweetness to this book that hovers somewhere above real human emotions. Which is fine because it's just a story, and that's how you should approach it to enjoy it on its own terms -- which I did. Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for a chance to read an advance copy.

Ashley says

This was well on its way to being a 5-star review - right up until the very end. I loved the way Annie Barrows described the fictional town of Macedonia, West Virginia. She made me feel like I was living in Small Town, USA during 1938. The story was told from the perspective of three females - Layla Beck, the daughter of a senator who was sent to Macedonia to write its history after she refused to marry the man of her father's choosing; Jottie Romeyn, the owner of the home where Layla boarded while in Macedonia and Willa Romeyn, the eldest daughter of Jottie's eldest brother. This is a coming of age book for Willa and a book about how truth sometimes depends on whose eyes you are looking through.

I fell in love with the characters of this book and really cared about what happened to them. Don't you just love books like that? (view spoiler)

Susan says

Let's get this right out in the open - this is NOT another **Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society**. The primary author of that book club favorite was ailing when she asked her niece, Annie Barrows, to help her finish it. **The Truth According to Us**, although it is partially epistolary, is a very different read with a much more bittersweet tone.

The novel uses several different POVs to tell the Depression-era story of Layla Beck, a spoiled socialite whose father cuts her off when she refuses to marry his hand-picked choice. As punishment, her uncle puts her on the New Deal Federal Writers Project, and exiles her to Macedonia, West Virginia to write the town's history for its sesquicentennial celebration. She is to board with the notorious Romeyn family, including handsome, mysterious Felix, his two young daughters Willa and Bird, and his spinster sister Jottie. Once the Romeyn family ran the biggest factory in Macedonia, but now Felix is rumored to be a bootlegger - or worse - and Jottie barely interacts with the other townspeople.

Layla is determined to prove that she can actually do a good job, but Macedonia's history is full of secrets and lies - much like the Romeyn family history. Twelve year old Willa is determined to use the Macedonian virtues of ferocity and devotion to learn the truth about her family. But neither Layla nor Willa realize that disturbing the past could have a devastating impact on their present.

The Truth According to Us portrays a fascinating genuine piece of American history - the thought of a federal government paying people to create art, (not science and technology!) should make humanities majors everywhere green with envy. And the disparities between Macedonia's history recounted by its "first families" and the less than honorable facts known to a few residents are eye opening and frequently humorous.

But the relationships are the strongest part of the novel as Jottie tries to move past grief and anger, Willa tries to keep her father from abandoning the family, and Layla tries to prove her worth. The three women don't always have comfortable relationships, and they don't all get what they want, but by book's end they are stronger than they were and ready to move ahead.

I'm a major epistolary novel fan, but I have to admit that the sections of the novel that include letters to, from and about Layla were not my favorite part, especially given that there are other sections that are written from Layla's POV. I wonder if Barrows felt the letters were necessary to catch the attention of **Guernsey Society** fans. She needn't have bothered. The story stands strong without them.

No, it's not the second coming of your book club favorite, but it's a strong, impressive novel in its own right.

Morgannah Mayfair says

Full Disclosure:

This book was sent to me via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

This book was written by Annie Barrows who is a co-author of The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society . The majority of the tale is told from the POV of a 12 year old girl named Willa. While Willa is witty and insightful I just couldn't suspend belief long enough to fully engage with her as a 12 year old girl. The other characters are well written and hold a certain charm while lacking in significant depth. At 500 pages this book could have easily survived an edit of about 1/4 of its content and came out all the better. I have to admit that at around page 400 I started skimming so I could make it to the finish line. Overall I gave this book 3 stars because the writing in fact is very GOOD! I believe this type of book just isn't for me but have no doubt it has a wide audience out there waiting for it.
