

Title: The Year We Left Home
Author: Jean Thompson
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"His wife was right, they'd worked so hard and were so proud to be on the outside of everything they'd grown up with. But they were inside of nothing but themselves." Midwestern novelist Jean Thompson writes in her New York Times bestseller, *The Year We Left Home*. As a finalist for the National Book Award, this narrative draws upon familiar Midwestern tropes and then delves underneath the polite surface to engage with raw family realness. From a deteriorating small Iowa town outward to Chicago and beyond, Thompson leads the reader on a journey through the eyes of extended family members spanning the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s.

Audrey and her husband have faithfully raised their four children with education, stability, and home-cooked food. Their middle-class home in the suburbs is no farmhouse, but their lives, stature, and features are easily linked to their weatherbeaten Norwegian cousins and ancestors. While their children, Anita, Ryan, Blake, and Torrie— as well as oddball cousin, Chip— obviously share the same gene pool, they grate against each other and quickly push outward to seek their own paths. Anita seeks to elevate her position in town with a bigger, newer house and picture-perfect family, while Ryan aims to throw off the confines of their constricting small town and be free: sexually, intellectually, and financially. Blake wants to dig in and work with his hands, while Torrie feels forever trapped in her head. Cousin Chip lets life take him where it may, tentatively observing the brokenness and beauty around him.

Thompson's characters are too real to be altogether likable or not. Their awkward yet insightful dialogues reflect their inner struggle as they try to differentiate what is expected of them from what is really worth fighting for. The characters are not equally represented, which feels somewhat unsettling, as I long for equality and full disclosure. Yet, what might seem like a fault in Thompson's work adds to the realism that she is aiming for, leaving mystery where we wish there were none. *The Year We Left Home*, Thompson paints images with broad strokes. Her emotional and personal descriptions of space and time are not lengthy, but they are moving. Instead of utilizing endless descriptions, Thompson utilizes symbolism to draw out the familiar, the foreboding, and the forbidden. She masterfully uses images of weather, vehicles, and photographs to draw upon her readers' own nostalgia and imagination.

Thompson's informal, tender tone brings plastic people to life. No matter what region a reader may come from, they will be able to relate with the universal human themes in *The Year We Left Home*. From deep in the heart of Midwestern America, Thompson asks the vulnerable questions of every soul who has longed to be on the "inside" and to find their true home.

Reviewed by Andrea Eads.