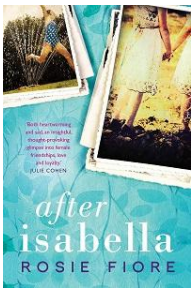

After Isabella by Rosie Fiore

What a sad story from beginning to end with a few light-hearted and haunting moments in between. The story follows the life of Esther, best friend to Isabella and single mum to Lucie. The story begins with the sad tale of her childhood best friend Isabella who is dying from cancer and being cared for by her younger sister Sally. After Isabella and Sally's mum both pass away Sally befriends Esther and Lucie at one point you have to question how Sally views the friendship. Esther has many hurdles to go through, during the course of the story and we are introduced to her boyfriend Michael who is able to reinforce that the friendship is genuine between the two ladies. The story comes to a head when Esther's mum passes away and her career takes a massive overall and Lucie asks to go and live with her dad and new wife.

This is a lovely read with the true meaning of friendship between mother and daughter, best friends and partners and ex-partners. I found that I was able to warm to all the characters and you are able to relate parts of your everyday life into the story. There are some funny moments, some sad moments and the occasional haunting moment.

On a personal level as a big fan of the hit TV show Neighbours, I did laugh out loud at the Neighbours reference in chapter 24. An all round enjoyable read but in parts will make you think hard about your own friendships with individual people.

Louise Riddleston
****

When Esther's childhood best friend Isabella dies of cancer, she is devastated. Years later she is bought together with Isabella's sister Sally, who cared for Isabella in her last days.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, it was a surprisingly good read, taking you through Esther's journey through love friendship and life as a mother and juggling a career. It has so many situations that many women can relate to and think I have been through that. It follows Esther's relationship with her Isabella's sister, who she did not really know before and was only thought of as the younger sister.

It follows both of their journeys which first appear that Esther's life is falling apart as Sally's blossoms but all is not as it seems. This book will make you laugh, cry and think "that happened to me". It is written in a beautiful way which makes the characters in the book very easy to relate too. I was fortunate enough to receive an advance copy of this book and could not put it down having read it in a weekend. Will definitely be seeking out more books by this author.

Maxine Wetherall
***

Thank you Real Readers/ Nudge for the opportunity to review the following book.

Isabella, dear friend of Esther is diagnosed with cancer and dies shortly before her 40th birthday. Sally, Isabella's sister has been nursing their mother who has dementia, who unfortunately dies leaving Sally lonely and unloved. Esther upon meeting sally again, takes Sally under her wing and befriends her. Sally, who was shy and socially awkward, finds a new lease of life, including a new boyfriend Phil, who happens to be an associate of Esthers…

This book took me on a rollercoaster of emotions, I laughed, I felt emotional and I felt sympathy, all crammed in from one book. This book is written so beautifully that I was totally absorbed into the plot, I felt the characters emotions, I could empathise with them and could put myself in their shoes. It dealt with the situation of death in a tasteful way, but also very touching. The storyline is very poignant, although the whole book is about death and grieving, it grips you from the first page and makes you want to find out what happens. Rosie Fiore has really touched my heart with this book and im still thinking about it days after finishing it.

I'm really hoping that Rosie writes another book of similar nature, as I believe she has the talent for this type of storyline.

Sara Jordan
*****

Esther is devastated when her best friend, Isabella, dies. Some years later she encounters Sally, Isabella's sister, at a funeral and Sally enters her life. Sally has cared for both Isabella and her mother through their illnesses, cancer and dementia respectively. Dowdy, naïve and lonely, she wants to be friends with a reticent Esther. Meanwhile, Esther, whilst fairly content, is stuck in a rut of work and a humdrum homelife when she endures a loss of her own and her life takes a downwards spiral.

This is a novel about relationships, between friends, family and lovers. An easy read but I felt that whilst it was an enjoyable book there was a lack of depth of character, almost as if we just skimmed across the veneer of the various parties lives. I didn't believe that Esther would act the way she does from the middle of the book onwards, it just didn't ring true. Rosie Fiore's description of loss is very well written and I feel that had she imbued her main character with more depth this would have been a great book instead of just a good book. I think it would make a good screenplay and could easily see this becoming a TV drama in a few years time. If you like contemporary women's fiction, give it a go! Thanks to Real Readers powered by Nudge for the proof copy of the book.

Ruth Carson-Byrne
***

Wow, just wow where do I start with this beautiful novel?

After Isabella opens with our protagonist Esther delivering the eulogy at her her best friend Isabella's funeral. Isabella, ironically so full of life, has been stolen by cancer at the age of 40, leaving a void that nothing and no-one can fill. Isabella was the driving force behind Esther. Pushing her into accomplishing things she never believed possible, she wouldn't have the life she's living now were it not for Isabella.

Sally, Isabella's younger sister, was always someone they found irritating as kids. The little sister that wouldn't stop pestering them, hanging around when she wasn't wanted. (Believe me, I know where they're coming from, as a teenager, the last

thing you want is your little sister hanging around). But who cared for Isabella in her last months? Who administered her medication, dressed her, toileted her, did practically everything? Sally.

Now Isabella is gone, Sally's care shifts from Isabella to her mother, who is suffering from Alzheimers. Her whole adult life has been dedicated to others, so when her mother dies, Sally, all of a sudden comes into her own. She starts living her own life, doing all the things she never got to do like learning to drive and taking night classes. Her life is just beginning.

Simultaneously Esther's life starts to nosedive. Although she's found love with a new man, her relationship with her daughter is going downhill. She blames hormones, but is that all it is? At the same time Esther's career is suffering, seemingly without her even being aware of what's happening. Her life, in contrast to Sally's, is running away from her.

Just like when Esther and Isabella were kids, Sally seems to be infiltrating into Esther's life and as that life starts to go off the rails Esther can't help mistrusting Sally, who seems to have everything sorted now that her caring responsibilities are over.

This was a beautiful novel. The characters are well-written and believable, the subject matter both poignant and uplifting, and although there are many strands to Esther's life, they weave together seamlessly making it easy to follow and therefore you become absorbed in her world. My first Rosie Fiore won't be my last if this is anything to go by. A beautiful novel that works on so many levels.

Lorna Cant
****

Esther's closest, most dear friend, Isabella, dies of cancer before her 40th birthday. They have been like sisters, going through all of life's trials and tribulations together. Then Sally, Isabella's sister, appears in Esther's life. Shy Sally has nursed her mother through dementia and had all but given up her life to care for her. Esther, realising Sally has been lonely and unloved for years, takes her in as a friend. Meanwhile her own life is crumbling around her. She's divorced and her 12 year old daughter is growing up fast. Where does that leave her? All she does is work and there seems to be no spare time for fun. Will Sally provide the answers to Esther's problems?

As Sally comes out of her shell and begins to thrive in her new life, Esther's plans for her future start to crumble around her. She is forced to re-evaluate the people she is closest to and ask herself who she can really trust.

I loved this book. It's a grown up, 'real' look at a forty something woman who is coming to terms with what she has lost, and still has yet to find. There are so many layers to the book which look at friendship, relationships, both good and bad, family and even religion. I immediately engaged with all of the characters. I was lucky enough to receive an advance copy and was so engrossed with it that I read it in a weekend.

I will certainly look out for more of this author's books. Highly recommended.

K MacKenzie
*****

The opening chapter of this book is a grabber. Emotional and affecting it hooked me immediately as it will to anyone who has lost a dear long standing friend at too early an age.

The setting is familiar to many of us who have attended funerals when amusing incidents often occur that you just know would amuse the person you are mourning. That is the moment when the loss of Isabella really hits home to Esther. Eight years later and Esther is content with her life as a professor of English, living with her teenage daughter, Lucie. She is not lonely but sometimes reflects that a man in her life might be rather nice.
Relationships feature strongly in this book. Esther is on good terms with her mother who lives on the Isle of Wight. Until the teenage angst hits Esther and Lucie are extremely close but the gradual breakdown of their relationship is documented realistically. When romance becomes a possibility for Esther the author has great fun with the awkwardness of mature people in such situations. The dialogue is hilarious as often is the behaviour. The manner in which the relationships fluctuate and change with circumstances and time is so well defined and portrayed and with great sensitivity.

There is something refreshing about a book featuring people facing the usual ups and downs of life, facing adversity with varying degrees of common sense. Esther is a perfect example of a woman who shoulders all the blame for family problems and

does not always make wise decisions refusing to acknowledge that sometimes other people do know what is best for her and have her interests and well being at heart. The sadness of loss is conveyed so gently I am sure I am not be the only reader who will shed tears at least once during emotional scenes. But there are clever touches of gentle humour that lighten the darkest moments. Rose Fiore has such a sense of fun. Yes there are scenes of loss and grief and adults behaving badly or unwisely but she has cleverly peppered the book with witty quips and retorts and this reader could not stop smiling. The dialogue flows naturally with conversations that ebbed and flowed as normal between friends.

When Esther meets an old friend at a conference the book sparks with fun, mischief and wonderful witty one liners. And anyone who has ever been forced to attend a quiz in a local hall will immediately recognise the usual characters who boss everyone, take charge, answer questions and overrule everyone else and the inevitable bores.This writer's gift for characterisation is so obvious throughout the story most of whom are familiar. I was less certain of Phil but perhaps because he stood out as being 'different'.

This is such an enjoyable read crammed with wonderful little cameos that make you smile and if I was to describe it I would say it is a family book in the widest sense but also a gentle book that never oversteps the mark into overly dramatic scenes. A thoughtful book that with a superb carefully contrived tale. A lovely story and I would not hesitate to recommend it.

Sheila Grant
*****

Esther and Isabella had been best friends since they were nine years old so when Isabella died Esther felt devastated. Several years later, following her divorce, she is now a single parent, concentrating on bringing up her twelve year old daughter Lucie and has a successful, but stressful career as a professor at a local university. However, she is feeling under increasing pressure, from colleagues, friends and even from Lucie, to make new relationships. At this point she also receives a letter from Sally, Isabella's younger sister, to let her know that their mother, whom Sally had nursed through many years of dementia, has just died. Although Esther had never felt close to Sally, in fact had only ever seen her as Isabella's rather annoying younger sibling, she gradually becomes more and more involved in encouraging her to broaden her horizons. These had, inevitably, been severely limited during the many years when all of Sally's time had been taken up with being a full-time carer, first

for Isabella when she was dying, and then for her mother. However, as the story progresses Esther herself is faced with one personal crisis after another and it seems that as Sally's world expands hers is imploding and she starts to lose all confidence in herself and her relationships.

This really is one of the most satisfying books I have read this year; from the very first sentence I felt totally engaged with this very moving and psychologically powerful story. The author's explorations - which included themes of female friendships, the conflicts of balancing the demands of work and family commitments, dealing with all the tensions of adolescence, negotiating the minefield of relationships with ex-partners, middle-age dating, love, loss, loyalty, betrayal, caring for someone with a terminal illness, envy, guilt - all felt psychologically pitch-perfect. Her reflections on the perils and anxieties of dating in later life, with so many issues surrounding a sense of "exposure" were often humorous as well as being very poignant. As Esther's background and past experiences were gradually revealed it became clear why, in middle-age and coping with the accumulating effects of so many losses, she had reached crisis point. There was never a moment during the book (I which read in just two sessions because I could hardly bear to put it down!) when I felt that either the character development or the plot lacked credibility; I just felt totally immersed in the story and found myself caring deeply about what happened to the characters. Given the range of themes in this story, I think this would be an excellent choice for reading groups - and I have already been persuading all my book-loving friends to read it!

This is the first book I have read by this author but I suspect it won't be the last!

Linda Hepworth
*****

My copy of this book was sent to me by Real Readers to review. It is always exciting to be given a book to review and the anticipation of reading the first chapter is like unwrapping an unexpected present that you have no idea what it might contain. This book was a good present!

Reading the first section of this book felt a bit like being on a lunch date with a group of friends, touching on a host of subjects, how to survive divorce, getting back into the dating game, dealing with an adolescent daughter, to name but a few, which means plenty of possibilities for discussion in a book group. All of these affect the central character of Esther but despite these and dealing with the death

of her school friend, Isabella from cancer, she has a pretty good life. In contrast Sally, Isabella's sister, has become isolated and lonely after caring firstly for Isabella and then their mother who suffered from dementia.

As the story unfolded it became more and more of a page turner and I found myself enthralled by the characters and the story line; the lives of Esther and Sally appear to be on a sliding scale, as Sally's life improves, Esther's begins a rapid decline. So many life changing things happen to Esther, how she reacts to the often disturbing events she experiences are written with emotion but without being emotive and the sadness and harsh realities are interspersed with humour . The reversal of fortunes between the two women made me think of Ruth and Mary in 'The Life and Loves of a She Devil', by Fay Weldon.

I was worried when starting the book that it would be bleak and depressing or overly sentimental however it was none of these, cancer and dementia along with caring for someone facing death are all dealt with in such a way that, whilst never downplaying the bleakness and emotion, that is readable and thought provoking without being graphic or maudlin. The ending takes the reader back full circle to the prologue which for me brought the whole story together. I shed a tear or two. Reviews often say a book was thought provoking and for me this one truly was, I felt the need to get a friend to read it so we could discuss it and how we would react. I will definitely recommend it to all the readers I know, whatever their usual genre choice.

Jan
*****

After Isabella...the title and plot synopsis suggested a tale of loss and reinvention, stirring emotion and provoking memories from the cover. The novel began as expected, opening with the melancholic death of a beloved friend, sister and daughter, forming the backdrop of the story. Isabella then served to provide the silken thread woven into the intricate story following the complexities of her best friend Esther's life.

The novel bravely tackled sensitive themes, namely those of loss, love and euthanasia. Rosie Fiore's passion for the concepts resonated through each page of her writing, deserving appreciation and admiration for the honesty with which she wrote this beautiful story. However, the book appeared as a tale of two battling halves. The former, a gripping intricacy of prose travelling through the multi facets of Esther's commitment to her loved ones; whilst simultaneously honouring her guilt and

compunction with regards to the very same. The latter half of the novel, however, I felt ravaged Esther's character. Evidently she was a complex and multi-dimensional woman with emotions and aspirations; nonetheless Esther almost became a scapegoat to the woes of the tale, crippled under the weight of the other characters' flaws and inadequacies.

Praise and gratuities must be paid to Rosie Fiore for the creation of a beautiful novel, which will undoubtedly reverberate with many readers, particularly those who have suffered from the loss of a loved one. Lamentably I found the defamation of the main character and the diminishing of her spirit overpowering in the midst of an otherwise complex and sincere tale.

Rekha Duggal

***

After Isabella by Rosie Fiore faces head on the problems of caring for someone you're close to, having to give up your own life but then trying to rebuild it when they've gone. Esther's best friend Isabella died of cancer devastating Esther. Years later She reconnects with Sally, Isabella's sister who cared for Isabella and then their mother through years of dementia and is now starting to get her life back. Esther finds Sally to be clingy and intense, something she finds hard to cope with. As Esther moves on with her own life, dealing with failed romance and then a relationship with an old friend, her daughter Lucie is growing up fast.

Add into the mix an ex husband with a pregnant wife who Lucie seems to prefer to spend time with and life becomes explosive. Esther has never been particularly close to her mother but when she commits suicide Esther finds it hard to cope with her grief and anger. She starts drinking and the fall out for the whole family is vast.
A story of grief, anger, relationships, taking a carer role and how to deal with the void when that person is no longer around, Rosie explores all these emotions with empathy and a real understanding of how her characters would react.

Esther's career has its ups and downs depending on how things are going with her personal life, and after her mum dies it all unravels with college asking her to take a sabbatical while she sorts herself out. Again Rosie manages to show the reader the trauma grief can bring in a very realistic way.

A real page turner but at the same time easy to read and relate to, another triumph for Rosie Fiore!

Glenda Worth
****

This book initially centres around Esther and her relationship with her childhood friend Isabella. However as I read on I realised that the theme running throughout the character's journey focused on the different relationships we have within our life and the impact this can have in relation to our responses and behaviour when we feel challenged by them. This was an easy fast paced read (read in 3 days!). I was right there with Esther, her daughter Lucie feeling empathy for her as she was trying to establish her own identity when shifting from the little girl into teenager at the expense of Esther's need to restrain & hang onto her innocence. The author Rosie Fiore gave believable scenario's to each of the characters as they encountered the ups & downs of death, teenage daughters, divorce, new relationships with being on the dating scene and from picking up a childhood relationship that came through being the sibling. I liked the twists and turns incorporated with 'Oh my goodness' did they really just do or say that! I was not disappointed, even when I thought I knew what would happen next and then encountered a surprise. Finally I liked the prologue and epilogue because they are so connected. Well worth curling up or basking in the sun this summer with this book.

Tricia Edwards
*****

Esther has lost her best friend to cancer - her cool, fun-loving, rebellious 'soul sister' who dragged her away from her tendency to dullness and pushed her to achieve the good life she is enjoying now. And she is in a good place - a few years escaped from an unhappy marriage, she has a delightful pre-teen daughter, her own home and a well-paid, responsible and very busy job she enjoys. No man, but she plans to remedy that soon.

Isabella's sister, Sally, on the other hand, is just emerging from a difficult early life in Isabella's shadow, caring first for her sister and then her mother in her final years. She begins to blossom in her new independence, just as events begin to turn Esther's life on its head.

Rosie Fiore has created an interesting character in Esther, who is a hard woman to love, likes to be in control and is utterly self-absorbed. I was struck by the way she shows us someone who likes to feel needed but on several crucial occasions fails to notice when she is, and is then outraged that her friends and family confide in

someone else, even scenting conspiracy, such is her self-absorption. She sets the upturn in Sally's circumstances against the downturn in Esther's perfectly - the emotional tension is carefully and skilfully cranked up little by little. The timing and pitch of emotion were the strengths of the book for me. Of course, Esther starts to lose her grip, to find out just how badly kept me reading, though I was more engaged in the outcome for those around her than for Esther herself.

On the downside, and I hesitate to list them for fear of spoiling the book for others, I was frustrated that the author introduced just a few too many issues for some of them to be handled in much depth.

Sue Broom
***

Upmarket chick lit for the more mature chick! The book opens with the central character, Esther, delivering the eulogy at the funeral of her childhood friend, Isabella, after her premature death from cancer. The narrative moves on eight years. Despite the loss of her closest friend and the breakdown of her marriage, Esther is living an apparently contented and settled life. She enjoys a fulfilling and busy career as a professor of English and Head of department, while at home, she cares for her 12 year old daughter Lucie, with whom she has a remarkably close and trouble-free relationship.

Esther unexpectedly meets Sally, Isabella's younger sister, who nursed Isabella in her final days and cared for their mother, who suffered from dementia. Now doubly bereaved, and socially isolated, Sally, dowdy and overweight, is keen to befriend the less enthusiastic Esther. At the same time, Esther's life implodes, as she faces crisis after crisis in both her personal and professional life.

This book deals with universal themes - loss, grief, middle-aged love, friendship and with mother-daughter relationships. But while treading familiar ground, the novel does not take an obvious route. Sally emerges as a far more complex and sympathetic character, while Esther is revealed as less secure and self-assured. I was taken by surprise at the course her life took, which was unpredictable and a little unconvincing. Characters were made likeable and believable by not being one-dimensional, but I felt Fiore could have dug deeper still in her character development especially with Esther. However, her depiction of grief as a long haul was excellent; loss takes unexpected twists and turns, rather than being an upward and ever improving progress.

The narrative was well-paced and the book was absorbing and easy to read. The characters and the challenges which they face are dealt with realistically and will strike a chord with many readers. It is a real page turner and would be a great holiday read. It provides much for a book group to discuss – including who you would cast as Esther, Sally and Isabella in a TV adaption?

Ann Smout
***

This is a book to persevere with, as I found myself plodding through the first third wanting to give up on something which seemed irretrievably bleak and humourless. After that, however, the pace picked up and as the protagonist's life started to unravel, she became rather less irritating. By the end, I was gripped to the narrative. I have three main criticisms of the book, however. Firstly, the laziness of the writer in making the protagonist, Esther, an English professor - a job presumably bestowed on her primarily because Rosie Fiore knows a lot about English and thus didn't need to spend time researching another profession than because it particularly suited her. Secondly, the awfulness of the teenage daughter, who read far more like a 30 year old who transformed into a 16 year old in her 'bad' periods than a 12 year old was beyond compare, as was the dullness of Esther herself. I found it hard to believe that the deceased titular Isabella, so 'fascinating' when she was alive, would have had much interest in her. Thirdly, of course a book that is largely about people who are dying will be very bleak, but there is always humour to be found in every situation, no matter how black this may be, and this to me is a book very deficient in humour. The novel was saved by the character of Sally, a woman who was surprising and different in comparison to the other characters, particularly Esther herself, and Esther's boyfriend Michael, who was kind without being sappy.

Sam S
***

How much difference a year makes, and how life can change totally almost out of nowhere, these are things which must have to occur to all people at least once in a lifetime. These are central to the story we are told.
Esther's life is one of success in her career, if not so much in love, although out of her divorce has come her much adored daughter. Isabella was her best friend, lost to cancer far too young, and the heartache from this event changes everything. Esther has to navigate life afterwards, putting into context the loss of her friend means

she should ask for a bit more of her own. This also means connecting for the first time since childhood to Isabella's sister who cared for her until the end.

The topics in this book are sensitive but the writer deals with them beautifully, and it had me turning pages fairly swiftly as I engaged. I could relate to Esther, like most people her life has been an eclectic mix of emotions and experiences but big events turn us to new directions. I found I could empathise with her and yet get frustrated too, she, like all of us, doesn't necessarily always help herself in the long term with her actions and turns away from doing what's hardest but ultimately most rewarding when her emotions control her. It's a testament to her strong characterisation that she's grounded and flawed and ultimately is a convincing pivot for events to turn around. The book is well paced as it covers quite a bit of time during which changes take place.

A great deal of the interest is in relationships – family, friendship, children and partners, and also with the psychological side of Esther, looking at addiction, jealousy, paranoia and distrust. These themes mix together very naturally to create a vivid world which I believe could be possible in life as well as fiction. The writer gives a great sense of realness.

It isn't a complicated book really, I'd describe it as a thoroughly entertaining novel with a character I felt happy to immerse myself in for the duration while always hoping and believing in her.

Helen Corton
****

From the very first page of this book, I was grabbed with such emotion being played out. We are introduced to Esther very early on in the book. Esther is the main focal character of the book and as the story develops, Esther's life begins to tip upside down.

Esther goes through a huge amount of change in her life, and the relationships with the people she loves and cares for changes hugely. The relationship with her daughter Lucie changes massively as Lucie becomes a teenager and starts developing her own opinions about things, and decides she wishes to live with her dad and his new wife and baby.

Esther's relationship with her mother had always been a bit terse, but they rubbed

along together nicely, but soon Esther is doubting everything when she discovers her mum has taken her own life, and then discovers that her mum had been hiding things from her.

Trying to deal with the grief of losing her mum, Esther's life begins to unravel in front of her eyes, and pushes away her friend Sally, and her loving partner, Michael. It takes the worst kind of news for Esther to begin to get the fight back in her again – Sally is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and Esther vows to look after her until the very end.

I thoroughly enjoyed every single page of this book – it takes the reader on an emotional rollercoaster. I think that readers of After Isabella will empathise with Esther as grief can be heart-wrenching, and can impact on our lives in so many ways.

Sarah Miles
*****

The ideas and themes underpinning After Isabella will resonate with many people, especially those who have lost someone young or in the early bloom of youth. For Isabella was just that: a young woman whose life had really just begun. She was successful, well-liked and, we are told by the main character, Esther, beautiful. Then she died – of cancer.

As in life, it is the dying of Isabella rather than the ultimate absence of her – she isn't ever really absent from the novel – that has shaped Esther, her best friend, and Sally, Isabella's sister. So the story, really, is theirs. It's about the stage after, when people pick themselves back up and what they do with that brush of mortality they've just witnessed. Yet Isabella hovers throughout the narrative and at times, this becomes too much. We understand, from the off, how important she was to both women but there are countless memories shared about her that add nothing more to the narrative or the development of any of the characters.

Sally was the real hook as she is an enigma throughout. We only see her through Esther's eyes and Fiore excels at creating a character the reader is both intrigued by and fearful of. I really wanted to know a lot more about Sally and even at the end, I wanted to know about her transition into the person she became.

The novel is gripping, largely because of Sally, and as Esther's life spirals out of control there's a growing sense of despair that echoes off the page. It was difficult,

however, to justify some of the more mundane details of Esther's life: the meals she ate, the runs she undertook and the places her and her daughter visited. Fiore may have been trying to underline how normal Esther's life was and how quickly this unravels, but it was difficult to read again and again.

It's a great read, largely because I never knew where it was going or whether I was reading a thriller or not. I almost wanted it to be and if Fiore was intending to make me as suspicious as Esther, she succeeded.

Laura Roberts
***

This is a beautifully written book by a great author I admire. The story is set around the complex nature of relationships. Esther friend Isabella dies of cancer it is devastating for her. Then as time passes she meets Isabella's sister Sally who apparently cared for her sister during her end of life episode.

This is all about life and how time moves on with memories, life and regrets focusing on the characters. Recommended summer read for the sun bed - I loved it.

Jane Brown
*****

The blurb for this novel immediately attracted me – a main character, Esther, who, on the face of it, is a strong, successful and independent woman. She has nevertheless been through difficult times – most notably the death of her best friend Isabella from cancer. However, the novel left me with a sense of disappointment at the end.
First, the good points. Most of the characters are superbly drawn, and I was especially taken with Sally (the late Isabella's younger sister). Having cared for her sister and then her Alzheimer's-stricken mother, Sally has never really had a life of her own. But she is not defeated by any of this and, following the death of her mother, she absolutely blooms and reshapes her life anew. She is a wonderful character.

The novel has the perfect pace, covering a lot of events but never rushing, never dawdling. I very much like Rosie Fiore's voice and style of writing. But the main let-down for me was the central character, Esther. Where Sally has had an almost unimaginably difficult time, she emerges from it with a determination to live her life

to the full, and she goes to it with a courage and vim which Esther could do well to imitate. Instead, I found her irritatingly passive. No matter what happens to her, she just lets it happen. She never takes life by the scruff of the neck as Sally does, nor does she take control of her life. It all just happens to her. I get that this is the central counterpoint between Sally and Esther, but I just didn't feel that Esther acted authentically. I just found myself wanting to shake her! A woman of Esther's age and experience just wouldn't behave in this way, it seems to me. Despite this, I did enjoy the novel. The writing flows beautifully and is very readable. The subtext concerning suicide and assisted suicide is handled sensitively (at least by the author), and Fiore gives us a thoughtful examination of what it means to be a carer. It's just that, for me, the character of Esther struck a false note. But well worth a read, nevertheless.

Katheryn Thomas
***

At the funeral of Isabella, her best friend since childhood, Esther is brought back into contact with Sally, Isabella's younger sister. Sally has been caring for Isabella for the past year during her illness. The title of the novel led me to expect the relationship between the two to start here. However eight years pass and they meet again at the funeral of Isabella and Sally's mother. Esther is shocked at the change in Sally who has also been her mother's carer. Esther herself is now divorced, has a close relationship with her pre teen daughter and is Head of English at a university. Sally is keen to build up a friendship but Esther is not sure. In the year that follows the lives of the two women change significantly.

The novel shows how everyday events such as bereavement; work stress; stroppy teenagers etc can build up to have a dramatic effect on a person's life. This is the strength of the book but also its weakness. At times it seems a bit ordinary, nothing very dramatic happens but then the domino effect of events causes important changes in Esther's life.

I struggled with the book initially as there didn't seem a lot of drama but the slow build up did work and I'm glad I didn't give up on it. Esther isn't always a sympathetic character and Sally is sometimes too good to be true. As for Isabella - well you'll have to read the book to find out why she's significant.

Maddy Broome
***

I received this book through RealReaders to read and review. The opening chapter of this book immediately draws you in and encourages you to read on.

The main character is Ester, an academic with a solid career and home life. Soon the loss of an old friend is brought back to the front of her mind and along with it comes a blossoming relationship with her friends sister - but is all as it seems? Before she knows it life for herself as well as Sally has changed dramatically and in some cases for the better.

This book focuses on loss, friendship and love. The characters were very real and showed real insight into how the world can be. It highlighted that we don't always understand ourselves or others fully, leading to a rocky road that can ultimately destroy relationships.

The unravelling circumstances and relationships kept me reading. I would recommend this book to other readers.

C H
****

nudge www.nudge-book.com
The newbooks magazine for readers and reading groups
LOVE YOUR INDIE A REWARDING READ