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# We are All Completely Beside Ourselves

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Fowler, Karen. *We are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2013.  
Popular Reading, PS3556.O844W4 2013.

“At dinner, I adopted my usual strategy of saying nothing. The spoken word converts individual knowledge into mutual knowledge, and there is no way back once you've gone over that cliff.” – page 126

At five years old, Rosemary Cooke's entire life changed with the disappearance of her sister, Fern. A few years later, Rose experienced the same trauma once more, only this time, her brother, Lowell, disappeared. Rose has spent each subsequent year attempting to compartmentalize the effect that becoming an only child has had on the remaining members of the Cooke family: her father, a psychologist specializing in animal behavior; her mother, so emotionally fragile that no one even mentions the missing siblings; and Rose herself, now a directionless college student at UC-Davis.

Rose begins her story in the middle. While eating lunch in the campus cafeteria, she accidentally ends up involved in a nearby couple's quarrel. This is how she meets Harlow, a drama-loving free spirit who inadvertently forces Rose to begin to acknowledge and perhaps try to understand her past. From the middle of the story, Rose moves to the beginning; flashbacks provide a depiction of her life with Fern and Lowell. At this point, Rose explains that Fern is not her actual sister, but a chimpanzee being raised in the home as part of a psychological study. The end of the story is the end of Rose's own narrative: an explanation of the way her childhood has directly affected the choices she has made as an adult and a report on the fate of the rest of the family, including both Lowell and Fern.

Mixing anger, humor, and sincerity, Rose candidly considers relationships, loss, and the more prominent themes of her life: the similarities and differences between humans and chimps, the treatment of research animals, and the unreliability of memories. But despite Rose's unusual circumstances, *We are all Completely Beside Ourselves* is the story of every family – in Rose's life, readers will find hints of their own familial situation, whether whole, fractured, or in some stage of reconciliation. And when finished, readers will want to further explore and reflect on the many emotional subjects broached therein.