

Lovereadings Reader reviews of Arms Wide Open by Tom Winter

Below are the complete reviews, written by Lovereadings members.

Jade Craddock

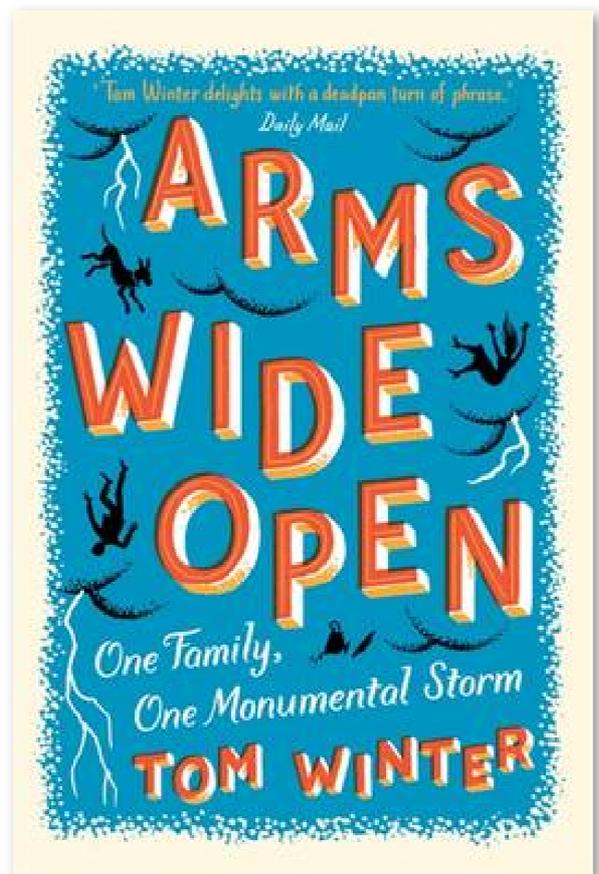
'Arms Wide Open' is the wonderful second novel from Tom Winter, following the lives of Meredith as she comes to term with her husband leaving her; twin brother Jack as he faces up to his own difficult challenges; and Meredith's children, teenager, Jemima who, desperate to be loved, turns to the circumspect world of online dating; and Luke, who struggles at the hands of bullies yet sees things more clearly than most, all set against the backdrop of Meredith and Jack's mother's dementia and the mystery over their father.

This is a powerful and accomplished novel. There were some questioning moments but it's a novel not afraid to tackle difficult and frightening issues.

Incredibly moving, it's about treasuring life and family and making the most of one's time and despite the seriousness and depth of its subject matters, Winter manages some moments of pure joy and humour. Indeed, it's a book of many shades, of which the overriding impression is one summed up perfectly by the ever-perceptive Luke, 'So sad and beautiful.'

Georgia Churchill

'Arms Wide Open' is a very moving and unexpected book. It is not the typical family drama, it has a deeper meaning to it, leaving you on the edge.



Meredith is a mother of two, who also has her un-identical twin Jack to worry about. She is suffering from depression as her marriage has been ripped away from her, leaving an old crumbly expired yoghurt in the fridge to keep this memory alive.

Meredith and Jack's father had died when they were children, well that's what they thought.

While Meredith and Jack are focused on finding out the truth concerning their father, the twins Jemima and Luke are put into darkness. Luke is an eleven year old boy who finds it hard to speak out loud and to express his feelings, due to being bullied at school. On the other hand, Jemima is putting herself out there using dating sites to express herself. In which she becomes an instant hit overnight on this fake profile.

*During all this family drama, Jack and Meredith's mother is suffering from dementia. **This book brings a lot of emotion and will leave you speechless.***

Katie Hoare

'Arms Wide Open' is about a dysfunctional family made up of a twin brother, Jack and sister, Meredith, and her two children, Jemima and Luke. Jack moves in with his sister, after he has found out that he is ill, much to the dislike of her two children. Meredith's marriage has failed and her husband has started a relationship with another woman.

Jemima, who the reader finds out is trying to seduce older men on line and trying to dress up like a young woman slightly older than herself, and going to meet these men. Whilst Luke, who gets bullied at school forms an unlikely friendship with his teacher at his school, who is also getting bullied by the children at the school.

Also the family whilst struggling, they end up adopting Reggie, the neighbours' dog who still believes that World War Two is still happening. Even, Reggie has his own problems and ends up with a cone round his head. Amongst all this there is Jack and Meredith's other joint issue - their mother who has dementia and find out that she lied to them about their father, and their quest to find out about the truth about him.

*This book is about the problems faced by a modern, if somewhat, dysfunctional family, and how they struggle to try to find the answers whilst trying to keep a strong family unit. **This is a warm and charming read, with some very***

subtle descriptive humour making an enjoyable read.

You can follow Katie on Twitter: @boggedoff

Suzanne Marsh

Tom Winter is the author of the novel 'Lost & Found' that was published in five languages. To my surprise I found out that Tom Winter actually lives in Berlin. After reading this funny story 'Arms Wide Open' I will just have to read 'Lost & found.'

I truly loved 'Arms Wide Open'. *One thing I noticed straight away is that Tom Winter's novel is full of delightful phrases. Here we read about one family and one monumental storm. The other thing that I loved about this story it is so different from the most serious family drama that I normally read.*

'Arms Wide Open' for me I found from start to finish very funny with moving moments. I am most certain that other readers will see the humorous side of some of this story and feel the moving moments.

Jack and Meredith are non-identical twins. Their father died before they were they were born and they both now have to watch their mother with an early-onset dementia.

Jack's Career has crashed.

Meredith's world is crumbling, the decomposing yogurt in her fridge a symbol of her newly-expired marriage. Her children Jemima and Luke offer little support.

One day, a throwaway comment starts Jack wondering if their father really died.

Jemima is a young teenage girl that everything just horrifies her, just like most other teenage girls. Jemima as a joke pretends that she is Lucy a twenty something blonde on an online dating site. By overnight Lucy becomes an instant hit online. Jemima is a girl that is always ignored by her father.

Luke is an eleven-year old boy who rarely expresses his opinion about anything, just like most young boys.

I highly recommend 'Arms Wide Open' to all readers and book clubs.

Karen

*I hadn't read a Tom Winter book before but **this was a delight to read. It was both poignant and funny and had a cast of wonderful characters that you could identify and engage with.***

Jack and Meredith are twins, both in their early 40's. Meredith's life hasn't turned out as she expected and she seeks solace in plants and gardening. She diligently visits their ailing mother in a nursing home despite the fact that her mother has never shown her any affection, only unkind criticism.

Jack, meanwhile has had a rather charmed life and has the Maserati to prove it. However life has a way of biting you on the backside and eventually the time comes for both Jack and Meredith to confront their past in order to be able to deal with their future.

Jack and Meredith are complete opposites and it's the interaction between them that makes this book so special. Add to the mix Meredith's teenage daughter Jemima – so streetwise in some ways but also so very naïve and who deals with her unhappiness by hiding behind online dating forums; 11 year old Luke, whose unusual behaviour makes him a target for bullies and Edna, the elderly next door neighbour who's still expecting Hitler's bombs to drop and you have a wonderfully dysfunctional family providing the perfect opportunity for some black humour and some very poignant moments. I have to give a mention here to Reggie, Edna's elderly and neglected dog, who stole my heart.

I can't praise this book highly enough, it is a book you simply must read. The writing is taut and clear and not a sentence is wasted. I am now looking forward to reading the author's debut novel 'Lost and Found'.

You can read Karen's blog at: www.myreading-corner.blogspot.co.uk.

Katherine Barber

Enjoyable tale of family and identity.

*This is Tom Winter's second book (the first being 'Lost & Found' which I have not read). The book has a very small cast and focuses on Meredith, her twin brother Jack and Meredith's two children, Jemima and Luke. Each of them is struggling through life for a different reason (from Jemima's fake online dating account to heavier issues), but centres on identity and family. It's both funny and poignant and holds your attention throughout, with strong characterisation. **It isn't the type of book I normally read, but I will seek out his debut novel, as he has a very readable style.***

Jayne Burton

What a wonderful and insightful story about disjointed family life.

*Meredith and her family drift through the book with ease taking us with them and making us a part of their strange, disturbing, funny and often very sad lives. The back and forth in time seamlessly stitch together giving further insight into the characters' background. **It is beautifully written, so much so that I wasn't able to put it down until I had finished, not wanting it to end.** I love the idea of putting the first couple of chapters of his first novel 'Lost and Found' at the end, taking you into yet another world and left wanting more. An excellent read – so glad I chose it.*

Carol Peace

Tom Winter does it again another great book.

The book centres around Meredith who is the mother of Luke and Jemima and also her twin brother Jack. Meredith's husband has left for a younger model and she can't move on. Jemima has many 'boyfriends' over the internet and she has some interesting ideas about how they should show their loyalty. Luke sees himself as a young Damien Hurst and has to hide the dead animals but really can't see the problem with them. Underlying all this it seems the grave Meredith has been putting flowers on for the father who died before she was born may not actually her father and Jack takes it on himself to find their real dad. Throw in the mix the elderly lady next door who thinks the war is still on and you have a great book.

Janet Monks

'Arms Wide Open' has at its heart a family trying to come to terms with life, loss and love. An easy to read, moving yet funny and entertaining tale that as clichéd as it sounds was un-put-downable.

Tom Winter's latest book - I haven't read his first - begins with Meredith staring at a pot of yoghurt. Her husband left over a year ago and not only did he leave Meredith and her two children, hormonal teenager Jemima and Luke her 11-year old brother, but he also left the yoghurt too. Meanwhile, in the City, Meredith's twin brother is struggling with a flailing career as partner in a top advertising firm.

The twin's mother is in a home with dementia, and it is during a visit to his father's grave that Jack hears something which makes him question the fact that his father is dead and that there is a possibility that he may still be alive.

At first I struggled with some of the language, it seemed over-worked and obvious but as I got lost in the book I became engrossed in the lives of the protagonists and the colourful characters who are part of those, from the American exchange student to Reggie the next door neighbour's dog. It is the wise almost all-knowing Luke that really shines, and touches on the core messages. Part mystery, part comedy, but most of all a story about family and what it means to struggle with what life throws your way!

Victoria Emerson

My first Tom Winter novel, I can't wait to read more!

I thoroughly enjoyed reading 'Arms Wide Open' by Tom Winter.

It does deal with the delicate subject matter of dementia but it is very sensitively done. It could very easily be a depressing read but it is not, and in parts I found it to be very funny. I did find the section about the American exchange students to be a little slow, but on the whole it moved along at a good pace. I liked the characters, particularly Meredith's son Luke who was wise beyond his young years.

All in all an excellent read.

Phylippa Smithson

This was such an individual story leaving me feeling personally engaged with the characters and with a smile on my face each page I turned.

'Arms Wide Open' is a brilliant character portrayal of everyday people living an everyday life. It could have been a mystery. It could have been a tragedy. It could have been a poke at the frustration and unfairness of what life dishes out. It could have been a mirror of what we all, at some stage in our lives, have to contend with in some shape or form.

However, Tom Winter conjures up a story that is thriller, tragedy and a reflection of modern life all served up and delivered with the British 'dead-pan' sense of humour at its most powerfully effective best.

The two leading characters are Jack (mid-life man with an apparent preference for partying rather than committing whether it be job, partner or his immediate family) and his twin sister Meredith (recently separated from her science teacher husband and with daughter at the worst age of teenage life and son who is by far not a unusual guy showing a maturity and understanding of human needs way beyond his 11 years).

Jack and Meredith have never known their father having been brought up by a Mother who has, throughout their lives, shown very little interest in being their parent. Through an unremarkable comment, they determine to find out who their real father was, given they had been lead to believe he had died soon after they had been born.

I'll end by saying, read this and you will better understand that we all learn that life it tough but humour will always win the pain of existing.

Cherrill Deans

*It took me a while to settle into this book, as for me it was a seismic shift from my current diet of whodunits. **I was unprepared for a wordsmith! My perseverance paid off when I realised the cleverness in every line; from emotion, sarcasm, wit and humour to droll observances and painful realities.** Words which I initially felt were off the point and distracting, which made it hard to closely follow the story, were in fact the very grist and heart of the work.*

As the author takes us back and forth through time in the lives of the characters, the story of a dysfunctional and emotionally damaged family unfolds. Rogue genes, undiagnosed mental disorders, relationship breakdowns and teenage angst are all in here as a veritable potpourri of the fallout of the stresses of modern life.

One phrase stuck in my mind (from page 240) after Meredith, looking stressed, is asked how she is and replies. "I'm fine, just a little, you know...." Everyone nods in clueless solidarity. Brilliant.

Another gem, on page 222, "drifting past the verbal equivalent of submerged houses and the bloated carcasses of drowned livestock." This is what Meredith is thinking as Chelsea, the American exchange student, talks incessantly.

Really happy that I had the pleasure of reading this book.

Sarah Harper

'Arms Wide Open' is a real gem of a book which makes you want to hug it to your chest and sigh with contentment. I felt as though I was being embraced by Meredith and her family as their lives were woven around me. All aspects of family life, from a distant ex-husband / father, to 15 year old Jemima exploring internet dating; to Jacks crumbling career in advertising were all handled brilliantly and as such were utterly believable. Meredith's addiction to her plants and Reggie's blind devotion added such warmth and comfort to these exceptionally real characters. Tom Winter enables the reader to achieve an intimacy and understanding with them all. He very subtly suggests how our past can shape our future as well as highlighting the importance of the here and now. A humorous, intelligent and insightful tale. I'll definitely be searching for more Tom Winter books in future.

Victoria Whish

A bittersweet, ultimately uplifting read that throws its arms out wide and draws you into the heart of a family grappling with life. Compelling, witty and life-affirming.

A poignant and poetic depiction of a family as dysfunctional as any other, struggling to make sense of their place in the world and what life is all about. Tom Winter's use of language is exquisite and there are so many quotable, pithy extracts I would love to have included in my review but for copyright and brevity!

Meredith and Jack are non-identical twins with a mother being lost to dementia and a father who is presumed dead. Meredith's husband has left her and their two children; Jemima and Luke who all find their own ways of coping with life. Meredith overfills the house with plants, Jemima escapes into a fantasy world of pseudo online dating profiles and Luke collects unusual things in his quest to understand people.

Meanwhile, Jack is experiencing a change that begins to define who he is and who he will become.

Over the course of the book we learn more about Meredith and Jacks' childhood and begin to understand how their upbringing has impacted on their lives and characters.

Like his first novel, 'Lost and Found', Tom Winter makes us care and root for his

characters despite their fallibility and imperfections.

Although the book deals with some quite serious subjects ranging from early-onset dementia to bullying and online safety, it does so with wit, lyricism and hope of redemption.

Throw your arms out wide to this book!

You can follow Vicky on Twitter: @VicKWhish

Judith Curtis

‘Arms Wide Open’ is a brilliant, funny and wise story about love, loss and resilience. Meredith, Jack and Reggie the dog will stay in my mind for a very long time. Highly recommended!

Tom Winter is a master in the art of deadpan humour, using it to maintain a perfect balance between the tragedy and joy of everyday living.

Meredith continues to love her estranged husband Alastair and keeps her arms wide open for inner peace and happiness. Her twin brother Jack, a once highly successful, Maserati driving entrepreneur is going through a “joy recession” as his career nosedives. Jemima is a typical teenage girl, preoccupied with herself, often wearing headphones “negating the need to be mentally present”. Feeling rejected by her father, Jemima searches for love, albeit in the wrong places. Her naivety and obsession with online dating creates a sense of fear and urgency throughout. Luke, her kind, sensitive younger brother is bullied at school and compensates by collecting specimens and taking photos of everything and everyone. Luke’s wisdom – way beyond his years, often speaks the loudest. Uncle Jack is his mentor and lifesaver.

The mystery of Meredith and Jack’s missing father, reportedly dying before their birth, drives the story. “Layers” peeled back gradually reveal more and more about the family in past years, throwing light on current dilemmas.

There are many laugh-out-loud moments but likewise some sincerely profound thoughts about love, loyalty, truth, hope and memory. Written in the present tense the reader is drawn into every part of the action.

This brilliant story will be loved by male and female readers of every age. There are dozens of themes and literary devices to explore and discuss in a reading group or just ponder alone.

Susan Andrews

A dysfunctional family struggling to cope with circumstances beyond their control. A well written book, with sympathetically handled characters.

I loved Tom Winter's first book and was looking forward to reading this, his second book. After 70 pages I was so depressed by this family that if it hadn't been a review copy I would have given up at this point. I'm so glad I didn't.

This is a story of a dysfunctional family; Meredith the mother, whose husband left her months ago but still expecting him to come home. Jack her twin brother, rich but unemployed. Jemima the 15 year old daughter who is going on-line pretending to be 20+. Luke the son bullied on a daily basis at school. There is also the twin's mother and next door neighbour both suffering from dementia.

A series of flash-backs shows the background of Meredith and Jack and you come to know how they got where they are. Their mother was a horror, but as the story unfolds you realise that circumstances made her what she became. I even felt some sympathy for her. They are also searching for the truth concerning their father whom they never knew and were told is dead. In some ways they are all looking for love and in the wrong places.

It is well written, sympathetically handled, with characters struggling with circumstances beyond their control.

You can follow Susan at twitter: @susiesun42

Rachel Hall

'Arms Wide Open' is a wonderful read which continues with all the trademark black humour, irony and wit that the reader came to associate with Tom Winter through his first novel, 'Lost and Found'. It tells the story of two non-identical twins - Meredith and Jack - with a mother in the grip of early-onset dementia, a father who died before they were born and their own individual coping mechanisms for dealing with the difficult upbringing and childhood they have had, and the places they currently find themselves in life. Meredith is a recent divorcee longing for the return of her husband and Jack, a former advertising executive who has lost his creative spark and finds his career washed up.

A passing comment from a stranger at what the twins believe is their father's graveside sets them on a quest as they wonder if he really died and seek to validate to truth. They are also forced to confront the reality of living with a hereditary disease in their bloodline in the form of their mother's early-onset

dementia.

*Throw into the mix of this dysfunctional family two teenage children of Meredith's, Jemima and Luke, an elderly neighbour, an American exchange student and the world of online dating and prepare yourself for one of the wittiest books of this year so far! **I defy you to read this book without a smile frequently appearing on your face!***

*Tom Winter creates characters who you really do care about, a humorous plot and casts everyday life in a way which the reader can identify with. **I look forward to his next book and hope this joyous read finds the audience it so deserves!***

Reba Khatun

'Arms Wide Open' is a gem. Definitely worth reading. Tom Winter has done it again with this beauty of a book. He's turned the simple subjects of everyday life and more into an interesting read.

A really emotional heart-warming story. Meredith's family is dysfunctional to say the least. Her husband left a year ago but she's still under the impression that he'll come back to them. Her son, Luke, although wise beyond his years is the victim of merciless bullying at school. Her daughter Jemima is obsessed with an online dating site. Meredith's mother is in a nursing home due to a condition she may have passed onto Meredith and her twin brother, Jack. Unfortunately Jack is already showing signs of memory loss and confusion at the age of forty. In the middle of all this when Jack is visiting their father's grave he begins to question if he really is dead and if their mother has been lying to them all these years.

Tom Winter has done it again with this beauty of a book. He's turned the simple subjects of everyday life and more into an interesting read. I like how the book has alternate chapters which go backwards in time and explain the reason of the mother's relationship with the twins.

Zarina de Ruiter

'Arms Wide Open' is the story of one family and their many ups and downs as they go about their everyday lives. Meredith has two children, Jemima and Luke, and a twin-brother by the name of Jack. She always felt that her brother was more privileged, but when the twins find out that the father they never knew and assumed to be dead may be alive after all they go on the search for

answer and she finds out that Jack's life isn't as charmed as she thought it was.

While reading the novel I felt particularly invested in the journey of Jemima. Neglected by a mother who is too busy grieving for the loss of her marriage to notice what is going on with her children, Jemima has little interaction with teenagers her own age. Instead she escapes into a virtual world of dating men far too old for her. I was horrified when reading her part of the story, but it also served as a wake-up call to the dangers that lay just around the corner for teenagers in today's digital society.

Despite the many tragedies the characters are faced with, Tom Winter has packed his second novel full with surprising wit and hope too. *Depressing on one page yet humorous on the next, he has created a story which goes from the mundane to the downright bizarre in quick succession. He balances these opposites in a very effective way, creating an engrossing and unique kind one novel. It's a thoughtful read as well - tackling subjects from dementia and complicated family dynamics to rebelling teens and death - which will have the reader thinking about it long after turning the final page.*

You can read Zarina's blog at: <http://www.pagetostagereviews.com>

Michelle Russ

A tale of a dysfunctional family with many skeletons in their closet.

Meredith and Jack are non-identical twins from a dysfunctional family. But hey, what family isn't dysfunctional I hear you ask? Meredith is the single mother of two typical teenagers, whose husband left her for another woman some time ago. She still hangs on to the hope that he will come home to her and fills her time as best she can without ever accepting that he is gone. Meanwhile, her 15 year old daughter has decided to foray into the world of online dating, but thinks it's a great idea to pretend that she's in her twenties when talking to men.

Jack has led a fairly charmed life, with lots of money and a sports car, but unfortunately no job to go with it. Their mother is ill and seemingly ungrateful towards her frequent visitors.

As with any family, things are not quite as they seem and there are quite a number of skeletons in their closet that need to be brought to the fore for anyone to ever understand how they have got to where they are today.

I was a little disappointed with this book to be honest. I had high hopes for this

book after 'Lost and Found' and this one didn't quite hit the mark for me in the same way. I found this story a little depressing and didn't really feel a connection to any of the characters. The writing was of a high quality, and the characters were well thought out, I just couldn't like any of them. Unfortunately, this one didn't quite do it for me, but I think that others will enjoy it.

You can read Michelle's blog at: <http://shelireads.wordpress.com>.

And you can follow her on Twitter: @shelireads

Jillian McFrederick

This engaging novel documents the remnants of a failed marriage and how the past can affect the future. Meredith, the main character whose husband has left her, and her twin brother Jack, whose career along with his health is in decline, confront a mystery which has long eluded them when they discover that their father who they believed dead, may in fact still be alive.

They avoid their own difficult present lives by hunting for their father hopeful of a positive outcome but it leads inevitably to disappointment. Despite this the novel manages to stay upbeat with the themes of betrayal, separation and early onset dementia, being offset by the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity and the importance of family support in times of stress. The two children in the novel add a necessary light relief to the story and their presence gives us hope for the future of the family unit.

The characters are well drawn and the plot moves fast enough to keep us reading. A light read that masks the big themes it contains, it would be a good book for a reading group discussion.

Barbara Gaskell

When I read Tom Winter's previous book 'Lost and Found' I described it "not as a literary classic but as a delightfully engaging Sunday afternoon read". His latest novel continues this feeling and maintains the enjoyable prose. As an example – "look out at the leaden grey sky, a day that might have been beautiful at 40,000 feet but not down here".

As well as the prose I did enjoy the mechanics of the book, slowly going back in time but keeping one foot in the here and now. It showed how our past has a habit of catching us unawares.

There was a lot of resonance for me in the content of Winter's book. As a twin I

liked how Jack and Meredith, estranged at the start but through the twists of life, find their way back to one another – life as a full circle. I did find the story line around Meredith's daughter Jemima to be irritating and I did not feel it necessarily contributed to the overall themes of the book – I did not connect with her and found myself quickly reading these parts – probably the difference in age!

Recommended.

LindyLouMac - www.lindyloumacbookreviews.blogspot.co.uk/

An extremely poignant read with dementia at its heart, dealt with through humour and sensitivity. Written in language that is clear, succinct and so expressive.

In fact this heart moving novel impacted on me so much that when shortly after finishing the novel I came across an initiative called 'Dementia Friends' I was inspired to find out more.

The protagonists of the story are forty three year old non identical twins Jack and Meredith, whose worlds are currently crumbling around them. Meredith is not coping with the break-up of her marriage leaving her to deal alone with teenage offspring. The children Jemima and Luke also have problems undoubtedly not helped by the fact that their father has gone off with another woman. Jemima is playing a dangerous game on-line and her brother is being bullied at school. Unfortunately Meredith is too traumatised to cope with much else apart from diligently visiting her mother in a local nursing home and her father's grave.

It is her twin Jack that shakes up life for them all when he suddenly starts to spend more time with them when his own high flying life style starts to crumble around him. Seeking solace from each other the trauma escalates as they not only discover by chance that the father they thought was dead may not be so. With their mother sinking daily into the ever deeper depths of Dementia they do not stand much chance of finding out the truth from her.

Narrated in the present day interspersed with flashbacks from five to forty-five years the reader gradually gets a fuller picture of the twins life as they grew up. As truths are revealed the twins discover that life is not always as simple as one thinks. I cannot think of anyone I would not recommend this to certainly a good choice for book clubs as so much to discuss.