

LoveReading Reader reviews of The Versions of Us by Laura Barnett

Below are the complete reviews, written by LoveReading members.

Katie Hoare

'The Versions of Us' is about Eva and Jim who meet by a brief encounter as students at Cambridge, when she swerves to miss a dog on her bike. The reader is introduced to three versions of this first meeting, which leads to three different versions of how these two characters futures also interact over the next 56 years, and how through each strain you know that there is a connection between Jim and Eva.

In each of the version there are representations of each Eva's and Jim's expectations, hopes, dreams and aspirations for their career goals of being a writer and an artist, some of which

*succeed and some do not. In conjunction with family life's that do not always go accordingly to plan. The reader grows the developments both of the protagonists, and you are drawn are drawn to each of their families. This book is **a beautifully written debut, written with fluidity and with each version taking its turn, as well as each scenario being treated with empathy and warmth**, the reader feels that they are drawn into the story, wanting to find out what happens to each version.*



Jo Turner

Wow! I've just finished reading this book and can hardly begin to describe how it's made me feel.

The book examines the 'what if', 'road not taken' idea and if one decision made can significantly change or alter the course of a life. The author skilfully shows us three versions of the lives of the two central characters, Eva & Jim, arising from the paths they took after meeting briefly as Cambridge students.

Initially I was concerned I may have trouble following the plot as the chapters skip between versions one, two and three and over the course of a lifetime. It is such a beautifully and carefully crafted novel though that I found I didn't need to refer to the header telling me which version I was reading as the words spoke for themselves. The attention to detail and the wonderfully-formed characters sweep you along. I just wanted to read more and more about Eva & Jim, their lives, families and flaws...their stories tugging at the heartstrings & making me feel that I'd just been caught in a big, emotional whirlwind of my own!

*It made me think about my own life, how much of it is destiny and how many 'what-if' moments have I faced that could have produced different versions. The book raises so many questions. Ultimately, it is **a fantastic read and I can't wait to see what follows from such an amazing debut novel.** I know so many people I will be buying this book for and already want to read it again myself!*

Sophia Ufton

This book is brilliant, three different versions of a man and a women. Amazing!!

Eva and Jim are the couple in the three versions of this story. It starts when Jim is walking alone a lane when a woman approaching him on a bicycle swerves to avoid a dog. The three different versions of this story will take you on a spellbinding journey. These are the choices we make/or don't on a daily basis and the different paths we take, what would happen if we had chosen the other path instead? What if one small decision could change the course of your life forever? What if you had said yes to the boy who offered you a ride home?

Sarah Webb

A great 'what if' story.

Eva and Jim first meet when they are students at Cambridge in the 1950s. At this first meeting, their story branches off into three possible futures. We then catch up with them every few years until the present day, meeting them in the various versions of their lives. Sometimes these meetings happen at the same party, sometimes not, but we're always struck by how different their lives are depending on which path they took at their first meeting. It's hard not to mention David Nicholls' "One Day" and the film "Sliding Doors" when talking about this book, but this combines elements of those stories and pushes them further.

As well as David Nicholls, the writing reminded me of Kate Atkinson. The story switches to one of the other versions each chapter, and each time I had to 'get into' which one I was reading again, but this didn't take long and definitely didn't spoil my enjoyment of it.

I really enjoyed spending time with these characters and it was interesting to see how much the same they were in the different circumstances, and sometimes how different they could be too. I know some of the settings (Cambridge and Ely in particular) well and they rang true in their representation in the book.

Sue Broom

Along with intelligent and sophisticated plot construction, I was equally impressed by the quality of her writing - and to think this is a debut novel!

This was a much more emotionally intense and sensitive novel than I had been expecting from the pre-publication blurb. Jim and Eva lead very different lives in the three versions, with varying degrees of success at work and at home, and their relationship evolves in three utterly different ways. Some of the other characters are specific to each version, but many (family and lifelong friends) are the same and the life events that these supporting characters experience feature at the same time in each version. Jim and Eva's emotional responses to them and the direction their lives take as a result depend very much on their own circumstances at that time. The way the author handles these, yet presents Jim and Eva as consistent personalities, is one of the book's greatest strengths to my mind. Along with intelligent and sophisticated plot construction, I was equally impressed by the quality of her writing - and to think this is a debut novel!

This is not a book to dip into - maybe it's just me but I would not recommend starting to read it unless you have time to concentrate - it took me quite some chapters and at first much flicking pages back to remind myself which version was which. A very rewarding read, though, and well worth the initial effort.

Alex Hetherington

The novel is illuminated with a sense of vibrancy I have rarely come across, it has that ability to age and nurture its characters with such boldness.

“What If?” the eternal question we all ponder, and one, which has been, examined in so many different art forms. It returns again with ‘The Versions Of Us’, a tale following Eva and Jim. We meet them when they are nineteen, Jim walking along, Eva on her bike, then a moment, which changes everything. Unlike movies like “Sliding Doors”, we see three eventualities unfold in this remarkable novel.

The novel is illuminated with a sense of vibrancy I have rarely come across, it has that ability to age and nurture its characters with such boldness, and you feel so attached to the intimate encounters and defeats. It's not a book that has you accepting the mistakes, embracing what can come from the ‘what if’ moments, and seeing the consequences of that.

The novel could easily be compared to David Nicholls ‘One Day’ as it starts with two university students and follows their lives, but the thing that this novel elevates is the ‘what ifs’, of a whole life. This novel is able to encompass a world of change and opportunity, really embracing it's ‘what if’ philosophy and stretching it to new ends, another alluring quality in the captivating tale. The subtle changes between the three stories is seamless, something I was at first daunted by. You were always willing to embrace each eventuality and accept its outcomes. A version of life all readers will be longing for this summer from a debut novelist who has us gagging for ‘what's next?’

<http://boyletstalkaboutbooks281.blogspot.co.uk/2015/04/the-versions-of-us-review-by-laura.html>

Maureen Evans

Wonderful concept, elegantly written. The three accounts of possible relationships for a young couple meeting by chance had me enthralled right from the start. This summer's must read!

I am still trying to decide which I enjoyed most of the three varying accounts of Eva and Jim's lives, following their chance meeting in the late 1950s. It is impossible to choose between those brilliantly envisioned by Laura Barnett; or maybe readers would care to imagine a fourth! Each version brought to life so skilfully by the author that I found myself immersed in the lives of these two young people and willing them to make the right decisions, whatever they may be. Most of us will have thought, 'what if...', in regard to the life choices we have made and this wonderful novel enables us to follow their 'what ifs' through the differing destinies of Eva and Jim. Of course, these choices involve others in their lives and, most intriguing for me, were the interactions between the main and other characters, who, in some cases, also became fundamental to the individual stories. Highly recommended as this summer's must read, do buy this novel as I'm sure you will enjoy it as much as I have!

Katy Noyes

Three lives lived from one moment in time, swerving (or not) to avoid a dog in the road. Students Eva and Jim are the leads in this parallel life novel that has heart, pathos and love at its core.

Eva is at Cambridge, Jim a fellow student who comes to her aid... or doesn't. The three realities split instantly and dramatically:

- Eva immediately splits up with her boyfriend, becomes happy and loving wife to Jim.*
- Eva doesn't meet Jim and stays with her current boyfriend, the talented but arrogant actor David.*
- Eva falls for Jim but remains, with regrets, with David.*

Each story follows Eva in her relationships, career paths and families from student years through jobs, houses, marriages, children (of which there were too many names to remember!), into the old age that whatever version of life we follow, inevitably awaits us. Each story proves a point - that life isn't simply a straight path. That connections are made, that nothing is inevitable. That things fail, or change.

I found the idea utterly fascinating. None of the timelines follows a simple path of 'happily ever after', and events in each, while often similar, take wildly different routes. Characters that are in the foreground in some versions are merely background in others.

It's comforting in some ways, achingly sad at times, uplifting at others. I really admired the perspective the author gives us - Eva is our constant, around whom Jim hovers in each version. In one, they are partners from the start, in another they find each other much later in life, and all possible pairings are played out in lives that ache of the everyday life the reader lives.

Very clever, readable (with minor character confusion to contend with) and original, this would be an ideal reading group novel, and one for those who like something deep to get their teeth into.

Phylippa Smithson

Oh dear. We all do have those 'what if' moments, so this was a book that really took my eye. I just did not find it captured my interest.

Brilliant idea to take the theme of 'what if', apply it to the same core people and explore what impact three different scenarios would have on those people. The lead people are Jim and Eva who meet after she has a minor accident on her bike when cycling to meet her Cambridge Uni lecturer in 1958. That incident is explored following three different 'versions' of the same people's lives right up until 2014.

But oh how hard it was to engage with the style of writing. I do not like short stories at the best of times, and whilst this was really only three stories in one, each was explored by applying version one to one chapter, version two to the next chapter and version three to the third. It would then start recycling again. Way too bitty, disrupting the flow and extremely difficult to re-engage with each different story after each break.

Sorry Laura Barnett but I have to admit, this one beat me.

Ruth Carson

*'The Versions of Us' is a novel which imagines three different ways the central characters, Eva and Jim, could have taken in their lives. I felt the book took a bit of getting into but I was glad I persisted with it, **it is probably the best novel I have read so far this year and I would highly recommend it.***

Linda Birt

An extremely thought provoking debut novel. Where fate, has us questioning the choices we make in a lives. The moments that change everything forever the

'What If'.

Jim is walking along in Cambridge in 1958, Eva is cycling towards him she swerves to avoid a dog.

Fate has stepped in, three very different versions of their lives begin. Three love stories that are no means perfect, we share love, heartbreak and death. In all three versions life is never perfect for Jim or Eva.

I highly recommend this book, Laura Barnett has us considering our own lives and 'What ifs'.

Lynne Morgan

A most unusual book, it's like reading three stories in one!

The stories are about Eva and Jim, students who first meet at Cambridge in 1958. Each story is a different version of their lives, together and apart, how things might have been had they just made a different choice on a different occasion. Laura Barnett very cleverly weaves these three versions together into one book, it's so well done and I could not put the book down until I had read all three versions and their different conclusions.

Each of the stories is complete in itself, and I was equally immersed in all three versions, enjoying each one individually as well as being aware of how their different choices had changed their lives dramatically.

It's all about how the different decisions and choices we make in our lives daily – even very small ones, can change the course of our lives and futures so dramatically, forever. This book asks “what if?” and the reader inevitably poses the same question of their own lives too. Does fate really exist, is it just accidental that we are where we are today, or is our ultimate destination in life something we can manipulate by making different choices?

Laura Barnett poses a very interesting question for us all in this book, which will make you think about where you would be now, had you just done things a little differently, or simply made a different choice.

This book is an excellent read, and I look forward to reading more thought provoking work from Laura Barnett in the future.

Sarah Harper

Heartbreaking and beautiful, this is a love story which will make you laugh, cry and seriously consider the 'what if?' moments in your own life.

A stunning book. 'The Versions of Us' is an expertly crafted tale. It tackles the 'what if?' question in a very clever way. What if, at their chance meeting in 1958, Eva had said yes to a drink with Jim? What if she had declined and walked away or what if he hadn't even asked her? It's a very thought provoking book. We never really know how our own lives would have changed if we had made a different choice at a key point in our lives, we can only surmise what might have happened and how events might have played out. The Versions of Us allows the reader to explore the possibilities for Eva and Jim as we follow the different paths of their lives.

Despite my original concerns, the book really wasn't difficult to follow and I think that this is primarily due to the excellent quality of the storytelling and the strength and depth of the characters. The stories span 60 years and each era is as believable as the next. The different threads of the story diverge as they would in real life but are very cleverly linked back together by key events in their lives, critical occurrences which can't be avoided or changed. So similar and yet so different, none of the paths are perfect, there is no fairytale choice which would have worked for everyone, but that's life and it helped to make the book more realistic. It really is brilliantly composed.

Angela O'Donovan

Great storyline/s - we all make choices which direct our paths in life. Sometimes, we can't help look back and think 'what if..? This novel explores that idea with a cast of characters...

I knew I wanted to read this book as soon as I read the gist - it's not giving much away to say it explores three different paths from the same moment on one particular day - mainly in the lives of two people but also involving others - in the supporting cast, you could say.

It would be oversimplifying it to say it is drawn on the element of 'head over heart' or 'heart over head' as there are circumstances too.

It was very well written and I enjoyed it very much. However, if I read it again, I would approach it differently. The novel is told in an order that confused me to start with - until I was fully immersed I kept checking back on the version, but that's probably just me! After the prologue, the chapters are headed 'Version

One', 'Version Two' and so on, and in chronological order, ie. three versions at one time, next stage three versions, etc

Anyway, if revisiting, I would read through Version one entirely and go back to read the others individually too. Personally, I found it hard to empathise much or get to know the characters because of the alternating storylines which reflected earlier choices. Perhaps longer timelines in each and fewer changes would have engaged me more.

That said, I would recommend this very well thought out read.

Stephanie Harding

I was expecting this to be a cross between 'Sliding Doors' and 'Life after Life' but it was like neither. The story was told in 3 different versions as in 3 different paths that the main characters chose. Initially, it was a bit confusing as to which version you were reading at that time (even though the chapters did specify which version it was) but after a while I got used to this. The idea is that we all have crossroads we reach in life where, the choices we make can lead us down very different roads and change the course of ours and others lives. The 3 different versions happen at the same time in the book so the differences between them are illustrated clearly.

*The characters were well drawn and likeable, easy to identify with and, although the story seemed a bit slow to really get immersed in, it's well worth sticking with. **The ending was poignant and beautifully written, I thought. A very enjoyable read and I would look out for this Author again.***

Val Brown

Fascinating debut novel from Laura Barnett, three versions of the lives of Eva and Jim, complex and intriguing.

This book give you three versions of the lives of two people, Eva and Jim. As we follow their life stories we learn of all the different choices they make.

*Marriages and children are different in each version. The book is really well written, the only problem is keeping track of all the people in the different versions. The book obviously compares to Kate Atkinson's Life after Life and also the film Sliding Doors. **A really satisfying read, I almost didn't want it to end.***

