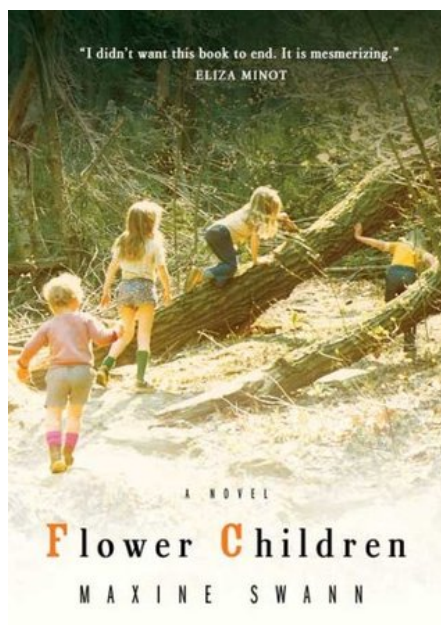




Flower Children

Maxine Swann

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From an award-winning writer: an elegant, lively, moving novel that portrays the strangely celebrated and unsupervised childhood of four hippie offspring in the seventies and eighties.

When *Flower Children's* first chapter was published as a short story in 1997, it announced the arrival of a new literary voice: it won every literary prize applicable (the Ploughshares' Cohen Award, the O. Henry Award, and the Pushcart Prize) and was included in the 1998 *Best American Short Stories*. Now, Maxine Swann expands and continues that story, bringing its four sibling characters through to the other end of childhood, in a much-anticipated book that only Swann could write.

Based on the author's own family, *Flower Children* is the amusing, moving, beautifully painted story of four children growing up in rural Pennsylvania, the offspring of devoutly hippie parents. Impossibly at odds with their surroundings, the children find themselves both delighted and unnerved by a life without limits. A swing hangs in the middle of the living room. The children run free all day, dance naked in the rain, and go riding on ponies with the boys who live up the road. But as their childhood is celebrated, the freedoms their parents have given them have also compromised their innocence. In time, their world starts to collapse. The parents split. Puberty hits. The children are mortified by what they know and have seen. They long for structure, normalcy, restraint: the very things their parents have avoided.

Haunting and celebratory by turns, *Flower Children* is at once a portrait of childhood's unbridled joy and the story of a unique generation. Ann Patchett recently selected another excerpt of the novel to appear in the 2006 *Best American Short Stories*.

Flower Children Details

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Author : Maxine Swann

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From Reader Review Flower Children for online ebook

Lauren says

I highly recommend Maxine Swann's Flower Children. It's a very quick read - less a novel than interlocking short stories about children raised by hippie parents. The narrative voice ranges from chapter to chapter - from the plural (we) to a third person narrator to the voice of one of the daughters, and though this kind of transition usually bugs me, it works here.

The book follows the children through adolescence - each chapter lights on an event or a significant moment. Swann has an elegant spare style that works beautifully in the first and concluding chapters that focus on the children and the landscape surrounding their home, but as she expands her vision to include other family members in the story, she is less successful at capturing that sense of the significant moment or important transition. Still, her failures are noble ones. I really admired the way she captured the way images of our younger selves erupt through the gaps of our memories like mountains in a mist.

What I liked best is there is no sense of passing judgement on any character - a lesser sensibility would have made a 'look how my hippie parents neglected me and fucked me up' kind of book. The character of the father, esp, who really is a mess and declines as the story progresses, is drawn humourously and sympathetically.

Shelly says

I was expecting something different from this novel. It's really more a collection of short stories about a group of siblings who have a bit of freedom to explore and live in a rural area, but that's true of many children who wouldn't be called flower children. Apparently the first chapter or story was published on its own. If the rest of the book had been more like that chapter (and the last, both of which I liked the most), I probably would have given this book 4 or 5 stars. It was good, for what it was.

It is a middle of the road book that'd give a report card grade of a solid B. It wasn't great, but it was a nice short, casual read. The ending (or last chapter/story) was quite good and it's often how I feel about the book when finishing that really sets the tone for how I end up feeling about it over all. So, I was left with a dreamy sort of feeling that made me think of my own childhood, which was quite different than that of the children in the book, though I too was given a bit of freedom to roam.

Beth says

I was intrigued by the cover of this book. I grew up during the same era, and the picture of the children playing (in 70's attire) took me back to my childhood. This is a fictionalized account of Swann's childhood growing up with two Harvard-educated hippies as parents. She and her siblings had no discipline, no rules. Their parents grew pot underneath the kitchen sink. A swing hung from the ceiling.

The story follows the four children from early childhood through the middle school years as they begin to come of age. Their parents divorce, subsequent lovers, and visits to their wealthy (and very different) grandparents' homes all add to the children's view of the world and their view of their parents as well.

I enjoyed this book. However, the switching back and forth between first and third person points of view was

distracting. I'd love to know what became of the children and their parents in later years. (You know it's a good story when you are left wondering what happened later.)

Pamela says

Coming of age of four children from a "hippie" family, In this case, I think "hippie" is code for "dysfunctional." Not particularly compelling, except for a beautiful final chapter about the process of growing up, universally experienced.

Catherine says

I found this odd little book while wandering the fiction stacks. Written very simply and often in 1st person plural POV, it's a novel based on the author's childhood. So, it's basically a memoir, but I'm assuming she took some poetic license with events and changed all the names. For instance, some of the chapters are written in 1st person singular from the perspective of "Maeve," which I'm assuming is a substitution for Maxine.

In the beginning, the children live a carefree life with their blueblood-turned-hippie parents, but as they get older, they begin to realize that their parents are odd and try to fit in as they start school. Then their father moves to "the city" and their parents eventually divorce and eclectic boyfriends and girlfriends parade through their lives. Their father is a little unhinged, their mother is a bit spacey, and you can't help but feel sorry for these kids who are basically left to figure everything out on their own. It's all a little monotonous, though, and the chapters feel like each was written separately, because there are overlaps and jumps that don't always make sense. (In one chapter, the children scare off their father's girlfriend, then in the next chapter she's back without any explanation. And she's referred to later as if she hadn't already been a prominent character.)

My favorite chapters were in the middle of the book when the children visit their grandparents on both sides of the family. Those two chapters have a very Wes Anderson vibe -- from their paternal grandparents who live in a kind of eccentric squalor with various random people all living in the estate, but none really making money -- to their maternal grandmother who still observes cocktail hour and hopes that someday her daughter will marry a more suitable (read: rich & conventional) man.

Overall: a quirky, quick read, suitable for summer reading.

Alexandra says

i read this back when it first came out and for the longest time recently i'd been trying to figure out what the title was. i only remembered a few little snippets and it took nearly a year to figure out that it was this one that i was thinking of.

i really loved it. it's about the mysteries of childhood, and growing up with hippies for parents in a time when it wasn't "cool" anymore. lu, maeve, tuck and clyde live primarily with their mother in rural pennsylvania in a house with four stories and dirt floors and a swing in the middle of the living room. their parents split when they were all pretty young and they sometimes go and stay with their dad in washington, d.c.

their dad, sam, is extremely unconventional, even for a hippy. he's a little lost, a little broken, he misses their mom a lot and he always talks about the most inappropriate things with the children.

both their mom and dad date a lot of other lost souls and the kids kind of learn how to be quiet and take everything in, and in a lot of ways end up being smarter than their parents.

i loved the rural atmosphere, and the descriptions of the creek and the pastures with the ponies and goats and all the beautiful plants. i loved how much time the kids spent outside, exploring and playing with their friends.

and the ending was very beautiful, and i feel that anyone who feels nostalgia for their childhood will certainly appreciate it. ♥

basically, all four of the kids go back to their childhood home and discover places they never knew existed, and rediscover places they knew and loved. it was just gorgeous.

Katy says

I read a review of this book in the NY Times and thought "oh boy! the kind of book I like about funny, quirky families!" No. It turned out to be about a weird, not at all funny family. It's based on the author's experience growing up, and sheesh, I'm glad I'm not her. It's short, so I made myself finish it in hopes that it would grow on me, but alas, I disliked it to the last word. And speaking of words...no offense to the author, but yeeks the writing was bad. Like the paper I wrote the morning it was due for my eight grade science class bad.

Beth Maddaus says

This book was probably the worst book that I've read in years. I bought it after reading a New York Times article about Argentina by Maxine Swan and thought that because I enjoyed the article, her writing might appeal to me. It didn't. Don't waste your money or time on this one.

Adele says

I got the creepiest sense of deja vu when reading a particular chapter of this book, before I realized I'd read the section before, in the 2006 edition of Best American Short Stories. This book is little, and I read it over the course of two days, which can be very nice once in a while. It's about a family of four children, two boys and two girls growing up hippie style in the hills of Pennsylvania. I really like Swann's style of prose, which is that of a preternaturally wise child. Her descriptions of physical places are gauzy and dreamlike without being overdone or boring. She also nails the high points and pitfalls of children growing up in a radical free-love post sixties family.

AP says

Some of Swann's writing is really beautiful, but some of it seems deliberately quaint or opaque. I bought the book very excitedly and even gave a copy as a gift, because I read the short story "Flower Children" that starts the "novel in stories" (what is that?) in 1997 and was still thinking about it 10 years later. I think that "FC" is the best story in the book, and part of what contributes to the weakness of the other stories is the extent to which the seem drawn out of FC, attempts to fill up a marketable book drawn from the successful whimsy of the title story. Some of her language is beautiful, though.

Sarah says

Here's a pet peeve I have about books: when bland, sparse writing is misinterpreted by reviewers as "lucid and touching" or "stunning and wistful." I think simple, bare-bones writing can be absolutely beautiful and moving - let's think about Annie Dillard or Ernest Hemingway - but I also think that minimalism is an easy trick some writers use to make us think that they've put a lot of work into something. Sure, Annie Dillard tends to write thin, spare books, but she puts love into each and every sentence and you can feel that. There's a lot of work hidden backstage. It kills me to read it, every word is so carefully and well chosen.

It also killed my to read Flower Children by Maxine Swann, but in the bad way. The novel - which is a series of connected short stories about four children growing up with hippie parents - has the appearance of being one of those sparsely beautiful books that read like long poems (which is why I checked it out of the library). It is small and short with big print and lots of white space. But. The writing just isn't there. Here's an excerpt, describing the school one of the girls attended:

"Our school was a low brick building with a flag out front and a playground behind. In the halls there was a yellowish light. From the classroom, you could look out and see the cars in the parking lot or a wavering patch of grass... The dining hall was furnished with linoleum tables with similar benches attached. We had hot meals on trays with depressed surfaces in them, each to hold a portion of something. The women who worked in the dining hall wore nets over their hair."

Yes, the language and sentence structures are simple and clean. But it isn't saying anything interesting. In fact, it's about the most bland, generic description of a school I can think of. It doesn't read like "touching prose," it reads like she wrote the first thing she thought of. Now imagine two hundred pages of that. None of it made me feel anything - the book failed the gut-check.

Kate says

I really enjoyed the descriptive writing. I was disappointed by the plot which never really went anywhere. It starts out with a wonderful description of little hippie children running around in a natural setting with no rules. As they grew up, the plot never really took them through any transformations. A fast enjoyable read none-the-less.

Jill Christie says

Thanks to Betsy and Heather, I picked this book for my Book Club. Overall consensus was that it was enjoyable, but should have been a short story. I thought it was well written and provided an entertaining glimpse into the strange lives of the hippy culture. The last chapter, when Maeve and her siblings returned to their childhood home as adults, was so beautifully written and poignant. I was only sorry I wasn't reading it in the privacy of my own home; lots of tears amongst strangers in the waiting room of my daughter's ballet studio...

Maia says

I've just gotten 5 big boxes of books from the old house and it's thrilling to discover so many of the ones I loved reading then--but *Flower Children* just isn't one of them. I remember I received it as a pre pub from friends in publishing, and I'd tried to feel the writing without impact from the hype around it, but it was near impossible. Maxine Swann is actually a pretty good writer and her other book, *Serious Girls*, struck me as better than this one, but overall the problem here is that to me she's not a) as good a writer as she believes herself and is hyped up to be and b) maybe because the expectation is higher than the talent, a lot of the writing goes flat. The idea behind the writing--kids brought up by narcissistic, blind hippie parents--is actually far more interesting than anything OF interest that her writing has to say on the subject, and that's where the entire enterprise seems doomed.

I always had--and still have--the feeling that reviewers find Swann's background and life story (plus the fact that she's pretty and photographs well) so fascinating that they either overlook a sort of basic mediocrity or simply take less for more from it. On her mother's side, Maxine Swann comes from a certain kind of 'high' NY family residing like people in an Edith Wharton novel (they probably did, way back then, anyway) but her mother, typically baby boomer, rebelled and ran off to be a hippie, with enough obsession to continue hippiedom even after it's sell-by date. This is the context for Swann's childhood, later on even more individualized by fancy prep schools and fancy ivy league colleges, plus years in Paris, married to an Argentine and now even an expat in Buenos Aires. It all makes for wonderful copy--how disappointing, then, that at times this is all it is, really: smart copy.

Jenifer says

I was looking so forward to reading this book but it was a major letdown. I wanted to feel the hippie spirit when I read this book and really escape to a this simple time where free love and open thinking ruled a family. Instead, I was met with a rather boring tale of a sister relating snippets of her childhood that didn't seem too far from normal. There was little hippie behavior actually described in the story. The Dad farts in the car and that is supposed to represent the life of a bohemian? Wow! Real crazy! It only took me a day to read so at least I didn't invest too much time on it. I felt like the story never really began. It was like the whole book was just a synopsis.
