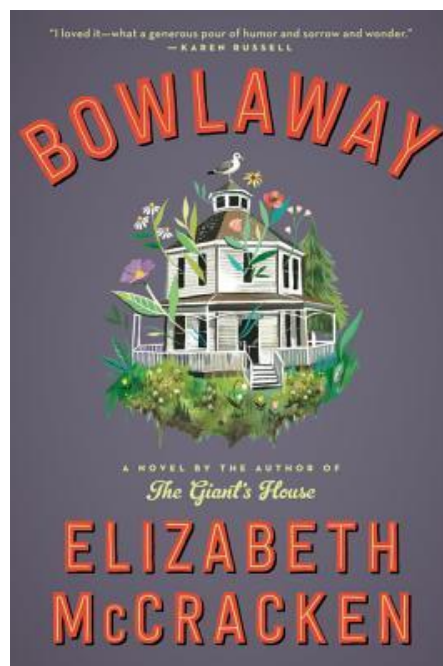




Bowlaway

Elizabeth McCracken

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A sweeping and enchanting new novel from the widely beloved, award-winning author Elizabeth McCracken about three generations of an unconventional New England family who own and operate a candlepin bowling alley

From the day she is discovered unconscious in a New England cemetery at the turn of the twentieth century—nothing but a bowling ball, a candlepin, and fifteen pounds of gold on her person—Bertha Truitt is an enigma to everyone in Salford, Massachusetts. She has no past to speak of, or at least none she is willing to reveal, and her mysterious origin scandalizes and intrigues the townspeople, as does her choice to marry and start a family with Leviticus Sprague, the doctor who revived her. But Bertha is plucky, tenacious, and entrepreneurial, and the bowling alley she opens quickly becomes Salford's most defining landmark—with Bertha its most notable resident.

When Bertha dies in a freak accident, her past resurfaces in the form of a heretofore-unheard-of son, who arrives in Salford claiming he is heir apparent to Truitt Alleys. Soon it becomes clear that, even in her death, Bertha's defining spirit and the implications of her obfuscations live on, infecting and affecting future generations through inheritance battles, murky paternities, and hidden wills.

In a voice laced with insight and her signature sharp humor, Elizabeth McCracken has written an epic family saga set against the backdrop of twentieth-century America. *Bowlaway* is both a stunning feat of language and a brilliant unraveling of a family's myths and secrets, its passions and betrayals, and the ties that bind and the rifts that divide.

Bowlaway Details

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Author : Elizabeth McCracken

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From Reader Review Bowlaway for online ebook

Ericka Seidemann says

Spoon River Anthology meets *Cold Comfort Farm* in this quirky story of a family-owned candlepin bowling alley that spans generations. There is a whisper of magical realism with a hefty dose of down-to-earth wisdom.

At the turn of the 20th century, Bertha Truitt, described as matronly and jowly, wearing a split skirt, is found lying face down in the local cemetery. She sits up and explains that she's the inventor of candlepin bowling. The townspeople are perplexed and mesmerized by Bertha Truitt and are delighted with her candlepin bowling alley, where they can bowl away their problems. Even women are encouraged to go, and it becomes a place of camaraderie.

Bowlaway follows Bertha Truitt and her husband, Dr. Sprague, and all their descendants in this small town in Massachusetts. Every character under the spell of Truitt's Alley has their own demons, their own agendas, their own desires. As the years pass, the bowling alley must change with the times as well as the aims of those who run it and those whose souls are captivated by the candlepins. *Bowlaway* has many stories of love and loss, and is handled with tenderness.

McCracken's writing is sharp and full of joie de vivre. I had to get out my tape flags to mark pages several times because her wordsmithing was so intelligent. It's getting a special place on my shelf because I know I'll smile every time I see it.

Many thanks to HarperCollins for an advance copy in exchange for my review. It was a privilege to read.

Constance says

A sprawling delight. Like reading John Irving circa *Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*, but written by a woman.

Kyra Leseberg (Roots & Reads) says

Book buzz spread like fire when the release of *Bowlaway* was announced. I hate to admit that I hadn't read a single word from Elizabeth McCracken before but appreciated the fervor readers have for the author.

Bowlaway certainly pulled me in with this first line:

"They found a body in the Salford Cemetery, but aboveground and alive."

And so begins a sweeping family saga full of quirky characters.

We are introduced to Bertha Truitt, the mysterious woman found in the cemetery with nothing more than a bowling ball, candlepin, and several pounds of gold. Dr. Leviticus Sprague and young Joe Wear are the first people in town to lay eyes on Bertha and it will change their lives forever.

Bertha arrives as if she fell from the sky and everyone is amazed by and strangely drawn to the mysterious

woman who never speaks of her past. She simply appears one day and shakes up the sleepy town of Salford and its people by marrying Dr. Sprague, building a strange octagonal house, and opening a candlepin bowling alley called Truitt Alleys managed by Joe Wear.

Just when I was settling into the odd story of Bertha, she died in a freak (and historically accurate) accident involving a flood of molasses. Her husband Leviticus mourns her death, sending away their teenaged daughter Minna to live with his family in Canada, which causes their longtime housekeeper Margaret to grieve over the loss of the child she helped to raise.

Just when I was beginning to shake off the sudden death of Bertha, Leviticus Sprague up and died in a bizarre way.

Enter Nahum Truitt, a man claiming to be the long lost son of Bertha Truitt and rightful heir to Truitt Alleys. He marries Margaret (Bertha and Leviticus's former housekeeper) and together they have two sons, Roy and Archer. Joe Wear disappears, leaving Jephtha Arrison as the only remaining original employee at Truitt Alleys.

Just when I was getting into this story that now had a completely different cast of characters, Nahum disappears and leaves his family to continue running the bowling alley. Roy grows up and sets off on his own but Archer marries a local girl once he returns home from war and together they update Truitt Alleys and rename it Bowlaway.

Years later, through family drama, disasters, and secrets; Bertha Truitt's last will and testament is found and it's the key to (literally) unlocking an old safe in the basement of the bowling alley.

Bowlaway is a look at a small town, a family, and their inheritance. I adore quirky stories but I was bummed that every time I settled into a character's storyline they up and died or disappeared! We are introduced to many people, all connected and centered around the bowling alley, learn the random events of their lives, but I couldn't connect with the story because of how often central characters were pulled in and out.

The writing was surprising and absolutely lovely at times:

"The future is coming. It always is. We have generations to get through first, marriages and divorces and widowhoods and re-marriages, the yoking of families, the unyoking. The disappeared and misattributed. The pathetic life spans of dead children, the greedy awful life spans of the very old

...

You will be born soon. You're promised. What damage you'll do to the family tree is in your hands."

I enjoyed the well crafted descriptions and eccentricity but the abrupt introductions and dismissals of characters left me uninvested in their lives and connections.

If you're a huge fan of multi-generation family sagas and a whole lot of quirk, **Bowlaway** is worth a try!

For more reviews, visit www.rootsandreads.wordpress.com

Louise Miller says

I loved this book a million reasons—the language, the characters, the storytelling, but most of all, for the

way it expresses a love for Massachusetts—the candlepin bowling, the Peggy Lawton cookies, the great molasses flood, the Mary Jane candies—it was like reading a book made straight from my childhood obsessions. A total delight.

Nancy says

As a girl in the 1950s, I grew up watching my grandmother bowl. It came about like this:

The fire department burned down the house across the street from us, an early 19th c house like ours, one built by a founding family in the area. It was scheduled to be demolished and the volunteer fire department decided to burn it as a training exercise.

My parents and I watched from our second-floor windows as the house became enveloped in orange flames that lit our faces, the heat nearly too much to stand. My father recorded it all on the home movie camera, bought at my brother's birth, so I know it was around 1960 when the house was burned down.

In front of our house was the gas station built by my grandfather. What were they thinking of, starting a fire so close to gas pumps?

And on that newly vacated land, a bowling alley was built. My grandmother, who lived with us, joined a league and bowled with her lady friends. I would go with her to watch the games. I remember having to put on special shoes that always smelled funny. I recall the snack bar, the bright lights, the balls rolling back to us, and especially the noise of the balls knocking down the pins.

Once there was another kid at the alley with his grandmother. He talked about baseball the entire time. I don't know why I listened, I had no interest in Little League or baseball--or in even boys.

Reading Elizabeth McCracken's novel Bowlaway brought back those bowling alley memories. But the novel's bowling is of a different sort than the nine pin I grew up watching.

"Our subject is love because our subject is bowling. Candlepin bowling. This is New England, and even the violence is cunning and subtle. It still could kill you. A candlepin ball is small, two and a half pounds, four and a half inches in diameter, a grapefruit, an operable tumor. You heft it in your palm.

Our subject is love. Unrequited love, you might think, the heedless headstrong ball that hurtles nearsighted down the alley to get close before it can pick out which pin it loves the most, the pin it longs to set spinning. Then I love you! Then Blammo."

from Bowlaway by Elizabeth McCracken

There is it! In the first pages of the novel, the theme laid out for the observant reader to see. We become addicted to the very act that knocks us off our pins--Love--which can even kill us. Bowling as metaphor.

I loved this novel for the many lovely tricks of language and quirky descriptions.

"Joe sat down on the bed and pulled the animal close, one of those accordion cats that got longer when you picked it up by the middle." from Bowlaway by Elizabeth McCracken

And how McCracken sums up things that knock you over with unexpected truthfulness--why didn't I think of that? you wonder.

But sorrow doesn't shape your life. It knocks the shape out. from Bowlaway by Elizabeth McCracken

McCracken tells us that this is a story about genealogy. We read about generations of the Truitt family and the people whose lives they touched.

Just before the turn of the century, a century ago, Bertha Truitt is discovered in a cemetery by Joe Wear, an orphan boy who works as a pin setter in a bowling alley. Bertha is attended to by another visitor to the cemetery, Dr. Sprague, an African American doctor with a penchant for deep thought--and drink.

Bertha has arrived with a candlestick bowling ball and pin and a pile of gold. She builds a candlestick bowling alley, hires Joe, and marries the doctor. The local women come to bowl. Bertha builds an octagonal house for her and the doctor and their daughter Minna.

But tragedy strikes (pun intended) in the form of a molasses flood. The doctor sends Minna away to his people and he slowly lets grief consume him. First, he and Joe fashion a Bertha doll with carved candlepin appendages and a stuffed body.

Joe had hoped to inherit the bowling alley, as Bertha once promised. It is assumed that everything goes to Minna, but she never returns. When a Mr. Truitt comes along saying he is Bertha's heir, showing a family bible with the handwritten family births, he takes the alley over, banning females and marrying a local woman. Their children are yoked to the alley unwillingly.

"When he was a young man the mysteries of the world seemed like generosity--you can think anything you want! Now the universe withheld things." from Bowlaway by Elizabeth McCracken

It is a story of revelations, sudden deaths, marriages, love, and how life slams lovers apart. The characters and plot may be Dickensian, but the truths are spot-on. As one character says, "Lady, lady. All sorts of things happen in this world. This is only one of them."

I purchased the book from the publisher.

Donna McCaul Thibodeau says

I didn't finish this, I just didn't like the style of writing.

lisa says

This was an ARC I received from a publisher. I had loved one of Elizabeth McCracken's short story collections (Thunderstruck) so I thought I would enjoy this book. However, it turned into one of those slogs that I ended up forcing myself to power through.

I don't know how to describe this novel because it made no sense to me, but the story mostly revolves around a bowling alley in a small New England town. The bowling alley is founded by the mysterious Bertha Truitt. Eventually it is run by her son, his wife, and various other family members. The plot is so dull I can barely remember it. Characters are mentioned in plotlines that are trickle away, only to be brought back to life a hundred pages later. The language falls over itself with its perceived cleverness. The whole book just drags and drags. Nothing very exciting happens. So much of the story is about characters who are supposed to be

full of mystery, but they are mostly just frustrating, and ridiculous.

I was sick of everything by the end of this book, but I was also extremely disappointed. I loved *Thunderstruck*, and was thrilled when it won literature prizes. I wanted this novel to be great, but it was so terrible I can't see myself recommending it to anyone.

Ron Charles says

Who could walk away from this opening line?

“They found a body in the Salford Cemetery, but aboveground and alive.”

It sounds like the start of some gruesome murder mystery, but then the wackiness worms in: “The gladstone bag beside her contained one abandoned corset, one small bowling ball, one slender candlepin, and, under a false bottom, fifteen pounds of gold.”

Death and life, frosted with macabre comedy: It's why we've enjoyed Elizabeth McCracken since her debut novel, “The Giant's House,” appeared more than 20 years ago. She never promises us freedom from pain, but she always offers just enough heart to endure it.

Her new novel, “*Bowlaway*,” is a rueful family saga that begins at the start of the 20th century and revolves around a bowling alley in the small town of Salford, Mass., north of Boston. “Our subject is love,” the narrator announces, “because our subject is bowling.” But not ordinary love and not ordinary bowling — nothing is ordinary in this story. The people of Salford play candlepin bowling — that smaller, harder version peculiar to New England: “a game of purity for former. . . .

To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

To watch the Totally Hip Video Book Review of this novel, click here:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/...>

Sandra says

2.5 stars. I wanted to like this book. But it was just **too** quirky for me, in a way that made it feel like it was trying to be.

There were moments of real feeling, and where it managed to convey deep unsettling emotions of the realities of life. It had decently portrayed characters. And the story, or the very intertwined stories, was/were overall good.

And yet...there was somehow both too much and too little at the same time. I almost stopped reading several times, and while I'm glad I didn't, I wouldn't say I enjoyed the experience.

Brenda Ayala says

My first novel from McCracken, and probably my last if the others are like this.

“Sprawling” is the best word for this book. It spans like 15 different lives, all stemming from one bowling alley in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. It’s weirdly untethered despite everyone being related in some way to each other, and I found myself getting more and more bored as the book went on.

There just isn’t a point. I’ve had this same reaction to books like this before and had I known that Bowlaway wouldn’t have a point, I wouldn’t have read it. It’s just lots of random occurrences in people’s lives. They don’t grow or reflect or overcome anything. Sure, it’s a nice homage to everyday lives, but why would I want that? If I wanted to read about an everyday life where nothing happens, I’d just go experience my own.

Trish Graboske says

Actually, 2.5, because it isn't often that a novel has an incident of human spontaneous combustion.

Kalen says

**** 1/2

Love, love, love Elizabeth McCracken and have been waiting for this one. Solid read but I wanted more Bertha.

Carol Peters says

Very engaging until the molasses factory explosion, all downhill after that.

Tyler Goodson says

What a big, sprawling novel this is. It reads like an anecdotal history of a bowling alley, and the family who starts it, grows with it, and feels trapped by it. It’s about the farthest branches of a family tree and the stories we tell about them. But the best part is McCracken’s writing—every few pages a line or a passage will sneak up on you and knock your socks off.

Truman32 says

If you like sprawling generation-spanning tales brilliantly written in the vein of John Updike or Lauren Groff, then **Bowlaway** by Elizabeth McCracken is the book for you. However, if you like poorly written tales full of misspellings, irregular capitalization, a meandering plot, and a peculiar fixation on flatulence (all

written in pencil), then I have to say my son Willoughby's report on Fennec foxes that he wrote last year in 2nd grade would be the recommendation to take. McCracken's **Bowlaway** takes place in the world of candlepin bowling in the New England town of Salford, Massachusetts. It starts at the turn of the century when a mysterious woman, Bertha Truitt, is discovered unconscious (maybe napping) in the middle of a cemetery. Willoughby's tale, "Felix the Fennec Fox," takes place in the Sahara of North Africa. Or at least I believe it does. This kid has spelled Sahara with three h's and a backwards r for God's sake and the page is covered in either chocolate stains or maybe the droppings of a bloody nose. Everyone who knows Willoughby knows the boy is mentally unable to stop using his pudgy fingers to excavate crusty booger-lodes from his nasal mineshafts.

The story in **Bowlaway** is odd, serpentine, sad, and funny, populated with many compelling characters. McCracken's writing is a marvel. She uses words like Paula Deen uses a deep fryer. With just 26 letters, McCracken constructs sentences that will wobble your ulnar nerve one moment and then the next completely pulverize your heart like an industrial car crusher. To say she can write is like saying the Fennec fox has sensitive hearing. On the other hand, Willoughby's writing, while informative, is quite possibly one of the hardest undertakings to interpret since Champollion deciphered the Rosetta Stone in 1822. If you can (miraculously) make out the words he is writing, the paths his logic takes often leads to confusion, debatable logic, and even lunacy. God, I really hope you chose **Bowlaway** over my kid's scrawling catastrophe.

Bowlaway will be sure to keep you up reading well into the night (like the nocturnal Fennec foxes) and you will devour the story quicker than a Fennec will devour an appetizing rodent.
