

BOOK REVIEW: The Echoes of Us by Emma Steele

"I never really thought about it before. How brief life is. How it can be there one moment, and gone the next. Over in a flash, I suppose."

What happens when we die? And can we alter an ordained course of events – can we cheat death? Is that what happens when people ‘come back from the brink’?

These are questions that have long fascinated Edinburgh author **Emma Steele**, whose debut novel *The Echoes of Us* is published this week. It's about the lives we choose to lead, our mistakes and misunderstandings along the way, and whether the power of love can ever be strong enough to help us put those right.

Jenn, a doctor, and Robbie, a chef, have lived together in a tenement flat for some time. After the initial euphoria their relationship has gradually started to deteriorate. She's a driven, uptight medic with an overwhelming need to look after everyone and make everything all right. He's a hedonistic guy from a privileged background who lives for the day and parties through the nights. They love one other, but does Robbie love her enough to change his selfish ways? And does she trust him enough to tell him everything?

As the story begins, the couple, newly reconciled after a separation, are driving home through Edinburgh when they jump a light. A truck is bearing down on them. It's approaching the passenger side of their car. Will they die or will they live?

Or will one of them die and one of them live? And can either of them change that?

To find out what happens, and why, Steele takes us back through the years. We see the past through Robbie's eyes. But why is he seeing it? And is he a reliable guide?

It's 1999; Jenn is on the beach with her beloved father and slightly vague mother. They are a happy family.

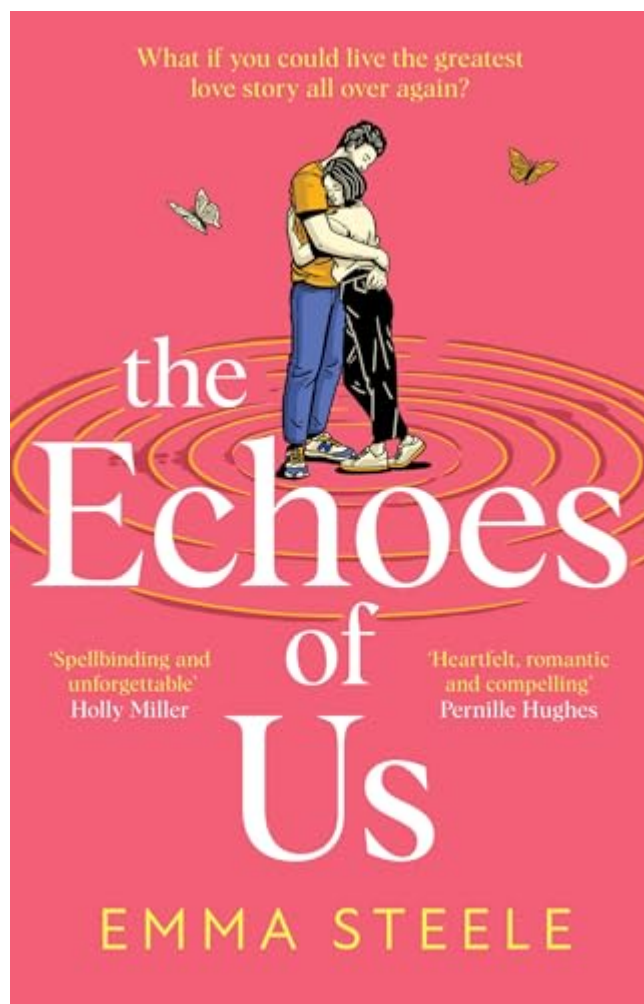
It's 2014; Jenn and Robbie meet for the first time in a seedy Cowgate bar. Robbie's there but he's not there; he sees himself as he was then, but Jenn can't see him as he is now. Is he dreaming? Or is she?

As we move backwards and forwards through the years (this may feel a little confusing at first, but stick with it, it soon makes sense) we observe Jenn and Robbie together and apart. Robbie begins to learn what has made Jenn the complicated, reticent person she is today – and to see what an entitled jerk he has been, from his comfortable childhood to his irresponsible laddish existence – something he's been loath to give up even having met the love of his life. Steele creates a convincing picture of the immature man-boy, the one who wants to care, but only when it suits him, who wants to be loved, but can't resist flirting with other women, and who switches into automatic sulk mode if Jenn won't fit in with his party plans.

In the present moment, Robbie is desperate to save Jenn from the oncoming lorry – but he also really wants to know why she left him so abruptly eight months earlier. And it turns out that her reasons were not all to do with Robbie.

Emma Steele has written a gripping, clever and unusual novel. It's a romance, but it's also a lot more. As she slowly reveals Jenn's story and (but not only) Robbie's part in it, we find ourselves questioning our own version of the past. Do any of us remember things clearly? Can a personal memory ever

be objective, especially when it refers to childhood events about which we were probably ill informed? And can we ever let go of the effects these questionable memories have on us? Are our ideas about ourselves valid – do we ever see ourselves as others see us? For the moment, Robbie is afforded that chance, and he's shocked by what he sees.



Jenn is locked into her certainty that her father deserted the family for a reason, and that that reason can only have been her mother. Her mum must've driven her beloved dad away – why else would he have abandoned her? Why did she end up, still a schoolgirl, having to look after her mum, make sure she ate, keep the pair of them on their tiny budget, avoid going out in case her mum couldn't cope? And why has her mum now taken herself off to Cornwall? Jenn feels deserted over and over again, but it can't be her dad's fault.

Robbie is locked into his own certainty – that he has always

been a great mate (then he is forced to revisit a holiday with his best friend Marty, and face the almost tragic consequences of his own actions), that he's the life and soul of every family party (until he sees how fed up everyone is with his heavy drinking, and how worried his parents are about his behaviour) and that Jenn's taking her exams seriously is just her spoiling his fun;

'(Robbie) looks kind of rough now he's across from me. There are bags under his eyes and his face is a bit bloated, his green t-shirt all creased. I'd been going out a bit more at this point, I guess. But then Jenn was always working or studying for some thing or other. I wasn't just going to sit around by myself in the flat.'

What if both of them were wrong?

Although Robbie is the more obvious villain of this story, *The Echoes of Us* makes it clear that life isn't as simple as that. Yes Robbie is a self-indulgent idiot, but as his long suffering mother says to Jenn, being the youngest child and only boy in the family meant he was spoiled rotten; he grew up thinking the world revolved around him – because it did.

Similarly, although Robbie certainly doesn't treat her well, Jenn doesn't help with her somewhat obsessive, secretive nature. Yes, she's suffering, but she too needs to interrogate her past. We can't let our childhoods, good or bad, become an excuse for everything that comes after.

Steele has also created a cast of interesting secondary characters; Robbie's sister Fi, trying to put a brave face on her crumbling marriage while navigating motherhood and career, Jenn's friend Hilary, desperate to meet Mr Right, Jenn's old boyfriend Duncan, who tries so hard to please her (and I must admit when I read the description of the house he ends up in, I did think I could probably have set aside any scruples about love....but I am old and cynical and should be ignored...) Jenn's

parents are, neither of them, straightforward either – a fact with which Jenn has eventually to come to terms.

As Robbie observes key events from his own life and from Jenn's, he's still in that car, they've still jumped the light ('ambler gambling' being an Edinburgh tradition), that truck is still skidding towards them. Is he going to have the chance to put everything right? Steele keeps us wondering till the very last pages of this moving, thought-provoking novel.

The Echoes of Us is published by Mountain Leopard Press (an imprint of Headline) on 6 June 2024.



Emma Steele. Image (c) Suzanne Black

Emma Steele grew up in Helensburgh, studied law at the

University of Aberdeen, and now lives in Edinburgh with her husband, children and a dog called Sunshine. Read more about her [here](#).