

Beatrix & Fred

EMILY SPURR



About the book

Beatrix is a loner. She has a love-hate relationship with her one friend, Ray, a hate-hate relationship with everyone else in her office and a genuine attachment to a stuffed canary named Horatio. She drinks alone far too much. Lately she's been finding the edge of the railway platform dangerously seductive.

Her life needs to change. Then she crosses paths with an old woman who seems to be stalking her, and that's exactly what happens. Eighty-something Fred is smart, earthy, funny and not the harmless elderly lady she appears to be. She is, in fact, quite literally something else. But *what?*

When something happens to Ray, Fred decides to reveal herself. And Beatrix realises she has some agonising choices to make.

Beatrix & Fred is an off-kilter love story wrapped in a satisfying layer of moral complexity and tied up with a ribbon of sheer fun. Warm, witty, more than slightly weird—it takes the age-old question of what it is to be human beyond humanity itself.

About the author

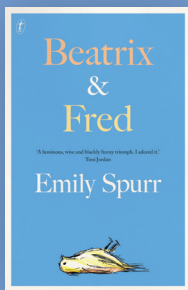
Originally from Tasmania, Emily Spurr lives in Melbourne with her partner, their twins and the ghost of a deaf, geriatric cat.

Emily's first novel *A Million Things* was shortlisted for the prestigious Victorian Premier's Unpublished Manuscript Prize, voted BookBrowse Best Debut Novel of 2021, longlisted for the 2022 Margaret and

Colin Roderick Literary Award and Highly Commended for the 2022 Barbara Jefferis Award. *Beatrix & Fred* is Emily's second novel.

Discussion questions

1. How would you describe *Beatrix & Fred*? Is it a love story? A psychological thriller? A dark dramedy? Or something else?
2. From the start we are aware of Fred's intrigue about Beatrix, her conviction that she is something *else*. Did you find that this mirrored your own feeling about Fred? Did you have an inkling from the start that she was not what she seemed?
3. Beatrix claims that she's not lonely, that she's less lonely on her own than in the company of others. In lieu of friends (other than Ray and until Fred) Beatrix has Horatio. bot explains her affection for the dead canary with the insight that lonely people tend to anthropomorphise. Do you think Beatrix was lonely? Or was there something else at play here?
4. Despite knowing that bot is 'just' a mental health chat bot, Beatrix relates to it almost as if it is another person – perhaps giving it more leeway than she would an actual person. Do you think the nature of AI can make it feel easier to talk to than a real person? Do you think this feeling is unique to Beatrix? Why or why not?
5. When told 'Fred's had a life that makes the NGV beautiful' Beatrix responds that she's never considered how something looks might be changed by who someone



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- is. (p. 197) Do you think who you are, and your life experiences influence how you perceive art, among other things?
6. Fred's clear assessment of who we are comes down to bodies and brains, a feedback loop of experiences and biology. How do you think about who you are? Are you your memories? Your body? Your genetics? If you were transplanted into another's body, would you still be you?
 7. Fred and Beatrix return more than once to the notion of memories as a way of making sense of who somebody is. How much of who you are is because of your memories? How might who you are be affected by having the memories of other people alongside your own?
 8. Fred's gives a shorthand explanation of a theory of her favourite social psychologist, Sheldon Solomon: that humans use self-delusion as a form of terror management, creating our own meaning and realities to protect us from the notion that life is chaotic and we will all die. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?
 9. Fred hopes that she's not immortal (p. 170). Do you think we— creatures who die, in a culture that fears death—idealise immortality? What do you think the reality of immortality might be like?
 10. What is 'human'? Do you believe that the characteristics we think of as 'human' can realistically apply to other species? Why or why not?
 11. An overarching theme of the book is choices, particularly the way Fred's existence forces unwanted choices on Beatrix. What would you have done in her situation? Do you think she made the 'right' choices?
 12. How do you feel about Ray's role in the story and what ultimately happened to him?
 13. The mind-body connection is a recurring theme in the novel, explored through Beatrix's experience with perimenopause and the very nature of Fred. What are your thoughts on the mind-body connection – did *Beatrix & Fred* challenge or confirm your ideas?
 14. What are your thoughts about Beatrix and Hana's future? What do you think lies in store for them? What do you hope lies in store for them?