



So Many Ways to Begin

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In this potent examination of family and memory, Jon McGregor charts one man's voyage of self-discovery. Like Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, *So Many Ways to Begin* is rich in the intimate details that shape a life, the subtle strain that defines human relationships, and the personal history that forms identity.

David Carter, the novel's protagonist, takes a keen interest in history as a boy. Encouraged by his doting Aunt Julia, he begins collecting the things that tell his story: a birth certificate, school report cards, annotated cinema and train tickets. After finishing school, he finds the perfect job for his lifetime obsession as curator at a local history museum. His professional and romantic lives take shape as his beloved aunt and mentor's unravel. Lost in a fog of senility, Julia lets slip a secret about David's family.

Over the course of the next decades, as David and his wife Eleanor live out their lives - struggling through early marriage, professional disappointments, the birth of their daughter, Eleanor's depression, and an affair that ends badly, David attempts to physically piece together his past, finding meaning and connection where he least expects it.

So Many Ways to Begin Details

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From Reader Review So Many Ways to Begin for online ebook

Teresa says

McGregor has a wonderful command of language, turning the most commonplace things into scenes and situations that are lovely and heartbreaking. More than once I almost felt tears coming to my eyes, and not even at times that would be considered dramatic.

Even though you know what is coming at the climax, in the 3rd to last chapter, your heart breaks once again for his characters, who are flawed, struggling, complicated and 'normal.' I think it was because of this chapter that I felt the book should've ended sooner, that the ending was perhaps a few pages too long. There were also a few times I felt that perhaps the story was too familiar, that maybe it had been done already.

At one point I was reminded of Colm Toibin and his Brooklyn but ultimately this book was all Jon McGregor. I still prefer his *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, a book I read twice, something, since childhood, that I rarely do.

The theme of coming at a story in different ways -- so many ways to begin -- is evoked several times, and beautifully done.

Laura says

Six incredible stars. I learned about author Jon McGregor from Katie at Books and Things on YouTube, and once again, her recommendation was perfect. I found this book beautifully structured and written, one of those rare books that grabs you right away, one that you never want to end, yet can't wait to see what happens.

Jon McGregor's first novel, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* was longlisted for the Man Booker, as was this novel, his second. Once you start reading, it will become clear why this is. He has the ability to transform the everyday into something extraordinary with a line or two. His prose is poignant and beautiful. He covers so much ground in this book, addressing themes of marriage, parenthood, mental illness, life stages, family, community, friendship and betrayal.

I hardly ever buy fiction before reading, but I will buy anything this man writes, period. This book moved me and a few scenes in here will stay with me forever. I can't recommend this author or this book highly enough. I hope you will give Jon McGregor's work a try.

Thanks once again to Katie at Books and Things for another wonderful recommendation. She's changed my life since discovering her YouTube channel last summer. She has exquisite taste and boundless enthusiasm, and as a young writer herself, I hope to be buying and enjoying her books someday soon. Please do yourself a favor and check out her YouTube channel. You will be so glad you did! Here is a link:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/thesilve...>

Note on the audio: It was beautifully performed as well. Highly recommended in both audio and book formats.

AmandaLil says

This was a Goodreads giveaway win for me, thank you to the publisher and Goodreads for the opportunity to read and review.

The story of a man who abruptly discovers he was adopted as a baby So Many Ways to Begin was a solid story. I've noticed other readers have complained about the way the story was told, with each chapter title an object from the many items of the narrators life he has collected over the years for his museum. Each chapter is a chapter from his life the he relates after looking at the object and while the book isn't exactly linear I didn't have any trouble following the story. I felt this was the most creative aspect of the book. Overall the writing was solid and the story was good, although I was somewhat annoyed that he was so obsessed with the fact he was adopted. It really seemed to take over the character so that it was hard to focus on him as a person.

Lisa Vegan says

Thanks to Goodreads friend Laura K., I was able to read this book now. She sent me a copy for my own when I found out that I couldn't borrow this book from the library, and so we were able to do a buddy read, and I love doing buddy reads with her.

This is a perfect book for a buddy or group or book club read. It's a great discussion book.

Laura and I read mostly in sync and it was a great experience, and it also helped me read it, though the book was so good I doubt I'd have had any problems reading through it, and I enjoyed reading slowly and savoring it.

Beautifully written and masterfully told the way events and relationships unfolded. There is a wonderful use of chapter titles and use of objects. I appreciated the mostly very short chapters.

My emotions really came out. Much in the book is heartbreakingly sad but I felt a gamut of emotions.

I think this book can be enjoyed by most readers, but it might be of particular interest for those readers on all sides of adoptions: people who've been adopted, adoptive parents, birth parents, siblings and all family members who've experienced the impact of adoption, especially the closed adoptions that were way too common in the past. Also recommended for those who've experienced (personally or in their families) mental health issues and life challenges. This is a great family story and so much over so much time is told in relatively few pages with relatively few words.

The ending/resolution is brilliant, so smart that for me it was breathtaking, and so true to real life; the entire story was. I loved it!

I looked up Fanad and other places in Ireland, places in Scotland, places in England. I wanted to know more and more as I read, not just about the characters and their stories but also about the times and places in which they lived.

Superb book! This is my first book by this author. I want to read his other three already published novels and also maybe his book of short stories, and I hope that he continues to write more books. He has a way of making something special out of the most mundane things in life.

Ian Mapp says

This is literature at its finest.

Its starts with a prologue of 1930s ireland and the rush for work that leave you wondering where the story is going and then an opening line, as good as any ever read about David Carter returning to his wife from her mothers funeral. This works so well - why didnt she go - instant mystery.

David is a curator at Cov Museum and the story is told as he goes through a box of objects that tell the story of his life.

And there are no shocking murders. It seems that Macgregor writes well about the complexities of everyday lives and the ordinary is made fantastic.

In the present, David is married to Eleanor and their story from long distance romance to her mental problems and agrophobia are told in loving detail, maintaining interest throughout.

David's background is also told - from a normal family with a sister and close famiy friend, auntie julia who develops dementia and reveals to him at the age of 22 that he was adopted (well, taken in by his mother, a nurse, in WW2 and bought up as her own without even his father knowing).

This cause a bit of a rift and david sets about tracing his real mother, even going as far as meeting a woman who turns out not to be his mother. This is a theme of the book, lives little disappointments and muddling through.

There is a great bit in the middle of the book and eleanors illness starts creeping in and he nearly starts an affair with a lady from work. This goes as far as him going to her house and being invited in for afternoon nookie. In alternating chapters, it is shown that he didnt go through with it, her husband found out, beat him up in a kind of duel and he didnt tell anyone about it.

Wonderfully upbeat ending as the love between him and his wife is described... after all their little disappointments.

Great book and candidate for book of the year.

Deea says

There are more kinds of books: the ones that you perceive as wonderful, but you struggle to get them finished as they have a really difficult style, the ones that you like for the story, but not so much for the eloquence of their writing, the ones that you like for the eloquence of writing, but not so much for the story, the ones that are great, but which are not very complex, and the ones that once you connect to their story don't cease to impress you. You would say that my list above is not exhaustive and you are right: this is just a subjective categorization. It however serves the point I want to make: **"So Many Ways to Begin"** is a member of the last category: once you get connected to its story, it never stops being amazing, not for a page, not even for a line. Just Like "Stoner" or "The Elegance of the Hedgehog", books that I discovered last year.

The temporal plans in this book are craftily juggled: there are short episodes from the future or present intercalated with the past, but mainly, the author keeps a chronological order. I'm not sure how to explain this, but what he succeeds in doing is magnificent: he can add only a glimpse of an idea that he will have in the future or a memory from the future and then unravel past and present events chronologically until you realize that he is actually explaining how that idea/memory formed over time. He therefore found this unique way to explore the **"so many ways to begin"**: how relationships form over time, how we can lie just because saying the truth is extremely difficult, how we may judge others because we don't understand that we would do the same in their place in the same situation, how abuse in childhood affects us as adults, how when committing adultery, people might do this out of solitude and frustration and helplessness, rather than out of a desire to be treacherous.

There are similarities between the other book by Jon McGregor that I read (**"If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things"**) and this one that I could not help but notice: there is an abusive mother that we are told about (in **INSRT** her actions were not presented in detail, we were only told about one of the characters' difficult relationship with her mother; here however, Eleanor's mother's behavior is presented extensively); David gathers all kinds of objects and exhibits them in the house ever since he was a child and also each chapter of the book centers its story around important objects from David and Eleanor's life which are catalogued in the same way the exhibits in a museum are (while in **INSRT** one of the characters gathers objects belonging to his neighbors and takes snapshots of them in an attempt to take a mental picture of the humans surrounding him).

You get to discover together with David his life story in a similar way in which you discover stories when/after visiting a museum. You see objects, you read their description, their history, their importance in the characters' life, you might even start investigating more and digging for more details. Then, you compile all the stories about the objects you've seen and this helps you scribble a story in your head. It's not a complete one, a story can never touch all the aspects of a real life, but you get a very clear picture of what it must've been like. And this is what Jon McGregor does: he tells us the story of two normal people (just like me, or you or someone we know) who are fragile as only humans can be and he explores where **it all begins** (how they turned to be the people they are, when exactly they began making certain mistakes, what determined them, how they became depressed, what made them happy or unhappy, what was the exact beginning of the outcomes of the present).

"These things, the way they happen. These things, the way they begin." "Isn't it funny to think we almost never met?"

Mary says

Beautifully written but disappointed with the ending!

Dolors says

What does a life amount up to?

A collection of memories, snapshots of hazy moments that pile up at the back of a mind that are fitted into the incomplete puzzle of identity, experience and hopefulness.

David Carter had it all sorted out early in childhood. He would make of his passion for ancient objects his profession, and eventually he would open his own museum. When he meets Eleanor, a Scottish girl with a troubled family history, whom he marries not much later, he envisions his life as a steady progression towards personal and professional fulfillment. But a secret that should have remained a secret is bared in the open air by accident and he sees his past and present crumble down into a puddle of lies and moral dilemmas.

Jon McGregor threads a blunt, unadorned story of an ordinary life that needs to be reconstructed from scratch. Everything that David took for granted; his family heritage, his professional ambitions and his role as husband and father, acquires a new dimension in view of the fortuitous revelation that alters the perception of his life story for good. Small fragments of an alternative past are the foundations of David's quest to find his authentic self: old letters, faded pictures and various mementoes guide him through the bumpy path towards the truth that has been eluding him for half of his life.

What is left of a life after it is spent?

David's conscientious hoard of relics might allow a chain of events to be chronologically reenacted; but do the crucial, life-changing moments ever leave track? Or are they kept silent, buried deep in the dark recesses of our frustration, impotence and grief that we try to disguise with nonchalant indifference?

Like the ceaseless flow of subterranean waters, David will see his life go by without ever being fully in it, his cherished objects crowning every milestone in mute desperation, but his heart lost somewhere in the distant, unalterable past or in an unattainable future. Meanwhile, he doesn't live his present.

In order to breathe again, in order for the stream to come up to the surface and kiss the shore of the parched land that has taken hold of him, David will have to embrace the tangled web of imperfections of those he loves as his own, and accept that the life he was given, the life that we all have, is only one; that family is more than blood ties or genetics, and that home is a stone's throw away, home is within ourselves. There might be many ways to begin, but once you started walking, do not look back, and keep moving on.

Amena says

Oh Jon. You have a way with words that makes my heart ache. Only you could create a story about a vase on a windowsill and weave that into the plot of the book so effortlessly. I love a book about the everyday, the mundane, even more so if it's told with tenderness and this did it for me.

Meet David. As an adult, he finds out something about his life unintentionally, through the words of a friend who accidentally slips it out. He has grown up in post WWII Coventry and the book eases between the past and the present, giving the reader various perspectives from the characters in the novel. As well as learning about the West Midlands (which I found wonderful because it's on my doorstep) I was hit with a jolt so many times in this book that I lost count. I just LOVED it.

The characters are so lost, all on their own search for the connection needed in our day to day to lives. There is so much to like about this book. SO. MUCH.

This is my second McGregor. I completely devoured it. The only thing left now is to buy ALL of his books. I have no doubt they will be worth every penny.

Stef Smulders says

The writing is beautiful but so detailed that the story progresses very very slowly. It also lacks focus meandering from the life of Eleanor, her depressions to that of David. Characteristical is the first piece of part one where David is visting Eleanor's mother, not his own, a thing that had me wondering the whole book and in the end didn't have any significance at all. Interesting writer, but the novel not so.

Katie Lumsden says

This was brilliant and beautiful! The language is incredible and the book is structured like a museum of memory. Another astounding novel from Jon McGregor.

Debnance says

There are so many ways to begin this review, but, then, that's always the hard part, isn't it...beginning.... This is a book I want to shove in the hands of every reader I meet. "Read this one," I might coax cajolingly. "It's good. You'll like it." Like the characters in this book, I have a hard time saying what I want to say. What I really want to say is that McGregor knows how to tell a story, not start to finish, but in little pieces, some from the middle of the story, one or two from near the beginning, and a few from the end. Somehow he manages to connect all the pieces together to make a whole puzzle; it is only when you look at it closely that you realize he has left whole chunks out, but it doesn't matter at all.

What I really want to say is that McGregor is—what—thirty? and yet he gets life, he gets marriage, he gets children, he gets grandchildren even. He sees the big picture in a way that most of us haven't quite gotten at fifty, the sadnesses, the tiny bubbles of complete joy, the deep disappointments, the way we can turn mean, how we can forget with time, how hard it is to tell our stories, how hard it is even to know where to start.

Bruce says

McGregor unfolds his story in a very captivating manner. His protagonist is a museum worker, and personally, a collector of all the bits and pieces of paper that make up a life. His tale is told episodically, with each chapter tied to some of the ephemera that he has collected over the years of his life. Additionally, you have the sense that he is rummaging through a lot of this material, and telling you the story as each bit comes to hand. This results in a novel that is not at all linear.

The writing is compelling, and crisp, and I liked the way the story ended, not too neatly, and in an entirely believable way. I look forward to reading more of his work.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

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Chrissie says

This book deals with a plethora of interesting themes. The first is adoption and what it is that defines a mother and father. Is parenthood defined by blood and genes or is it instead time spent and experiences shared? Should a child be told they are adopted, and if this information is withheld what will be the consequences?

Mental illness is another theme. Can one / should one shove psychological problems and the troubled relationships that result under a mat? What will be the result? Can resolution be attained without discussion? What happens if problems are avoided and it is pretended the problems quite simply do not exist?

The book looks at complicated marital relationships that although based on true love must overcome problems, and isn't that really how most relationships are? How do relationships develop over time, and can resolution be attained without cinematics and melodrama? Troubled relationships is the third central theme.

A fourth theme is how history is best recorded--in objects or through memories and stories? What if memories are distorted, as they most usually are?!

All of the above stated themes are relevant to the book.

The central character, David Carter, is adopted. This is made very clear from the beginning of the book, in how the story is told, in the arrangement of parts and chapters. It is obvious. I would have preferred that this had been revealed later after having been introduced to the characters. David's wife, Elena is depressed. Mental illness lies in the family. Her mother had been placed in an asylum. There is mental illness in David's family too. I am using a wide definition of family! There is the set-up. The central themes are woven into the lives of the characters.

What this book does is observe how the characters deal with these problems. The observations made are meticulously correct and realistically drawn. Often it feels that one is observing through a camera lens. How the characters hold their bodies and how they move is remarkably well detailed. This is an achievement to be acknowledged, but at the same time there is created a distance between the reader and the characters. We observe from the outside. We do not see what is rolling around in the characters' heads. What we observe is the external. The internal is not discussed. The characters tend to run from their problems rather than tackling them or even thinking about them. The adoptee, David, is a museum curator; he sees history in objects and things, less in stories and memories. At the beginning. in the middle and what about at the end?

I am giving my view. Another reader may well have a different view! I felt I never came to understand what caused Elena's family discord, although it was not hard to guess at probable causes. Neither are we told how she came to (view spoiler). This I see as a weakness of the book. I would have preferred to have access to the characters' thoughts and to feel their inner turmoil. A perfect description of external events is not enough for me. This is my prime criticism of the book. The same criticism can be said of David's meeting with his mother, which you know is going to come at the book's end. It is so obvious it cannot be classified as a spoiler. What the book is about is instead how that meting unfolds, not if it will or will not happen.

The telling of the tale does not move forward chronologically. There are many characters and the disjointed telling can be confusing. Each chapter has a title, most often referring to an object that could be found in a museum display, and a date. This could be said to be fitting for a book about a museum curator.

The audiobook is narrated by Matt Bates. It is good. It is easy to follow. The reading fits the tone and style of the writing. It is never emotional; it remains cool and calm and external, just as the writing is.

I have given both the book and the narration three stars. I want to feel more emotion and involvement with a story's characters. I want to get into their heads.

If you have read the author's earlier novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, you will recognize a similar tone and writing style. Both I have given three stars. I have liked both.
