



## Special Exits

*Joyce Farmer*

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Joyce Farmer's memoir chronicles the decline of the author's parents' health, their relationship with one another and with their daughter, and how they cope with the day-to-day emotional fragility of the most taxing time of their lives.

Elderly parents Lars and Rachel, who have enjoyed a long and loving married life together, are rendered in fine, confident pen lines. Set in southern Los Angeles (which makes for a terrifying sequence as blind Rachel and ailing Lars are trapped in their home without power during the 1992 Rodney King riots), backgrounds and props are lovingly detailed: these objects serve as memory triggers for Lars and Rachel, even as they eventually overwhelm them and their home, which the couple is loathe to leave. *Special Exits* is laid out in an eight-panel grid, which creates a leisurely storytelling pace that not only helps to convey the slow, inexorable decline in Lars' and Rachel's health, but perfectly captures the timbre of the exchanges between a long-married couple: the affectionate bickering; their gallows humor; their querulousness as their bodies break down.

Though Lars and Rachel are the protagonists of *Special Exits*, Farmer makes her voice known through creative visual metaphors and in her indictment of the careless treatment of the elderly in nursing homes. *Special Exits* gracefully deals with the hard reality of caring for aging loved ones: those who are or who have been in similar situations might find comfort in it, and those who haven't will find much to admire in the bravery and good humor of Lars and Rachel. Joyce Farmer, best known for co-creating the *Tits 'n Clits* comics anthology in the 1970s, a feminist response to the rampant misogyny in underground comix, spent 11 years crafting *Special Exits*, a graphic memoir in the vein of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* or Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner, and Frank Stack's *Our Cancer Year*, about caring for her dying father and stepmother.

### Special Exits Details

Date : Published September 2010 by Fantagraphics

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Author : Joyce Farmer

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## From Reader Review Special Exits for online ebook

### erigibbi says

Purtroppo Special Exits è un fumetto di cui non sento molto parlare ed è un vero peccato, vi basti sapere che è considerato uno dei titoli fondamentali della storia del fumetto tanto da far parte della 50 Essential Graphic Novels stilata da AbeBooks (mercato online mondiale per il commercio elettronico di libri).

Quella narrata da Joyce Farmer è una storia di decadenza fisica e mentale di due anziani, marito e moglie, prossimi alla fine della loro vita.

È stata dura leggere questo fumetto soprattutto perché sto vivendo sulla mia pelle, con mia nonna materna in particolare, quello vissuto da Lars e Rachel. E per quanto poco Special Exits non fa pensare solo ai propri nonni ma anche ai propri genitori che prima o poi saranno i futuri Lars e Rachel, e a te stessa perché a tua volta tu e il tuo compagno di vita sarete i prossimi Lars e Rachel.

È la vecchiaia, e non ci si può fare nulla, anzi, forse bisogna essere grati di arrivare vivi fino a 80 anni.

Ci si sente impotenti di fronte al decadimento cognitivo ma anche di fronte a quello fisico. Ci si rende conto che i tuoi genitori o i tuoi nonni non si ricordano più che giorno è, che il loro fratello è morto anni prima, che hanno mangiato da dieci minuti, che non mangiano adeguatamente perché se anche gli prepari pranzo e cena poi loro se la dimenticano in frigo. Ci si rende conto che non sono più in grado di alzarsi dal letto, che se provano a stare in piedi senza un sostegno cadono, che non riescono a farsi una doccia o a tagliarsi le unghie dei piedi. Per quanto tu, figlia o nipote, possa pensare a tutto c'è sempre qualcosa che ti sfugge e l'impotenza è uno dei sentimenti più forti che si provano.

Joyce Farmer è stata molto brava: non ci sono sentimentalismi e forzature; quello che lei ha vissuto e ha disegnato e scritto è vero, è dannatamente vero. Sono le peripezie di tutti i giorni, le discussioni di tutti i giorni, le ripetizioni di tutti i giorni da cui non c'è scampo.

È stata una lettura veramente triste e allo stesso tempo consolatoria perché chi legge e sta vivendo una situazione del genere non si sente solo e questo, per quanto mi riguarda, mi ha dato un po' di forza e di conforto.

L'unica cosa negativa di questo fumetto, che è assolutamente un gusto personale, sono i disegni. Lo stile della Farmer non rientra tra i miei preferiti; il problema non è il bianco e nero ma la quantità: troppe tavole in una pagina e troppo piene, troppo ricche di dettagli che più volte mi mandavano in confusione, mi sentivo la testa pesante e trovavo difficile proseguire con la lettura dopo un po'.

A parte questo piccolo dettaglio Special Exits è una storia toccante e vera; un fumetto che ho apprezzato veramente tanto e che vi consiglio spassionatamente.

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### Terry says

I really resisted reading this book for a long time because I thought to myself, "Why do I have to read about this? It's MY LIFE." Heh. Sigh. Sometimes I think the book should be required reading for anyone with, um, parents. At some point we all have to face the fact that no matter what relationship one has with one's parents, at some point they will be old and have serious health issues and make extremely poor decisions

because their thought process is, well, not in the best shape. We all have to face it and figure out a way to live with it, no matter the outcome (you spend your life taking care of your parents, or, you have no relationship at all with your parents--LUCKY \*cough\*--or something in between). The only "down" side to this well-written, thoughtful, honest book is that there is no real resolution... which makes sense, as this is life, not fiction, so one shouldn't expect some kind of epiphany or character arc or, as I said, resolution. It just...is.

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### **Moisés says**

Faltoume unha miga para abandonalo ao pouco de empezar, porque me deixou unha moi mala primeira impresión: pareceume unha sucesión de escenas breves non moi ben fiadas. Esa impresión de desorde, de estrutura vaga, mantívose ata o final, pero a miña cabeza teimuda cambiou de bando. O desleixo non era un defecto senón unha renuncia ao artificio. A historia que conta é a dos últimos anos de vida dunha parella de anciáns, os pais da personaxe que todo parece indicar que é o trasunto da autora. É unha historia contada sen artificios estéticos (nin manierismos nin metáforas) e con total ausencia de épica (vale, só a última páxina, pero facía falta). Algo tan íntimo só se pode contar ben así. En fin: emocionoume e sentín que era un privilexio ler unha historia na que se conta algo tan común como extraordinario no cómic (polo menos no que caeu nas miñas mans): o deterioro físico e mental no tramo final da vida.

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### **Maricruz says**

He confundido a Joyce Brabner con Joyce Farmer. Es el tipo de cosas que me pasan de continuo. De todas maneras, ha sido un error afortunado, porque de otro modo quizás no me habría interesado por este cómic, y al final ha merecido la pena.

Hacía tiempo que no pasaba tan mal rato leyendo una novela gráfica. No malo en el sentido de que sea un bodrio, sino en el de que su tema es duro: el deterioro físico de una pareja de ancianos y la llegada, cada día un poco más cerca, de su muerte. Es una historia muy conmovedora, narrada con unos recursos gráficos un poco monótonos y tirando a pobres, pero que comunica lo que quiere comunicar: morir es un proceso feo y desagradable, y la única dignidad que realmente podemos darle es abordar los cuidados de manera realista, respetuosa y humana. Tal vez esta no sea la intención de la autora, sino mi opinión sobre este tema, quizás ella tan solo quiso contar la historia de sus padres y de cómo los cuidó en sus últimos años. En cualquier caso, lo hace con sensibilidad y sin eufemismos, y ya solo eso hace que las tres estrellas que le iba a poner porque el estilo de dibujo no me convence, las suba a cuatro.

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### **Rachel says**

This excellently written and drawn book is based on the last years of the author's father and stepmother. It shows their gradual decline and need for a lot of care. They managed to stay in their own house (except for the stepmother's last couple of months), though conditions there were not great. Her father managed to die, with dignity and plenty of help and love, in the house.

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## Katie says

I think I'm probably in the wrong audience for this book, as I haven't yet had any experience with declining parents or grandparents, and not really connecting on that level kind of threw off a lot of my potential love for it because there really are some great moments. For me, however, the pages seemed to drag, especially in the art. I realize now that this may have been an intentional play on the state of the characters, but while I was reading this I just kept getting frustrated. It's not horribly drawn at all, but the page layout is the same for nearly every single page, so the pacing reads very monotonously and really kind of boring. I also found my sympathy for the characters wavering throughout the book -- again, probably because I haven't had any experience taking care of aging relatives and also probably because I'm pretty self-centered and kind of callous anyway when it comes to people's complaints, especially if those people are strangers like Lars and Rachel. The ending with Ching was predictable from Laura's first interaction with him.

That said, the characters are realistic and often have moments when even I thought they were endearing and sympathetic. Two stars because it really was okay; it just didn't really reach me.

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## Louise says

I understand that this graphic novel is a portrayal of the author's own story told through Laura in her role as daughter and care giver. Short vignettes chronicle the decline of Lars, her father and Rachel her stepmother.

As it begins, Laura checks in frequently but the need for assistance grows. Eventually there is the need for some temporary live in help (Laura disguises this with a couple who will paint the house) and then to nursing home (for Rachel) and hospice visitors (for Lars). The deaths of Rachel and then Lars are gently portrayed and you see the decisions and grief that follow.

There are familiar themes of the elderly, "I want to stay in my house", "I don't need any help" hoarding and denial. The outside world intrudes as the Rodney King riots rage around their home and an earthquake strikes. Through it all Laura is patient and caring. She makes meals (which her parents don't eat), bathes Rachel and gently introduces diapers. Laura takes a lot in stride.

When Rachel has totally exhausted both husband and daughter there is a nursing home, introduced to her as a temporary stay. The experience is a chain of small and large disasters leading up to Lars' short brush with the medical establishment.

This is a beautifully told portrait of elder care, which even under the best of circumstances (Laura seems to have the time, money and family support) is trying and difficult.

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## Rebecca says

**(3.5)** In terms of subject matter – the physical and mental decline of the artist's parents – this is similar to *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* by Roz Chast, but Farmer's book is more gruelling to read, and I found her drawing style ever so slightly grotesque. This is presented as a memoir even though the names don't match up, so Laura is presumably Joyce's stand-in here. The book is set in 1990s Los Angeles, and for much of its length we're cooped up with Lars, Rachel and their Siamese cat Ching in their crumbling home; only occasionally do outside events like the race riots and an earthquake intrude. Rachel's blindness

and dementia eventually cede to Lars' cancer as Laura's major concern.

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## Lars Guthrie says

I can be forgiven for knowing nothing of Joyce Farmer. Apparently, she did make a mark in the underground commix industry in the 70s when she and Lyn Chevely created 'T\*t\* and Cl\*t\*,' a counterweight to male-dominated, and sexist, product.

Then she more or less disappeared from the scene. Now in her 70s, she has published the painstakingly detailed, and sometimes painfully honest, story of the slow death of her stepmother and father. Farmer was concerned enough about the frank nature of her account that she changed all the names (including her own), but 'Special Exits' is subtitled 'A Graphic Memoir,' and I gather it's pretty much straightforward autobiography.

Aging and dying are not intrinsically attractive themes, but Farmer has superior story-telling skills and kept me interested in the most mundane aspects of the process—cleaning house, buying groceries. She also had me frustrated with our society's weakness in granting dignity to dying. Rest homes and funeral directors don't come off too well here.

What could have been lugubrious is transformed by humor, compassion, and a masterful evocation of the times, not to mention the author's meticulous yet loose drawing style. Farmer's parents lived in a decrepit South Central Los Angeles bungalow with an ornery cat named Ching. Their survival in the midst of their own decaying also involves surviving the riots that followed the Rodney King trial. Farmer's father rises in elation from a hospital bed, tubes stuck in his arms and nose, when the TV news covers a celebrity death. 'Look! I beat out Nixon!'

Indeed, what really rescues Farmer's tale from dreariness is the wit, strength, intelligence and love of her parents, her family and her friends. She finds power in the sometimes overwhelming struggle to just get by, and her 200-page graphic novel closes on a small moment of closure that is immensely touching.

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## Melki says

My 84-year-old friend is quite fond of telling me, "Don't ever get old!" I always respond with, "Okay, but I'm not crazy about the alternative."

This is the moving, true story, told in graphic novel form, of author Joyce Farmer's attempts to care for her elderly father, Lars, and her stepmother, Rachel, during the last few years of their lives. This is truly scary subject matter. Most of us will need to face the problem of aging parents at some time during our lives, if we haven't already. It reminded me so much of my mother's last year of life, before she succumbed to multiple myeloma in 2008. Like her, Lars and Rachel denied the obvious, insisting that they would take care of things "when I get better", as if aging and terminal illness were just a small bump in the road to be endured, then overcome.

My mother turned into something of a hoarder during her last year. I remember her yelling at me for attempting to throw a catalog away. Farmer's parents were much the same, clinging to items they couldn't possibly use again. Reading this helped me understand, just a bit, that it wasn't actually hoarding so much as the idea that they don't want someone else deciding what parts of their lives are now disposable.

I know this sounds like a real downer of a book, but that's simply not true. There were quite a few funny moments, such as Lars' absolute glee when he realized he had outlived Nixon, and Farmer's prickly relationship with her father's Siamese cat.

It was tough saying goodbye, but I'm so glad I got to meet them.

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### **Licha says**

Couldn't put this book down. This one is right up there with Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?.

It's a lot to take in when dealing with ailing, elderly parents. Laura finds herself taking over the care of her father Lars and stepmom Rachel. It was exhausting to see how much Laura had to do to juggle her life around. I loved Laura for always doing all this with a smile on her face and never once begrudging her parents for it.

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### **Gary Butler says**

76th book read in 2017.

Number 306 out of 640 on my all time book list.

A very sad thoughtful book.

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### **Emilia P says**

This book was pretty amazing. I was skeptical, with R. Crumb's glowing recommendation, that it might be a dash of nepotism, especially because I hadn't heard of Farmer. But I was won over within the first chapter. It isn't raw, per se, but it's honest -- the steady, relentless decline of old age is so mundane and so huge at once - this book documents the last years of Farmer's parents lives, as they struggle to remain independent while losing self-reliance bit by bit. It speaks quietly and humbly about the sacrifice and strength that adult children muster, both naturally and painfully, to ease their decline. There's almost no magical thinking about life after death or mushy sentiment, even though there are plenty of "when we were young" flashbacks. There are plenty of laughs and many hard tears, a power failure during the L.A. riots, blowing stuff up in the microwave, sponge baths, dirty bedsheets, and so much love. What an astonishing paradox of our lives are.

There's one or two supernatural moments, and I have to say .. they took my breath away. Perfectly timed, and beautifully brief.

Please read this, if you have ever known or plan to be or know an older person. It is wonderful.

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### **Jan Priddy says**

I read a few new graphic novels each year just to stay abreast of what is around and because I teach them. Like most of my favorites, this isn't a novel, but memoir.

Joyce Farmer's graphic memoir (2010) records the last years of her parents' lives and she strives to do what she can for them, and they die anyway. I can't say I "really liked it" because it wasn't an enjoyable read and it wasn't graphically appealing to me. What it was is too close for comfort, and I wondered as I began if I would make it through intact.

My husband and I cared for my mother through several years of gradual decline so much of Farmer's story is familiar. In some ways her family story is much harder than mine. In other ways not as challenging. Lung cancer, delusions, negotiating doctors and a parents who do not want to do what's been advised, the determination to stay home, the broken hip... with my mother it was years of continuous rounds of practical medical advice, which she ignored. She hated being told what to do and mostly, therefore, I didn't try to tell her anything. Gary and I just showed up several times a day and did as we were told. She would do the opposite. My brother thought I was lying about her condition because she lied to him. In her final days she thanked me for always doing what she asked me to do. She smiled. "I know you didn't always approve, but you always respected my wishes."

Farmer's son was involved and that bodes well for his involvement in her future dying, which comes to everyone eventually. Her mother died in a nursing home—the worst way, I think. Her father died at home—the way most of us would choose. My mother was in assisted living for a few years, but had she followed her doctors' advice and admitted her poor balance, she might have avoided falls that hastened her physical decline and death.

Like Farmer, one gain, and perhaps the only one in caring for my parents, is that I learned family truths that had been jealously guarded for the whole of my life.

In the end, I am glad to have read Farmer's story. I felt a kinship with her sorrow and struggle, her guilt and earnest efforts to do the best she could for her parents. It can't be easy. I would hug her if she were here.

I am not a fan of the style of illustration, because it does not read graphically for me. But if you like Crumb, you will recognize that sketchy style. She's good.

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## Jeff says

I can't praise this as highly as R. Crumb did, but i'm also not Farmer's friend. If you liked Ethel and Ernest, then you'll probably like this, too. The drawing style (unsurprisingly) reminds me of Crumb, which is somewhat of a negative for me. Transitions from one time to another almost always are indicated by stage directions such as "Two weeks later," so the narrative jerks you along rather. The characters occasionally seem unrealistic. But overall the care with which Farmer broaches a difficult topic lifts this book up to "very worthwhile reading" standards.

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