

The title of Gail Honeyman's novel *'Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine'* is deliberately ironic since Eleanor is far from fine. She has convinced herself that living alone in a rather shabby flat, buying a pizza, wine and two bottles of vodka on a Friday, which she gets through by Monday, is perfectly alright. She says to herself *'I'm Eleanor Oliphant. I don't need anyone else.'* She had done well at school and had gained a degree in Classics at university but is now in a poorly paid job in a finance department. She is unable to relate to her work colleagues, largely because she doesn't understand their behaviour and is very direct, with no appreciation of tact. In the middle of the week, she phones 'Mummy'. She hopes for some reassurance, but 'Mummy' always reminds her that she is, in fact, worthless.

Eleanor's life takes a sudden change when she sees **him** at a work do and is instantly smitten. She thinks of this handsome rock star with a beautiful voice as instant husband material and sets out to realise that ambition. It's a project that 'Mummy' would approve of. She makes a series of changes to her appearance, including a bikini wax, that she hopes will attract him to her. One issue is that she has a burn scar down the right side of her face. This information about Eleanor's appearance is the first clue about the kind of life that she led as a child, which is slowly revealed in the course of the book.

Two other changes occur in Eleanor's life that turn out to be much more significant than the rock singer. The first is when her work computer becomes infected with a virus, which is cleared by Raymond in IT. Raymond is the antithesis of Johnnie Lomond. He is overweight, appears unfit and has no dress sense. He invites Eleanor for lunch at a nearby café where she discovers that he has poor table manners and smokes. Eleanor is nothing if not sensitive about 'proper' language and behaviour. These had been instilled into her as a child. Yet somehow, she finds herself being drawn to Raymond.

The second event is when she and Raymond see an old man collapse in the street. Eleanor thinks that he was drunk and should be left to recover, but Raymond realises that he needed help. His name is Sammy Thom and Raymond calls an ambulance. The two of them go and visit him in hospital and his gratefulness leads to them being accepted into Sammy's large family.

Meanwhile, Eleanor's 'project' continues and she finally gets to a gig where she might be able to attract Johnnie Lomond. He ignores her and behaves like a spoilt brat on the stage and Eleanor suddenly comes to realise that she had been deluding herself. She goes on a complete bender and nearly dies from alcohol poisoning. Raymond comes round, cleans and tidies her flat and gets her back on to her feet. Eleanor begins to understand the power of caring. Bob, her boss, allows her time off, her work colleagues send a large bunch of flowers and she receives a present from one of Sammy's relatives.

There is also considerable humour in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, much of it coming from her approach to life, but never making mock. When giving 'comfort' to the injured Sammy, she says – *medical care is completely free in this country ... you probably wouldn't want to bump your head in, say, the new state of South Sudan*. Raymond's eating she regarded as - *the noise, seemed almost industrial in its relentlessness*.

Gail Honeyman states that the inspiration for the book came from a newspaper article about loneliness, but this novel is about much more than that. Eleanor Oliphant lives alone because she wants to. Events in her childhood, which are gradually revealed, lead her to a variety of foster homes and children's homes, where her behaviour is usually difficult. Despite her intelligence, she starts living with a violent thug, but finally has the strength of character to have him arrested. She feels

unworthy, an emotion that is constantly reinforced by her conversations with 'Mummy'. Raymond and Sammy come from a part of society that 'Mummy' would look down on, but they show her love. Raymond also comes to understand that she is a survivor of incredible trauma and is on the way to healing and being more accepted by others. She also manages to free herself from 'Mummy's' grip. The group loved reading this book.