

Just One Life

Ernest Cohen

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With wit, verve, and compassion, Ernest Cohen's epic novel Just One Life demonstrates how one man's tragedy can become the impetus for healing and growth in the lives of those around him.

In Ernest Cohen's epic novel *Just One Life*, a small change in one life sets off a chain of momentous shifts in the lives of others.

The Governors of the Given, a collective of minds that implements small changes in the universe with maximum results, chooses a bumbling businessman, Geoffrey, as their next target. Thus Geoffrey encounters a disguised Giver at the airport, causing him to forego dinner in order to make his flight home to LA to see his daughter, Charlotte—a flight that crashes, changing his story's trajectory. A flight attendant, Donn, saves Geoffrey's life, but many others die. During Geoffrey's long hospital recovery, he, Laura (the hospital public relations administrator), and Donn become a found family.

Meanwhile, Geoffrey's wife, Victoria, whom he loves and supports though she is critical of her daughter and husband, would have been just as happy if Geoffrey had stayed away. After the plane accident, Charlotte is introduced and the story takes a turn toward the serious: she struggles against Victoria's domineering ways, and even against Geoffrey's doting, as she works to come into her own. Their family history becomes central to this confessional, wrenching tale.

The three-part novel is patterned after *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and follows a problem through to its resolution in an appealing manner. Though the story includes grave moments, its primary narrative tool is comedy: Geoffrey is introduced as a man who spills his coffee and makes jokes while traveling—and while his wife is on outrageous shopping sprees. The supporting cast is also humorous: two older members of the couple's synagogue have gossipy phone exchanges that serve as comic interludes within the tale.

The short chapters skip through time, balancing the story's light and heavy moments well. Geoffrey meets people in the hospital who push his story in a hopeful direction, offering levity and friendship to counterbalance his relationship struggles. But every character has their own healing to do, too.

The novel moves through Los Angeles neighborhoods that are captured with vibrant details. News articles are used to flesh out Victoria's story, while banter between Geoffrey and others, including his apartment building's doorman, is used to push the message that small changes can have big impacts. In time, the book's humor is replaced by confrontations and tears, all working toward a realistic finale that pronounces a timeless message about love and care.

With wit, verve, and compassion, the novel *Just One Life* follows as a man's tragedy brings out the best in everyone involved.

MARI CARLSON (April 28, 2022)

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