

**Songs Without Words (Knopf)**  
**By Ann Packer**

Review by Mindy Friddle

Ann Packer's first novel, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, proved to be a surprise bestseller; a book that captured not only the interior lives of characters, but also the attention of more than half a million readers.

Those readers will be pleased to find Packer's remarkable talent for characterization in the pages of her second novel, *Songs Without Words*, and if the story sags slightly under the uneven weight of five characters' ruminations, much of the novel is moving.

The story centers around childhood friends Liz and Sarabeth, whose bond deepened as teenagers when Sarabeth's mother committed suicide. Now, years later, the women, in their 40's, remain close, until another calamity erupts--this time in Liz's family.

Single and aimless, Sarabeth is a decorator who works with real estate agents to "stage houses," for quick sell. In her spare time, she designs lampshades, reads *Anna Karenina* aloud to the elderly, and has destructive relationships with married men. Sarabeth, who thinks of herself as "toxic," still ruminates about her inscrutable mother whose actions, decades later, remain unexplained.

Liz, meanwhile, lives in the 'burbs with her husband Brody, and their two kids, Joe and Lauren. On the side, she practices yoga and "decorative furniture painting," and grapples with the usual sandwich generation challenges of raising teenagers and caring for aging parents. But when her daughter, Lauren, undergoes a crisis--sorry for the vague term, but I don't want spoil the plot-- Liz's calm life disappears. Devastated, she doubts her parenting abilities, questions the strength of her marriage, and finds herself estranged from Sarabeth.

"... It was the most ordinary things that caused the greatest misery," laments Liz, [p 256], two-thirds through the book. Indeed, in this novel, commonplace events and everyday gestures reveal not only sorrow, but the complex, interior lives of characters. There is no heavy-handed foreshadowing by the author. Instead, every exchange between characters, each fleeting doubt or frail hope, is given equal weight. Relationships fray and falter, love is rekindled or lost, often surprising the characters, themselves, and the reader.

The novel stumbles a bit as the third person point-of-view moves into the heads of five characters, some more deeply than others. Liz's husband and son are given

short shrift, while Lauren's teen anguish is so expertly drawn, she eclipses Liz and Sarabeth. Lauren's sections are pitch-perfect-- whether she is crying in English class, hiding in her closet, or admiring the geometric abstractions of the artist Richard Diebenkorn: "She imagined lifting up the edge of a pale blue rectangle and lying down underneath it." [296.]

Lauren acts on events in the present narrative, where the dangers are imminent, but Sarabeth, in contrast, seems maddeningly passive: Moldering in her bathrobe, pining for her married lover, deconstructing Freudian dreams-- the tension lags. "I'm not your mother," Liz snaps to Sarabeth, as their friendship loses its footing. Some readers might, at that point, be inclined to give Liz a high five.

As much as this novel is an intimate story about a complicated friendship between two women, it is equally — and perhaps more significantly — a story about soldiering on through despair. In the end, as the crisis in Liz's family unfolds, what stays with a reader is not the struggles of Liz or Sarabeth, but the resiliency of Lauren, a fragile, young teen who finds the courage to meet hopelessness head on; it is Lauren who gives this novel its enormous heart.