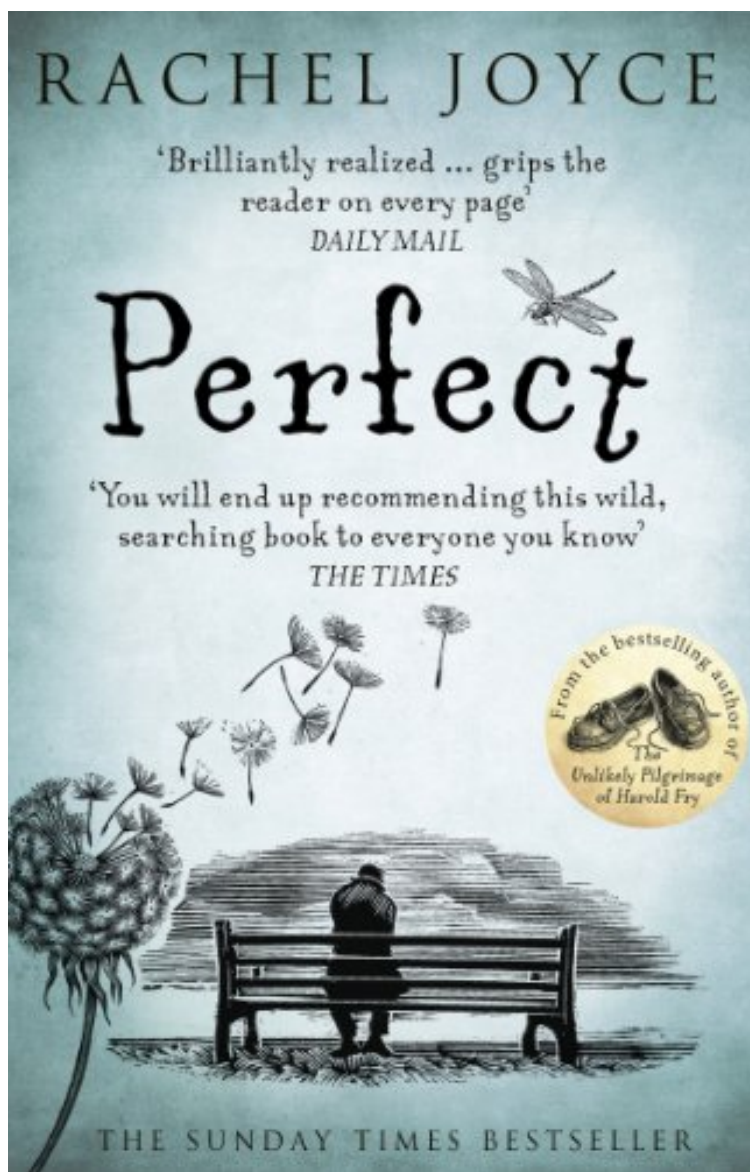


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSummer, 1972: In the claustrophobic heat, eleven-year-old Byron and his friend begin Operation Perfect, a hapless mission to rescue Byrons mother from impending crisis. Winter, present day: As frost creeps across the moor, Jim cleans tables in the local caf, a solitary figure struggling with OCD. His job is a relief from the rituals that govern his nights.Little would seem to connect them except that two seconds can change everything. And if your world can be shattered in an instant, can time also put it right?Extrait1Something TerribleJames Lowe and Byron Hemmings attended Winston House School because it was private. There was another junior school that was closer but it was not private; it was for everyone. The children who went there came from the council estate on Digby Road. They flicked orange

peels and cigarette butts at the caps of the Winston House boys from the top windows of the bus. The Winston House boys did not travel on the bus. They had lifts with their mothers because they had so far to travel. The future for the Winston House boys was mapped out. Theirs was a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The following year, they would take the Common Entrance exam for the college. The cleverest boys would win scholarships, and at thirteen they would board. They would speak with the right accent and learn the right things and meet the right people. After that it would be Oxford or Cambridge. James's parents were thinking St. Peter's; Byrons were thinking Oriel. They would pursue careers in law or the City, the Church or the armed forces, like their fathers. One day they would have private rooms in London and large houses in the country where they would spend weekends with their wives and children. It was the beginning of June in 1972. A trim of morning light slid beneath Byrons blue curtains and picked out his neatly ordered possessions. There were his Look and Learn annuals, his stamp album, his torch, his new Abracadabra magic box, and the biology set with its own magnifying glass that he had received for Christmas. His school uniform had been washed and pressed by his mother the night before and was arranged in a flattened boy shape on a chair. Byron checked both his watch and his alarm clock. The second hands were moving steadily. Crossing the hall in silence, he eased open the door of his mother's room and took up his place on the edge of her bed. She lay very still. Her hair was a gold frill on the pillow and her face trembled with each breath as if she were made of water. Through her skin he could see the purple of her veins. Byrons hands were soft and plump like the flesh of a peach, but James already had veins, faint threads that ran from his knuckles and would one day become ridges like a man's. At half past six, the alarm clock rang into the silence and his mother's eyes flashed open, a shimmer of blue. Hello, sweetheart. I'm worried, said Byron. It isn't time again? She reached for her glass and her pill and took a sip of water. Suppose they are going to add the extra seconds today? Is James worried too? He seems to have forgotten. She wiped her mouth and he saw that she was smiling. Two dimples had appeared like tiny punctures in her cheeks. We've been through this. We keep doing it. When they add the seconds, they'll say something about it first in The Times. They'll talk about it on Nationwide. It's giving me a headache, he said. When it happens you won't notice. Two seconds are nothing. Byron felt his blood heat. He almost stood but sat back again. That's what nobody realizes. Two seconds are huge. It's the difference between something happening and something not happening. You could take one step too many and fall over the edge of a cliff. It's very dangerous. The words came out in a rush. She gazed back at him with her face crumpled the way it got when she was trying to work out a sum. We really must get up, she said. His mother pulled back the curtains at the bay window and stared out. A summer mist was pouring in from Cranham Moor, so thick that the hills beyond the garden looked in danger of being washed away. She glanced at her wrist. Twenty-four minutes to seven, she said, as if she were informing her watch of the correct time. Lifting her pink dressing gown from its hook, she went to wake Lucy. When Byron pictured the inside of his mother's head, he imagined a series of tiny inlaid drawers with jeweled handles so delicate that his fingers would struggle to get a grip. The other mothers were not like her. They wore crocheted tank tops and layered skirts and some of them even had the new wedge shoes. Byrons father preferred his wife to dress more formally. With her slim skirts and pointy heels, her matching handbag and her notebook, Diana made other women look both oversized and underprepared. Andrea Lowe, James's mother, towered over Diana Hemmings like a dark-haired giant. Diana's notebook contained articles she had snipped and glued from the pages of Good Housekeeping and Family Circle. She wrote down birthdays she had to remember, important dates for the school term, as well as recipes, needlecraft instructions, planting ideas, hairstyling tips, and words she had not heard before. Her notebook bulged with suggestions for improvement: 22 new hairstyles to make you even prettier this summer. Tissue paper gifts for every occasion. Cooking with offal. i before e except after c. Elle est la plus belle mere, James sometimes said. And when he did he blushed and fell silent, as if in contemplation of something sacred. Byron dressed in his gray flannel shorts and summer T-shirt. His school shirt was almost new, and he had to tug to fasten the buttons. Having secured his knee-length socks with homemade garters, he headed downstairs. The wood-paneled walls shone dark as conkers. I'm not talking to anyone but you, darling, sang his mother's voice. She stood at the opposite end of the hallway at her telephone table, already dressed. Beside her, Lucy waited for her plaits to be tied with ribbon. The air was thick with Vim and Pledge polish, and it was a reassuring smell in the way that fresh air was reassuring. As Byron passed, his mother kissed her fingertips and pressed them to his forehead. She was only a fraction taller than he. It's just me and the children, she said into the mouthpiece. The windows behind her were opaque white. In the kitchen Byron sat at the breakfast bar and unfolded a clean napkin. His mother was talking to his father. He rang at the same time every morning, and

every morning she told him she was listening. Oh, today Ill do the usual. The house, the weeding. Tidying after the weekend. Its supposed to get hot. Released from her mothers hands, Lucy skipped to the kitchen and hoicked herself up onto her stool. She tipped the box of Sugar Stars over her Peter Rabbit bowl. Steady, said Byron as she reached for the blue jug. He watched the splashy flow of milk in the rough vicinity of her cereal. You might spill, Lucy, he said, although he was being polite. She already had. I know what Im doing, Byron. I dont need help. Every word of Lucys sounded like a neat little attack on the air. She replaced the jug on the table. It was vast in her hands. Then she slotted a wall of cereal boxes around her bowl. Byron could see only the flaxen crest of her head. From the hall came their mothers voice. Yes, Seymour. Shes all polished. Byron assumed that they were discussing the new Jaguar. Please could I have the Sugar Stars, Lucy? You are not supposed to have Sugar Stars. You must have your fruit salad and your healthy Alpen. Id like to read the box. Id like to look at the picture of Sooty. I am reading the boxes. You dont need all of them at once, he said gently. And anyway you cant read, Luce. Everythings as it should be, came their mothers voice from the hallway. She gave a fluttery laugh. Byron felt a notch of something hot in his stomach. He tried to remove a cereal box, just one, before Lucy could stop him, but her hand flew up as he was sliding it away. The milk jug shot sideways, there was a resounding smash, and the new floor was suddenly a wash of white milk and blue pins of china. The children stared, aghast. It was almost time to clean their teeth. Their mother was in the room within moments. No one move! she called. She held up her hands as if she were halting traffic. You could get hurt! Byron sat so still his neck felt stiff. As she made her way to the cleaning cupboard, balancing on tiptoes, her arms stretched out, her fingers pointed, the floor swished and snapped beneath her feet. That was your fault, Byron, said Lucy. Diana rushed back with the mop and bucket, and the dustpan and brush. She twisted the mop in soapy water and dragged it through the pool of liquid. With a glance at her watch, she swept the broken bits of china into a dry patch and scooped them into the dustpan. The last splinters she scraped up with her fingers and shook out over the bin. All done, she said brightly. It was then that she noticed her left palm. It was cut with crimson, like spilling stripes. Now youve got blood, said Lucy, who was both appalled and delighted by physical injury. Its nothing, insisted their mother, but the blood was slithering down her wrist and, despite her bib apron, had made several spots on the hem of her skirt. Nobody move! she called again, turning on her heels and rushing out of the room. Well be late, said Lucy. Were never late, said Byron. It was a rule of their fathers. An Englishman should always be punctual. When Diana reappeared she had changed into a mint-green dress and matching lambswool cardigan. She had wound her hand with a bandage so that it looked like a small paw and had applied her strawberry-red lipstick. Why are you still sitting there? she cried. You told us not to move, said Lucy. Clip, clip, echoed her heels across the hallway as the children raced after her. Their blazers and school hats hung from hooks above their school shoes. Diana scooped their satchels and PE bags into her arms. Come along, she called. But we havent cleaned our teeth. Their mother failed to answer. Swinging open the front door, she darted into the shroud of mist. Byron and Lucy had to rush outside to find her. There she stood, a slight silhouette against the garage door. She studied her watch, her left wrist clamped between the thumb and fingers of her right hand, as if time were a small cell and she was examining it through a microscope. Its going to be all right, she said. If we hurry, we can make up time. Cranham House was a Georgian residence of pale stone that shone bone-white in full summer sun and pink as flesh on a winter morning. There was no village. There was only the house and the garden and then the moor. The building sat with its back resolutely set against the mass of wind, sky, and earth that loomed behind, and made Byron think of a home that wished it had been built elsewhere, in acres of flat English parkland, for instance, or on the gentle banks of a stream. The advantage of the setting, his father said, was that it was private. This was what James called an understatement. You had to drive at least three miles to find a neighbor. Between the gardens and the first slopes of the moor was a meadow with a large pond, and then a belt of ash trees. A year ago the water had been fenced in and the children were forbidden to play there. The gravel drive popped beneath the wheels of the Jaguar. The mist was like a hood over Byrons eyes. It stole the color and edges from even the closest things. The top lawn, the herbaceous borders and rose pagodas, the fruit trees, the beech hedging, the vegetable plot, the cutting beds and picket gate, they were all gone. The car turned left and carved its path toward the upper peaks. No one spoke. Diana sat straining forward over the wheel. Up on the moor, conditions were even worse. That morning there was no dividing line between hills and sky. The car headlamps bored shallow holes into the blanket of white. Occasionally a watery group of cattle or a protruding branch took shape, and Byrons heart gave a bounce as his mother swerved to avoid them. Once Byron had told James that the trees were so scary on the moor they could be ghosts, and James had frowned.

That was like poetry, James had said, but it was not real, just as a talking detective dog was not real on the television. They passed the iron gates to Besley Hill, where the mad people lived. As the wheels of the Jaguar rumbled over the cattle grid, Byron breathed a sigh of relief. Then, approaching the town, they turned a corner and braked hard. Oh no, he said, sitting tall. Whats happened now? I dont know. A traffic jam. It was the last thing they needed. His mother lifted her fingers to her teeth and ripped off a shred of her nail. Is it because of the mist? Again: I dont know. She pulled at the handbrake. I think the sun is up there somewhere, he said helpfully. It will burn this off soon. There were cars blocking the road as far as they could see, all the way into the veil of cloud. To their left the dull silhouette of a burned-out vehicle marked the entrance to the Digby Road Estate. They never went that way. Byron saw his mother glance over. Were going to be late, wailed Lucy. Snapping down the handbrake, Diana pushed the car into first gear with a crunch, yanked at the wheel, and accelerated toward the left. They were heading straight for Digby Road. She didnt even mirror, signal, maneuver. At first the children were too stunned to speak. They passed the burned-out car. The glass of the windows was smashed, and the wheels, doors, and engine were gone so that the car was like a charred skeleton. Byron hummed gently because he didnt want to think about that. Father says we must never go this way, said Lucy. She smothered her face with her hands. Its a shortcut through council housing, Diana said. Ive been this way before. She eased her foot down on the accelerator. There was no time to consider what she had said: that, despite their fathers rule, she had been this way before. Digby Road was worse than Byron had imagined. In places it wasnt even tarmacked. The mist was glued to the rows of houses so that they reached ahead, dull and indistinct, and then appeared to disintegrate. Pieces of rubbish choked the gutters: rubble, bags, blankets, boxes, it was hard to tell what it was. Occasionally washing lines appeared, strung with sheets and clothes that held no color. *Revue de presse* Touching, eccentric . . . Joyce does an inviting job of setting up these mysterious circumstances, and of drawing Byrons magical closeness with Diana. Janet Maslin, *The New York Times* Haunting . . . compelling. *Minneapolis Star Tribune* [Joyce] triumphantly returns with *Perfect*. . . . As Joyce probes the souls of Diana, Byron and Jim, she reveals slowly and deliberately, as if peeling back a delicate onion skin the connection between the two stories, creating a poignant, searching tale. *O: The Oprah Magazine* *Perfect* touches on class, mental illness, and the ways a psyche is formed or broken. It has the tenor of a horror film, and yet at the end, in some kind of contortionist trick, the narrative unfolds into an unexpected burst of redemption. [Verdict:] Buy It. *New York* Joyces dark, quiet follow-up to her successful debut, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, could easily become a book club favorite. . . . *Perfect* is the kind of book that blossoms under thoughtful examination, its slow tendencies redeemed by moments of loveliness and insight. However sad, Joyces messages about the limitations of time and control, the failures of adults and the fears of children, and our responsibility for our own imprisonment and freedom have a gentle ring of truth to them. *The Washington Post* There is a poignancy to Joyces narrative that makes for her most memorable writing. *NPRs All Things Considered* Beautifully written . . . Joyce showed an incredible sensitivity and understanding when she wrote about the impact of mental illness in *Harold Fry*, and that talent shines even brighter now that shes devoting more space to the subject. . . . Joyce is great at building tension, with her prose managing to give huge weight to a menacing comment or a small mistake. *The A.V. Club* *Perfect* is a poignant and powerful book, rich with empathy and charged with beautiful, atmospheric writing. Tana French, author of *In the Woods* and *Broken Harbor* [Rachel] Joyce, showing the same talent for adroit plot development seen in the bestselling *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, brings both narrative strands together in a shocking, redemptive denouement. *Publishers Weekly* [Perfects] unputdownable factor . . . lies in its exploration of so many multilayered emotions. There is the unbreakable bond between mother and son, the fear of not belonging . . . and how love can offer redemption. *London Evening Standard* From the Hardcover edition.