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# Beast

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

~~New Talent~~

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

17-year-old Stephen is due to leave his foster family of four years, the Reynolds, and all his social worker can offer him as a place to live is St Mark's, the rough hostel for homeless people where, ironically, Stephen's biological father once stayed on his release from prison. Stephen treats his foster family (Jimmy, Verity and their children, 11-year-old Robert and 15-year-old Carol) with the wary scepticism of the young person in care who has been let down too many times. He so rarely tells the truth about what he is thinking or feeling that not lying about something now feels strange. Apart from routinely protecting himself in this way, Stephen also has a huge and dangerous secret to keep. How that is revealed is pacily and often amusingly plotted. Without giving the plot away, it's a bit hard to see why *The Secret* could not simply have been revealed to the relevant authorities but this is a minor creak in the narrative.

Kennen's portrayal of the Reynolds family is sharply and wittily observed ? from Carol, demure in her girly pink, skilfully landing Stephen in trouble whenever she can to Robert with his stash of girly magazines and understated friendliness to Jimmy who tries so hard to be understanding.

The narrative is related in the first person by Stephen who addresses the reader directly, often with a weary pessimism. He has, after all, been there and experienced a lot of pretty awful things. The appearance of his father ? now a smelly, alcoholic tramp and always an absent and indifferent father ? is related in a matter of fact way. Stephen has long since let go of any expectations he might have had from that quarter. Kennen has a sharp and laconic ear for dialogue (teachers for whom swear words are a problem beware!) and conveys the essence of even her minor characters with deft economy. This exceptional first novel is in essence about the impact of family (for bad and for good) as well as an unsentimental portrait of a courageous, likeable young man making the most of the little he has been dealt.

Running Order:

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