



All the Things We Never Said

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Editorial Choice:

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Media type:

Book

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Three mid-teenage girls all live in provincial Bridgeport, but they've never met until they sign up to a suicide pact on the MementoMori website. Their reasons for ending things have little in common, though it's true that all feel painfully alienated from their insensitive mothers. Fathers do even worse in **All the Things We Never Said**: one's too busy gaming on his phone to notice his daughter; one has run away with a Fire Risk Assessor; and the third has been killed in a car-crash for which his daughter blames herself.

This debut novel could so easily have become melodramatic, trivialising or sentimental. Its emotional charge remains riskily intense throughout its substantial length; but the interest of many YA readers is likely to be fully sustained through the girls' contrasting personalities and the circumstances which lead them to MementoMori; it is here that they are introduced to each other as partners in the pact and given clear procedures and dates leading to Termination. Readers will also be engaged by the different ways of storytelling adopted by Mehreen, Cara and Olivia. A reader would immediately know, opening any page at random, which of the three is currently moving the story on. Frequently, there are inferences to be drawn as a reader goes beyond a narrator's own understanding.

We meet Mehreen first and remain closer to her than the other girls throughout the novel. Early in the story, she tells us of her sense of isolation and uselessness - her family would be better off without her. Her crisis is the consequence of several factors working together, while the details of the specific incidents which prompt Cara and Olivia towards suicide are withheld for many chapters. Yasmin Rahman's introductory 'Dear Reader' pages tell us that she 'grew up in a very traditional Bengali Muslim family' similar to Mehreen's, with 'little understanding of mental illness'. Like Mehreen, she suffered from depression, was drawn to self-harm, felt abnormal and misunderstood. YA books had offered a way out, but even there she saw that all the protagonists were white. So, the author tells us, this is 'the book I wish I'd had as a teenager'.

Where Mehreen's voice is anxious and reflective, Cara's is angry and vehement, her narrative punctuated by energetic swearing, fuelled by the memory of the car-crash which stole her lovely, lively Dad; she's convinced she distracted him for a fatal moment. Now she is trapped for ever in a wheel-chair; her mother is so anxious about letting her out of her sight that she's insisting on home-schooling Cara. Despite all of this, it's Cara who provides the book with some of the swift, sharp-edged wit which YA readers know well.

Olivia's narrative offers further variety. To the other girls, she seems socially poised and confident. Her writing tells another story - different type faces and lay-outs fly about on the page - a series of restless shape poems, perhaps. They make for wild, jagged reading, drawing us into the terror Olivia lives with, threatened by the raw violence of the man who has invaded her mother's life - and her own.

The novel is long, but then it has much to explore beyond the question of whether the girls will follow through on the decision to take their own lives. As they spend time together, pursuing their project, turning away from themselves to each other, the three begin to find a trust and friendship which is new for each of them. There are no easy fixes here ? there are setbacks - but gradually the girls and their parents come to see what they must learn from each other across a generation.

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