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Under a Dancing Star

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Editorial Choice:

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Media type:

Book

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Taking its inspiration from **Much Ado About Nothing**, Laura Wood's YA novel is a heady exploration of first love and self-discovery set mostly in the grounds of a gorgeous Italian villa in the mid-1930s. Our narrator, Bea, has been sent to stay there with her uncle after a disastrous dinner party at which she shocks a prospective husband and his parents by describing in some detail the sexual habits of the glow-worm. It's not something young ladies of her class are meant to know about, let alone discuss over the dinner table. Bea however, is far from typical. She has a passion for science and is thoroughly stifled by her family and their genteel small mindedness. The stay with her uncle provides a life-changing encounter with a set of Bohemian young artists and during her summer in Europe Bea turns into an adult, very much like one of her beloved butterflies, shucking off her drab, constricting English frocks for brightly coloured silk dresses and even most liberating of all trousers. She also embarks upon her first ever love affair in the interests of science of course with the gorgeous if equally headstrong Ben. Anyone familiar with the source will know that sparks will fly. Bea's sexual awakening is described as playfully as her new wardrobe, but with the same attention to detail, and the same vivid sense of carefree rapture.

It all makes for delightful reading though Bea's new found joy is tempered by the intrusion of real life and her uncle's admiration for Mussolini. Bea returns to England without Ben, though readers will be glad to know that this will not be the end of their affair. Wood is clearly happier negotiating the powerplay of courtship than the tensions of a looming war and the final chapters feel slightly rushed and unfinished. This doesn't detract in the slightest however from what is a thoroughly charming and entertaining love story with captivating central characters.

Read our [interview with Laura Wood](#) [4].

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