



And the Stars Were Burning Brightly

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Editorial Choice:

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Book

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We're in Wythenshawe, the huge post-war council estate to the south of Manchester. Horizons for young people here in 2020 are grey and empty; as though a smothering gloom chokes the light. Maybe this is what it's like to feel left behind.

Except Al Bryant is different. He's intellectually voracious, a reader, a painter. He finds beauty even in these anonymous streets. He reads and talks and writes about his passion ? the stars and their galaxies ? with such joy, such energy. That's why he takes his younger brother Nathan up to the roof of Jimmy Egan's boxing gym, to gaze at those stars together. Later, he painted the two of them there ? maybe his best work so far. Not that Nathan's that interested. Al's Art teacher feeds his talent; he's hungry for more, heading off into Manchester to explore the galleries. Al's seventeen, and there's talk of a place at Cambridge. He seems strong, modest but confident and generous spirited; everything's to play for.

Dad quit the family home a while ago. Oldest son Saul doesn't say a lot, but he does his best to support Mum and the family ? she's barely holding things together and can't help but reach for the bottle too often. At school, Al doesn't mix with the crowd much; his haven is the Art Room, where he's sometimes joined by Megan from his Art Class. Watching and talking with Al as they work encourages Megan to see that she has her own abilities. She needn't spend so much time keeping in with her friend Tara and the other girls. Especially now Tara's hanging out with Eli and his mates. Eli is cock of the tawdry walk in Benchill, their district of Wythenshawe. As Eli sees it, Al is breaking the rules. Eli's rules. Al's different, and that means he's a weirdo and weirdos need sorting.

That's how things stand. Until, one day, Al calls Nate, says he needs to talk. Nate closes him down ? too busy with stuff. When Nate gets back, the house is silent. Nate checks Al's room. He's killed himself. Hung by his school tie.

There's no way Nate can let it go ? it's his fault. If only he'd listened, just for once, the way Al always listened to him. Nate's soon joined by Megan; she too needs to understand. Nothing makes sense. They take turns with the chapters, allowing us different understandings of Al, and of each other. Their narrative voices contrast. Megan's is the more gentle, more perceptive. Jawando finds a rough-edged idiom for Nate, somewhere between the spoken and written word. Often he is angry or confused, but then there are sudden moments of acute self-awareness; he's growing closer to Al's ways of thinking. This debut novel is long and much of the plot is carried through dialogue rather than action. It may

seem to some readers, impatient for answers, as though the mystery of Al's death unravels in real time. When the revelations come, they are savage in their violence. YA readers are familiar with the cruel ingenuity of bullying through social media; they may find here a mindless venom darker than anything they have met before, all too credible in our abrasive times. However, emerging from the tragedy of Al's death, a relationship grows between Nathan and Megan, as they share their determination to keep Al's memory ? and his influence ? alive. Jawando doesn't hurry things; their awareness of their own feelings is delicately handled. Their courage and hope feed each other, guided by the beacon which Al's life becomes for them and others in Benchill.

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