



The Stars at Oktober Bend

Glenda Millard

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A powerful, captivating story about Alice, who is reaching out to express herself through her beautiful-broken words, and Manny who is running to escape his past. When they meet they find the tender beginnings of love and healing.

Alice is fifteen, with hair as red as fire and skin as pale as bone, but something inside her is broken. She has acquired brain injury, the result of an assault, and her words come out slow and slurred. But when she writes, heartwords fly from her pen. She writes poems to express the words she can't say and leaves them in unexpected places around the town.

Manny was once a child soldier. He is sixteen and has lost all his family. He appears to be adapting to his new life in this country, where there is comfort and safety, but at night he runs, barefoot, to escape the memory of his past. When he first sees Alice, she is sitting on the rusty roof of her river-house, looking like a carving on an old-fashioned ship sailing through the stars.

The Stars at Oktober Bend Details

Date : Published February 1st 2016 by Allen & Unwin

ISBN :

Author : Glenda Millard

Format : Paperback 266 pages

Genre : Young Adult, Contemporary, Romance, Fiction

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Alicia Papp says

What a little jewel of a book. Almost dreamlike at times, this story is tough and tender, and deals with some horrific events with compassion and dignity. Alice is a memorable character; unable to voice her innermost thoughts due to the after effects of a terrible assault, she has to deal with prejudice, hate and indignity. But she does it with such hope and grace; through writing poems and creating art. And Manny's story is just as compelling. And Joey - what a truly amazing brother! Lovely and lyrical, I found myself crying unexpectedly at times, but I was left with such hope for the future for these wonderful characters. 4 and 1/2 stars

Kelly Brigid says

"Their eyes were very full because they had seen many things, but their lips could not be opened to speak of what they had seen."

An intriguing concept, but uneventful story. Although I greatly appreciate the unique narrative and voice of the protagonist, Alice, I didn't find the plot particularly engaging. The idea of the romance is sweet, but the poise made it difficult to fully grasp the progression of their budding feelings. I'm afraid I just wanted more from the plot and characters, and couldn't help feeling a pang of disappointment by the time I finished the novel.

The writing is a double edge sword. On one hand, the writing is gorgeous. The decision Millard made to narrate this story through the perspective of Alice, a fifteen-year-old girl who has suffered severe brain trauma, was a risk. Whether or not this leap of faith paid off, is entirely up to the reader. At times, the writing is enchanting, but the constant jumps between the broken up paragraphs, verse, and traditional poise in Manny's perspective, made it difficult to follow the story as a whole.

It's a sweet story, and I did like the themes throughout. I have a huge soft spot for novels that revolve around emotional plots. The juxtaposition of Alice's injury with Manny's PTSD is so heartbreaking, but nicely executed. As I mentioned earlier, I just wish I could've had *more* from this book. Overall, it's still a neat story and I'm sure there are many readers who will greatly enjoy it!

I received an ARC from the publisher in exchange for an honest review!

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Jenna says

4.5 stars. This review also appears on my blog, Reading with Jenna.

I received a copy of this book from the publisher. All thoughts and opinions are my own.

How do I even begin to find the words to express how much this book meant to me? This was an absolutely beautiful story about overcoming adversity and living with hope and courage. It's a simple story that is just done so right.

This novel follows 15 year old Alice, who struggles with her speech after a traumatic incident that happened when she was 12. As a result, she doesn't go to school and spends most of her time writing poetry, fly tying and trying not to do anything that will lead to seizures. She starts leaving her poetry and 'perfect thoughts' in public places for people to read, but nobody has ever taken her seriously until Manny James stumbles upon her poem at the railway station. Manny was a child soldier in Sierra Leone. He's adjusting to his new life and new family in Australia, after losing his family, and Alice and her poetry quickly becomes his salvation.

The first thing you'll notice when you flip open this book is the writing style. This book has a very unique writing style, with strange syntax and punctuation. Alice's voice is incredibly unique and can take a while to get used to. I had a little bit of a hard time getting my mind to focus during the first couple of pages, but I quickly realised how lyrical and beautiful the writing was. Because of this, I decided to read the entire book aloud and it really helped me to get into the writing style and Alice's voice very quickly. The weird syntax and lack of capital letters in the writing really reflected Alice's character and I really appreciated the way the book was written. This novel is written partly in prose and partly in verse. Sometimes it switches without warning and others in a more logical manner. I adored this format and thought it added a lot to the story. It made Alice's voice truly her own. We also get to read from Manny's perspective in this book, and his chapters were written much more traditionally, in prose and with proper syntax and punctuation. I thought his voice also reflected who he was as a person and I loved being able to read from his point of view as well.

for some
twelve is a nice number
but i
am alice
fifteen times
over

All of the characters in this book were outstanding but my favourite was definitely Alice. She went through a traumatic experience that nobody should have to go through, and to some people around her, she will always be the 12 year old girl she was before the incident. But even though her life changed when she was 12, and some of her abilities are stunted, she keeps trying to grow and prove that she's more than what happened to her at 12. Her strength moved me to tears and her bravery just left me speechless.

he had listened to fragments of my stumbling speech and begged me to speak again. his
wanting to listen made no difference to my speech. it was no clearer, quicker or more fluent.
my words did not sound like birdsong or poetry, but manny watched me and waited while i
spoke. asked me when he didn't understand.

My favourite aspect of this book were the relationships. The way that the characters cared for and cared about each other was just amazing to witness. The relationship between Alice and Manny transcended just teenage romance. The discovery of somebody who you can share your darkest secrets with, and somebody

who will listen and try to understand you is just the most heartwarming thing, and I felt so lucky to be able to read about Alice and Manny finding each other the way that they did. Their connection and attraction did feel a little bit too instant, but I didn't even care because they're absolutely made for each other.

While the relationship between Alice and Manny was stellar, it was Alice's relationship with her brother, Joey, that was my favourite. To see Joey, a young teenager himself, be so protective and supportive towards Alice... I just could not stop crying. To see him take on the role of being the man of the house, and look after Alice and his ailing grandmother, I really felt for him. His love for his family and for Alice was so evident from the first chapter and I wished that I had Joey as my brother.

The plot of this book is simple. The author doesn't try to do anything complicated and, instead, focuses on and explores the strength of the characters and the bonds between them. I really appreciated the simplicity of it and the way the author was still able to give me a good case of the feels. This was a fantastic new Australian YA novel that I cannot recommend highly enough.

Fred says

Very briefly, this book follows a young girl named Alice who has suffered from an accident and it follows her as she deals with her life and how it affects her family. She meets a boy named Manny who has suffered an extremely war-dominated and traumatic past.

I did not enjoy this book at all. It's been shortlisted for the Carnegie medal and I do think there is some stuff in here that is worthy of that, I do!

But the writing? Are you serious? I can forgive Alice's rubbish writing as she has a speech impediment but Manny is also badly written. They are supposed to be teenagers yet they read like five year olds.

The plot was lost on me pretty much. The character development was tolerable but not worthy of me saying 'it was good'. I did not enjoy this book at all and I was pretty much skimming it by the time I got to the end. No.

Lara (Bookish_turtle) says

This book was not at all what I expected from reading the blurb, but it was a wonderful story nonetheless. It had really nice, unique characters, a well developed setting and a good plot. However, when you are starting the book, the style takes some time to get used to. The parts of the story told from Alice's perspective don't use capital letters or much punctuation and whilst this is an interesting literary technique, it does make reading the book difficult. Once you understand the reasoning behind Alice's writing style and get used to it, it is a very beautiful novel.

I really liked the poetic language and style throughout the book, especially the parts written by Alice in verse. Sometimes her character comes off as almost dream-like, and she has a very interesting perspective to read from. Alice writes about her thoughts, which is easier than trying to communicate with her words that just don't work properly, coming out slow and slurred. Manny has been through horrible things, and runs at night in his attempts to escape. It's also really wonderful to be able to read from Manny's perspective and see

how he overcomes his past. When these two very different people meet, this beautiful story takes shape.

This is not really a happy, light-hearted read. It deals with some serious issues, and is quite a sad story. Alice and Manny have both been through some pretty tough stuff which is explored later in the book, but it deals with issues which I think it is important for people to be aware of. The story is extremely insightful and challenging and I think that it is definitely a book that people should read. I would highly recommend that you give it a go, and are not put off by your initial impression. Once you get used to the style, this is a truly extraordinary novel.

*"still i am
alice
no less
no more
just different alice still"*

Pat says

I loved the character of Alice, and found her voice in her poetry very compelling. Joey her brother was a stunning character, protective and loving, and Manny's back story about Sierra Leone was heart breaking. This is a gut wrenching but ultimately uplifting read.

Meg says

I discovered Glenda Millard's talent for ripping your heart out and stomping on it while somehow highlighting the hope and joy in the world when I read - and was blown away by - A Small Free Kiss In The Dark. The Stars at Oktober Bend is every bit as stunning, filled with beautiful writing and a main character who has just become my new favourite YA heroine. Highly recommended for readers 14+.

Mariah Bowman says

I received this ARC from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review

Alice is a fifteen year old girl stuck at twelve. Not by any fault of her own, but because of something terrible that happened to her. Her brother, Joey, is always by her side. Never forsaking, as Alice would say. But Alice is also "the girl that Manny loves" and she suddenly wants to have Manny be part of her life. In this beautiful story, Alice must decide who she can trust, what defines her, and what she wants from this life.

I admit that it took me a little bit to get into the style of writing, but I don't think the writing style choice made the story worse. If anything, the style chosen by the author was a huge piece of the story. Since Alice is the primary narrator, it is told using the broken sentences that she able to create after her "accident." Being able to understand how her mind works is a big thing, and to be able to pull off an amazing story in this

fashion is no small feat. While the world in the book is small and less detailed, it was focused on the sheltered life of a young girl who didn't see things like others did. Everything about this book was simplistic, but it functioned well. I liked the simple way of writing that this story had because it allowed me to focus on understanding Alice.

Anne Hamilton says

The style, while intensely beautiful, lyrical and poetic, makes for a baffling read at times. Particularly since those chapters from Alice's point of view are all without capitals. Her thoughts jump and sizzle with half-revealed clues and memories peeping out of repression. So the strange punctuation and grammar is in perfect keeping with the fried hardware of her brain and her forever-twelveness, but it doesn't make it easy to follow. It took me ages to work out 'bear' was not a person. It's a mental relief to get to the scenes from Manny's perspective with their punctilious sentences.

Alice is fifteen but trapped in the mind of a twelve-year old - a very poetic twelve-year old who loves the intricate decorations of the Book of Kells, the bee-wing pages of an old Bible, the making of fly fishing lures for collectors - and Manny James. The doctors have pronounced she'll stay twelve forever.

It takes most of the book to uncover the traumatic event that has resulted in her having a head put back together with 'fishbone stitches', to discover what happened that caused her to have a short-circuiting brain that makes it so difficult for her to speak and to put two and two together about why her grandfather who has been put in prison and why there's a boy on the local football team who hates her.

Manny is a 'boy soldier' from Africa who has been given a new life by Louisa and Bull James. He runs each day; running from the memories that haunt him. One evening he sees Alice climb out a balcony onto the roof of her house - she looks like she's floating amongst the stars.

She has a meltdown one day after dance class; just as the football team is arriving to use the same hall. Manny helps her brother Joey and gradually begins to learn a little about 'Anon', the poet who leaves her enigmatic verses around the town.

His desire to meet her properly is over-matched by her desire to meet him. She sacrifices droplets of blood to the god of flying things in the hope of bringing about an encounter. But life is tangling around her - her gorgeous younger brother Joey who has promised never to forsake her is growing up and getting interested in girls. And Tilda, the girl he's got his eye on, is the one Hamish O'Leary - the boy who hates Alice - has decided he won't allow to be taken from him.

This evocative, transcendent story is about refusing to let past troubles define who you will be. It's a pity that the style means you can't let up your concentration for a moment and relax into a gently flowing read.

Jeann (Happy Indulgence) says

This review appears on Happy Indulgence. Check it out for more reviews!

I say this time and time again: sad books just aren't my thing. It takes me years – sometimes months to work

up to reading sad books, because they take me ages to get over.

And that's what Stars at Oktober Bend did – it ripped out my heart and threw it on the floor.

The book is about Alice, a girl who has trouble with speech due to brain damage. But it's clear that she's smart and intelligent, as she writes beautiful words of poetry. Yes, she may be a little slow at times, but it's much easier for her to put words on paper than to verbally construct a sentence. The way her voice is depicted, with no capital letters, short sentences and bouts of poetry is a beautiful way of capturing what speech is like for Alice.

This is interchanged with Manny's perspective, a young black orphan who discovers her poetry and doesn't judge her by her disability. I found Manny's voice to be young, fresh and absolutely endearing. While it definitely did feel like insta-love, the way they so quickly started getting attached to each other, I didn't hold it against them – because they needed each other to hold on to.

The diversity in the book was marvellously done, and I liked how they weren't stereotypical characters. They both broke the bonds of their stigmas – with Alice looking after her elderly grandmother, and Manny as someone who could survive through PTSD and the horrific circumstances of war. But despite being disabled, despite being a boy soldier, the two find a certain solace in each other. Alice has found someone who she can share her “voice” with, and Manny with someone he can protect and trust.

If reading about a brain damaged girl and a young survivor of war sounds heart breaking enough, that's only the tip of the iceberg. Stars at Oktober Bend is filled with horrifically ignorant people who bully both of the characters. Their ignorance, their territorial behaviour and their abusive words and actions just really made my blood boil. Not only that, but the book continually punches you in the gut, over and over again as the true horror of the story slowly unfolds. It reveals Alice's past for why she's like that, and shares Manny's horrific past experiences. But it doesn't stop there – it continually descends into more horrific circumstances that don't just surround Alice and Manny, but their families, friends and enemies, and my heart just couldn't take it anymore.

The book does not have a strong plot, as Alice and Manny get to know each other over the course of the story. A random flood comes out of nowhere towards the end of the story and Alice stays in the house which I found hard to believe – particularly given her condition.

The sibling relationship here is also done beautifully, with Joey showing Alice love and humility, where the rest of the world does not. He's such a wonderfully caring brother, and truly showed what unconditional sibling love is about.

I kind of feel like having one or two sad themes would have been enough for me, but in more ways than one, Stars at Oktober Bend was a traumatising experience. While it's incredibly beautiful in the writing, the theme and the characters, I just feel completely depressed and miserable after I read it. While I could totally appreciate what Stars had to offer, I simply don't enjoy feeling that way after a book.

I received a review copy from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Ruthy lavin says

Oh my.... this book is a literary triumph.

It's so original that it took my breath away!

Once you get used to the narrative style of the main character, and later on in the book when you understand why she speaks this way, you will become so endeared by it that you won't even notice anymore. It's like reading pages and pages of poetry.

It's a lovely story although tragic, and you will find yourself willing for a contented ending.

I'm still thinking about it hours later. Just beautiful ?

Shannon (Mrsreadsbooks) says

So our main character Alice has some trouble with her speech due to brain damage, however she is very intelligent and writes beautiful poetry. She finds it much easier to write down her words rather than speaking them. Enter Manny, a young orphan who discovers Alice's poetry and doesn't judge her by her disability and they quickly begin to grow close.

This book deals with a lot of sensitive topics, such as bullying and mental illness, as well as including a lot of diversity between the characters. Although I enjoyed the characters and watching their relationship develop, the book itself didn't really have a strong plot line. This book deals with a lot of intense and fairly sad topics, which isn't my favorite kind of book. I do believe books like this are important, however they are typically hard to read. Overall, I did enjoy the book, especially the unique characters and their developing relationship.

Thank you to Candlewick Press for sending me an ARC of this book.

Emily Mead says

Oh wow this book.

It's not in verse but the writing is so lyrical it feels like it. So beautiful.

REVIEW

Can we just talk about the writing in this one though?

IT IS SO INSANELY BEAUTIFUL.

Alice is a narrator that takes some getting used to, because her voice is like no other. There are little things that just make it so REAL – the fact that there are no capital letters, the disjointed phrases, the little poems in amongst prose.

Aaaaand I'm not the biggest fan of verse in novels but the poems served to make the prose even better. Like. Gosh guys. My biggest writerly wish is to be able to write with such lyricism.

And what I loved about the book was gradually piecing together what happened that day at Oktober bend.

You have to figure it out yourself because the writing is not exactly straightforward, but that was fine with me – it made me feel like a clever chicken when I figured it out.

(view spoiler)

If you're looking for a beautiful, courageous, lyrical story, this one's for you.

Julie Parks says

This book was soul abrasive. Poetic and scarring. Something you know you're honored to have visited but never wish to return to.

For some reason, reading this book made me think of an ocean shore. One that's cold and yet also refreshing when it's scorching outside. That feeling when you're coming out, waves still crashing against your knees...you're almost there, you can almost feel the sand under your feet BUT then a new wave comes and nearly sweeps you off your feet and you realize you're not that close to the shore as you thought.

(and if you're not careful, it might swallow you alive - or break your heart in case of the story in this book)

I loved the writing in Alice's narrative. Though, it's much more short story way to go about the story. And I can see why so many people have a problem with it - it gets old very fast and you just want to know what happens but because of the style it drags and there's a lot of jumping in time even when told in the same person's point of view, that's afterwards repeated by Manny...so distracting and sets you off the track easily. The mood is there for sure, but the story doesn't flow.

There is a part where Alice writes in her poetry:

but i cannot forget how both the scared and the sinful slipped so easy from his tongue. light and dark together. fire and ice. i loved the way holy howled like a hymn up the back of his throat, how shit hissed and spat like hail on the fires of hell. perfect opposites. the one made the other deeper, richer, more terrible, and true.

later, much later

when manny and i found one another when

we met and touched

skin and breath and soul the only way we could

unpick the stitches

that locked our secrets inside was to use words

the way faulkner did

It kind of sums it up how I felt reading their story.

However, I do agree with the others who found their narratives to read more like pre-teens than late teens. Which would be fine given their traumas etc. BUT then how come their attraction builds like normal teenagers in their age. This aspect of this story hadn't really been worked out. It just felt like a fabricated

romanticized way of talking about war and family tragedy. Which is still fine in my eyes - only this is the kind of YA book that's written ONLY for YA audience, not so much ABOUT them. I think this is a perfectly soothing language for those who're actually in that age dealing with something similar.

All that being said, Glenda Millard is a terrific writer and I'm going to look into her children's books for my son. Happy to have discovered her!

Thank you Netgalley for a cope in exchange for my honest review.

Kris says

I've been reading a lot of extremely moving books lately and this one has definitely been added to this list. At first I thought this one was going to be written in verse, but it wasn't, though it was written in a way that flowed so lyrically it was hard to put down. It was very character driven and was hard not to fall in love with each and every one of them (the main ones anyways). I was a very beautifully written, moving story that immersed me from the beginning.

I feel like you get a real look into Alice, and how she feels about everything happening around her. She is very intelligent, and uses her poetry to express the things she has a hard time articulating. She radiates hope, even when having to deal with people not understanding her (speech wise and what's inside).

If you are looking for a beautifully written and depicted story about tolerance and acceptance, give this one a go. Be prepared it is tough to get used to the writing style immediately, but is more than worth it to stick it out. This. Is a story that needs to be told and the author really did it stunningly.
