

***Little Bird* by Penni Russon**

At sixteen Ruby-lee's world is constantly evolving but she isn't sure where or how she fits into this new world. Her sister is getting married, her best friend – who blows hot and cold – has a boyfriend, her parents have new partners and she has a baby half brother she barely knows. Her lack of self confidence and belief in herself impacts on her life and schoolwork in so many ways. Does anyone really care about her? She isn't sure until she is conned into a babysitting job and finds herself falling 'in love' with this little human being.

Unfortunately Ruby-lee is unable to see that some of the people in her life are using her for their own selfish means. Finding this out and dealing with it allows Ruby-Lee to finally start growing up, make new friends and stand up for herself.

Throughout the story there are snippets about birds which at the end of the story all fit together to show that Ruby-lee, just like any little bird, has to find her way out of the nest and learn to fly solo.

This book would be suited for those in mid-senior years at high school.

Raelene Hall, Freelance Writer/Editor, WA

“If I were a bird, I'd fly all the time and never come down to the ground”.

Indeed, for sixteen year old Rubylee King, the thought of being a 'little bird' offers freedom, being lighter than air, and escaping from her shifting family dynamics, her disintegrating friendship with Tegan, the changes associated with moving into Senior College and just being 'ordinary, plain old, nothing much Rubylee'. Bossy, annoying older sister, Shandra, the Prima Donna Princess, has turned into Bridezilla, planning the perfect wedding of her dreams – once more, Rubylee to be in Shandra's shadow and vulnerable. “I could use some of Shandra's left over glitter on myself”, she muses.

Into this melting pot of Rubylee's unstable feelings, a chance babysitting job for Colette Kane, the exotic band singer friend of Shandra's, sets in motion a rollercoaster ride of emotions for Rubylee. Facing abandonment issues from her parent's divorce three years previously, seemingly aimless, empty and neglected, Rubylee 'fills up' with a powerful love for delightful baby Maisy, who makes her feel wonderful and 'full of possibilities'. As the baby becomes more responsive, so too does Rubylee's love grow and become all-consuming, as she is 'babied up and brainfried'. The unhealthy fantasy runs out of control, as she includes Maisy's father, the older Michael Spencer, a teacher at her school, in an imaginary happy little family unit. But for this young woman, craving family because hers is not great and she's walking on eggshells, only heart break and humiliation can come from this situation, as things become 'messy and complicated'. Rubylee knows she has been used by Spence and feels betrayed by her disappointing future. 'I barely existed anymore. I was blurred around the edges'.

A simple, easy-to-read, light but not 'lightweight' story, *Little Bird* explores relevant contemporary adolescent issues with honesty and sensitivity and a touch of humour. These complex themes include the nature of family relationships and friendship, teacher-student relationships, identity and acceptance, love and loneliness, marriage, teenage pregnancy and motherhood issues. Interestingly, Spence claims 'women are clipping his wings' and Rubylee views her mother as the original submissive 'vanishing woman', worried that she, too, will become invisible over time.

From the popular *Girlfriend Fiction* series of 'real life, real emotion and awesome stories', *Little Bird* is appropriate for inclusion in the secondary school library and students aged 13-16 will enjoy this engaging, thought-provoking book. They will identify with the search for identity and self, familiar to all adolescents, and empathise with Rubylee as she craves love and that sense of belonging. Drawn to discover more, readers will be pleased that Rubylee finally 'will find the song of her own'. Just like that little bird oblivious to passers-by, Rubylee will soar. 'My wild thoughts are sent out into the air on wings made out of dreams.'

Alison Cassell, Qld

Little Bird is an entertaining but also stimulating novel about a typical year 11 girl who is struggling to find her identity.

The metaphor that Ruby-Lee is a 'little bird' is ever present in the book, with the opening paragraph bringing an idea about a small bird on the sidewalk which no one who is rushing along seems to notice.

The novel follows the story of Ruby-Lee's quest to discover what love is; with her sister Shandra, over-dramatising her impending wedding, her parents being divorced and her best friend fobbing Ruby-Lee off for her boyfriend.

Ruby-Lee is skeptical about love, until her sister volunteers Ruby-Lee's babysitting services to her best friend, Collete. When baby Maisy is left in her care, Ruby-Lee begins to 'fall in love'. The story escalates with Ruby-Lee's fantasies about a teacher at her school, who happens to be Maisy's father.

Ruby-Lee baby-sits for Collete regularly, and things start to go haywire as her fantasies about Spence increase and the relationships around her seem to grow more complex.

The style that Penni Russon has written *Little Bird* is in one of the first person, so the reader follows Ruby-Lee's struggles with a sense of empathy.

Ruby-Lee discovers what real friendship is and also unearths more of the true meaning of love. She struggles throughout the book about who she is and who she wants to be – it seems like everyone around her has different expectations of both these things.

The story explores friendship, love and identity, and is best suited to teenage girls.

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