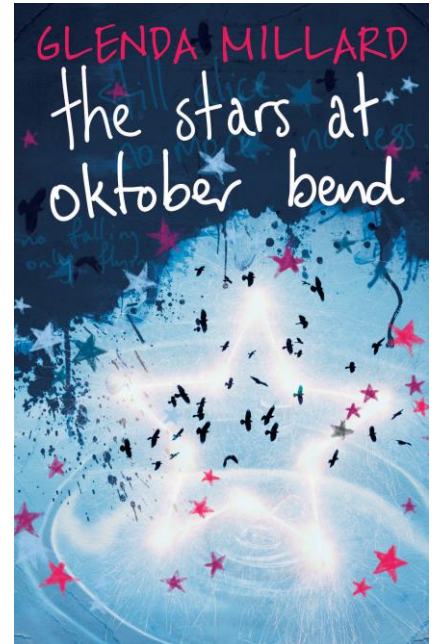


The Stars at Oktober Bend

By Glenda Millard

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A fine, heartfelt novel about transcending past troubles and learning to live with trust and hope.

The Stars at Oktober Bend is the long-awaited new teenage novel from Glenda Millard. Her successful novel *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* received many awards (Winner of the Qld Premier's award in 2009, and Honour Book in the 2010 CBCA awards, shortlisted for the NSW Premier's award, and on the Honour List for the 2012 IBBY awards). *The Stars at Oktober Bend* is for a slightly older readership (13–17 years) and is about a relationship that develops between a girl who is determined to be recognised for who she really is, and a boy from Africa who is trying to fit in to a new community.

Use in the curriculum

The Stars At Oktober Bend can be a valuable text for study in all strands of the Australian English Curriculum (Language, Literature, and Literacy). It is particularly relevant as an example of:

- how authors use innovative structures in a text to convey meaning
- how the use of language can affect structure, pace, voice, and tone
- how metaphor, simile, figurative and literal language can change a text
- a case study of creativity and the craft of writing
- a text with multiple narrators, with different voices
- the power of metaphor in conveying depth of meaning
- an exploration of themes of human experience, interpersonal relationships, and ethical dilemmas
- an opportunity to explore and exercise abstraction, higher order reasoning and intertextual references

Summary

Alice Nightingale is fifteen, with hair as red as fire and skin as pale as bone, but something inside her is broken—her words come out slow and slurred. Yet when she writes, heartwords fly from her pen. Manny was once a child soldier. He is sixteen and has lost all trace of 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. He is sure she must be the author of a poem he found and carries around with him.

Alice has acquired brain injury, the result of an assault when she was twelve, the fallout from which has left one person dead and another in jail. In addition, her mother has left

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Contact Carolyn Walsh, Education Marketing Coordinator,
Ph: +02 8425 0150 Fax: 02 9906 2218 Email: CarolynW@allenandunwin.com

and her father died in an accident. Hamish, the brother of one of her assailants, blames Alice for his brother's death. As the result of her injuries, Alice's speech is difficult for others to understand, so she writes poems to express what she can't say aloud and leaves them in unexpected places around town. Her younger brother Joey has held their little family together – they live with their Gram and are outsiders in their town, living on the outskirts, close to the river – but when Joey meets Tilda and Alice meets Manny, their close sibling bonds are broken open. Now they have people who get inside 'the Nightingale business'.

However, Hamish is jealous of Joey's relationship with Tilda and threatens more violence against Alice in revenge – ordering Manny to deliver his threat to Joey. It takes someone who has been through his own troubles to recognise Alice's depth, and together Alice and Manny start to put the past to rest.

Then a flood sweeps down the river. Hamish comes to gloat over the Nightingales being flooded out of their home but his dinghy is punctured and he is helpless in the floodwater right next to the house where Alice and her dog are waiting to be rescued.

This is a powerful, captivating story about the tender beginnings of love and healing. Glenda Millard writes with a sense of poetic beauty and great depth of feeling, and she sets her characters the challenge of rising beyond their circumstances, telling the story from both characters' points of view. Millard has created a spare and poetic voice for Alice, whose thinking has not been affected by the brain injury:

'i am the girl manny loves. the girl who wrote our story in the book of flying. i am alice. they sewed me up with tiny stitches. even as fishbones in my caved-in skull. frayed edges tucked in. everything tucked in. things meant to be and things not. do it quick. stem the flow. stop life leaking out of alice. that's all they wanted, gram said.

In the final scene, when Alice and her dog are desperate as the floodwaters undermine the footings of her house, readers will be wondering how the tension between Hamish and Alice will resolve. Hamish might carry out his threat to hurt Alice; Alice could let Hamish drown. But Alice recalls these words: 'if we let cowards stop us living the way we want to, we let them win' and so she decides what to do.

Endorsements

'A poetic and mysterious adventure into the language of the human spirit which stuns the mind and heart.' —Ursula Dubosarsky, author of *The Red Shoe* and *The Golden Day*

'Gentle, powerful, poetic, precise. I was totally mesmerised. I don't often love a book this much.' —Diana Sweeney, author of *The Minnow*

Related and complimentary texts

- *Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
- *Say What You Will* by Cammie McGovern
- *The Beginning of Everything* by Robyn Schneider
- *Deenie* by Judy Blume
- *Chasing Jupiter* by Rachel Coker
- *Friday Night Lights* (TV series)
- *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* by Glenda Millard
- *How I live now* and *The Bride's Farewell* by Meg Rosoff

The author

Glenda Millard is a highly respected author who writes for children of all ages. Her novel *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* was the Winner of the 2009 Queensland Premier's Award for young adults, Honour Book in the 2010 CBCA awards for older readers, shortlisted for the 2010 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and included on the Honour List for the 2012 International Board of Books for Young People. Books from her popular Kingdom of Silk series have also received individual awards. Her novel, *The Novice*, was chosen for a White Raven Award in 2006. Glenda has also written many picture books, including *The Duck and the Darklings*, illustrated by Stephen Michael King, and *Lightning Jack*, illustrated by Patricia Mullins.

Glenda Millard on writing *The Stars at Oktober Bend*

In some ways, I found *The Stars at Oktober Bend* very difficult to write. I suppose I am best known for my Kingdom of Silk series of books which are novels for younger readers, and for my picture books. Even *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* was marketed towards younger teenagers. I don't usually worry too much about the age of the reader. However, this time I wanted to write something with content and theme more suited to older readers. I wanted to challenge myself with something new.

To begin with, I felt some anxiety but that was nothing unusual. I almost always feel a mixture of excitement and fear before I start writing any new book. In this case, I wanted to write without restraint and to do this I knew that I needed to free myself from the frightening thought of friends, family, editors and readers of my previous books, reading this new and different story-telling that I planned.

'What will they think?' I wondered. 'What if they expect it to be like all my other books? Will they be disappointed, in the story and in me?'

Trying to 'get free' was one thing: while I wrote I was immersed in the story. Afterwards I worried. But I kept stumbling along. Then a series of distressing personal events took place. I just seemed to recover from one when something else would send me reeling. There were times when I thought I'd never finish this book and secretly wondered if I would ever write another. But I made myself remember what Rosalind Price (of Allen & Unwin) had told me after she'd read my first ten thousand or so words of the novel. 'Write with courage', Rosalind said.

'Write with courage', I reminded myself every time that I doubted and I'd start over—again and again and again.

The initial idea for *The Stars at Oktober Bend* was gleaned from a newspaper article about a homeless girl who sang and in doing so had earned a scholarship to study music at a prestigious conservatorium. I began writing with the single intention of telling the story of a girl who sang as a means of escaping a tragic past. But as usually happens, the story became more complex once the character began to evolve and other information came to hand, informing and expanding the writing. My daughter was studying for her Masters in Speech Pathology at the time I was developing the manuscript and I became aware of language disorders, their causes and effects, and this information impacted on my story.

Initially I wrote in third person but felt like an observer. So I rewrote it all in first person, wanting to feel Alice's pain and longing more acutely and allow her to express her troubled past, present and uncertain future.

Giving Alice a voice empowered me to use a means of expression unique to her. And although her syntax was somewhat unfamiliar, especially in the early stages of the novel, that was when my writing began to flow. Alice thinks of her writing as a means to freedom beyond her circumstances—to flying.

'Words, caught me by surprise,' she says, 'took me in their rushing updraught, took me from the page into the clear mid-air.'

That is what recording Alice's thoughts felt like to me—a breathless leave-taking of all that was known and familiar.

On the pages of her Book of Flying, Alice writes:

these new words, many love and peaches, hungered me in places that never before seemed empty, for things I never dared want.

And strangely, I have just realised that there is a parallel between Alice and the girl who left school at fifteen, who never dreamed of being anything more than being a wife and mother, who never dared want. Words have given me freedom.

In the classroom...

The Stars at Oktober Bend

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Discussion questions

1. "Poems mean whatever people want them to. That is why I like them." (p 36). Do you think this is true? Discuss where meaning is created in the interplay between writer and reader.
2. Read chapter 14 'Ballerina on a bicycle' aloud. How does the changing form affect the pace and the rhythm of the chapter. Does this change the way you experience and interpret the text? How?
3. Birds and feathers are constant motifs throughout the novel. Collect examples of how they are used, and use these examples to develop a theory of what they might represent in the text as a whole. Consider especially:
 - a. The feathers used in Alice's fly lures
 - b. The family name
 - c. Descriptions of birds around Oktober Bend
 - d. The ravens of Alice's fits
4. Love is an overarching theme in *The Stars At Oktober Bend*. Millard explores the nature of love between siblings, the protective love of parents and grandparents, romantic love, and the love between friends. Discuss these different kinds of love, and consider what the author might be trying to communicate about love in this novel. How does this interact with the author's idea of 'forsaking'?
5. "Once upon a time a boy with no yesterdays asked a girl with no tomorrows for something no one else wanted." (p 111) What is the significance of the use of the phrase "once upon a time" here? How does it both establish and subvert our expectations about Alice and Manny's love story?
6. "We're not like the Cassidys and their friends. Shit, Alice, haven't you noticed?" (p 154). Disability and poverty have a hugely isolating effect on people. How is this truth explored in the novel? What can we do to help counter this in our society, and help people feel more supported and connected?
7. "'I'm Alice', I whispered, and my words fell new-made against Manny's shoulder." (p 172). Alice, in revealing herself to Manny, discovers herself anew. Discuss.
8. "Did he think holding a gun made a boy a soldier? Did he think being raped made a girl a whore?" (p 229). Discuss this quote with respect to the concepts of agency and consent. Be aware that these topics may be upsetting or personally confronting for some students, and approach them with sensitivity.
9. "I felt like our house. Cast adrift in an unfamiliar landscape." (p 250). The house represents safety and stability for Alice at the beginning of the novel. How does this change over the course of the story? What might this mean in relation to ideas of growing up, change, maturity, and family?

Curriculum notes and discussion questions prepared by Esther O'Rourke-deGraaf.