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Grass

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Penguin's website reveals that Nightingale has taught young adults and teenagers 'for many years' in the East End. And it shows, It is incredibly difficult for an adult writer to conjure up dialogue for inner city teenagers which persuades readers - including those of us who live on different planets - that this is the real thing. Nightingale's East End is not made up of mean streets peopled by mean caricatures. Her world includes friendly corner shops, swimming lessons, recreation grounds where you can walk the dog and adults who may be fallible but are not stereotypes; and so the danger of these streets is all the more plausible. I believed entirely in Nightingale's multi-ethnic cast, playing out a grim drama haunted by the bleak spectres of Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor. In the old ILEA, some buccaneering English teacher would have read the book with teenagers in Tower Hamlets and made space for them to talk about their own world; in the shires, someone might have had the vision to invite readers to look through a revelatory window. Here, the victim is an Asian boy, kicked into hospital and so to his death by a gang of youths. The only witness is the narrator, Caryn - and the gang knows that she knows who they are. The tension is never relaxed and though the plot takes in the almost obligatory teenlit spats between friends, the reasons for the conflicts in this novel are not at all like the wearisome self-dramatisings of, for example, the denizens of Melvin Burgess's **Doing It**. Caryn falls out with her friends because she will not see the victim as 'just another Paki', and because she is tough enough to consider 'grassing up' the murderers - and so some of her friends abandon her. Caryn is deceived (perhaps the plotting here is a little transparent), isolated, menaced, reduced to her own basic courage and values. She finds out who her friends are. In the end, Caryn and those friends are 'waiting for the trouble to start. And when it comes, we'll handle it.' This is a very welcome first novel. Watch this space.

Running Order:

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