



# Dying to Know You

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Editorial Choice:

off

BfK Rating:

5

There are plenty of surface similarities between the first person narrator of this novel and Aidan Chambers himself. The unnamed storyteller is a writer of books for teenagers, now well into his seventies. He struggled early on in school, he hated team games, his father was a joiner. The narrator is most comfortable - most himself ? alone in his workroom. Chambers shares all of this with him ? the information is in the public domain, not least in **BfK** Authorgraph 130, September 2001. There are less factual similarities. Like Chambers, our writer remains fascinated by late adolescents, their searching relationships, their ways of thinking. He is especially drawn to the vital, often painful, way some teenagers explore experience, not least because he still shares this intensity with them.

Best to take this line of thinking no further. The reader needs to be a little wary of this narrator, to my mind. The trigger for the plot is a knock on the door by 18-year-old dyslexic Karl, a plumber. His girlfriend, would-be writer Fiorella, wants Karl to write about himself for her, and as it happens she is also a fan of our narrator's books. So, asks Karl, would he help him out? The author responds, reluctantly at first but then whole-heartedly and, we might well think, unwisely and intrusively. He listens to Karl, then shapes his words and thoughts into emails for Karl to send as if they were Karl's own. On a few occasions, the writer is also not averse to sharing the wisdom of old age uninvited with the young, a practice which is at least doubtful and perhaps arrogant. He is not Mr Chambers. Most significantly, this writer has lost his wife and is still adrift in loss, which underlies every page of the novel. The physical irritants of old age ? sciatica, the frequent need to pee which he prefers to call ?consulting the hedge? - are seen as daily reinforcements of his disabling grief.

As time passes and their friendship develops, it becomes clear that the writer is not alone, for Karl has never escaped the pain of losing his father some six years earlier. Despite misunderstandings and through shared experiences, both slowly discover the seeds of solutions in art. Karl finds what may be a talent as a sculptor. In the final pages, the writer at last returns to his workroom, takes up his 2B pencil, and opens his accustomed ?new refill pad made of recycled paper, with faint narrow ruled lines and four holes in the margin for filing?, and begins to write the story he has just told to us.

Young readers may well focus on Karl and Fiorella, appreciating the gradual shifts in a relationship recorded in serious language rather than the brash action and jokey idioms of much YA fiction; but they may also see that need and openness do not disappear with age. My guess is that Chambers enjoyed, even indulged, a wry self mockery throughout the book ? maybe some private smiles that the rest of us can never share. That would be characteristic of him ? he's always seemed to be attracted to the irony within a memory or an anecdote.

Required reading for Chambers watchers, young or old.

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