



Amy and Matthew

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Editorial Choice:

off

BfK Rating:

5

The dilemma behind the opening pages is thought-provoking in itself. Amy's cerebral palsy has meant that she has always had an adult carer on hand, right through to this, her final year in High School in Southern California. So, she has never been able to make friends with other kids without an adult aide hovering nearby. Amy persuades her protective mother to advertise for paid carers drawn from her own Senior year group to help her through the school day. She especially hopes that Matthew will apply. In the 11th Grade, alone among her classmates, he had responded critically to an essay Amy had written about her disability, in which she claimed that she felt content with the positives her situation had generated. Matthew had thought she was fooling herself, and his honesty jolted Amy into recognising the truth in what he said. Matthew does apply, though he has issues of his own - compulsive hand washing, anxiety about germs, tapping on alternate radiators, fixation on numbers.

A love story in which CP meets OCD might pose a challenge to any author. Happily, this account of the growing, risky love between Amy and Matthew avoids cliché or sentimentality; in part, no doubt because, Cammie McGovern is one of the founders of a resource centre for children with special needs, and one of her own children is autistic. To this reader, with little knowledge of these areas of need, McGovern's subtly crafted love story was both moving and absorbing.

In some ways, Amy and Matthew are ahead of their peers; she is intellectually able and very widely read, while his lack of academic interest is offset by a sometimes eccentric sensitivity. Their strengths and shortcomings are, in some ways, complementary and their slow recognition of this - with Matthew well behind Amy - reflects an emerging tenderness and physical attraction unique to them.

There are some nicely judged episodes which come close to YA parody. The prom, for example, is a comic disaster in ways other YA novels couldn't hope to reach. McGovern does not avoid sex: readers may be surprised by Amy's decision to have sex with another boy to get 'the first time' out of the way to be ready for Matthew, 'if and when?', but then her circumstance is beyond the experience of most of us. The plot needs this encounter to move on to Amy's pregnancy which coincides with her early, isolated, months at Stanford. Agonising decisions must be made: whether to have the child, and then whether to surrender the tiny and premature baby for adoption.

The frequent use of emails (sent and unsent), texts, and Amy's Pathway2000 Communication Device (she must type rather than talk) all allow a focus on one character's thoughts and emotions, without fear of the concealments and interruptions of live conversation. They also allow characters space to find out what they think; and they suit well the

jokey intimacy of late adolescence, the shadowy meanings between the lines, the playfulness with language, which few preserve into adulthood. Certainly, the fictional adults here, especially the respective mothers, are exhausted, having shouldered the raising of their children. The resolution of the novel remains tentative. *Not Happily Ever After*, so much as *Give Things a Try*.

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