



The Square Root of Summer

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It's a frequent plot device in Young Adult fiction ? a cliché even - for things to come to a head at a party in the closing chapters. All the main players will be there. Drink flows, maybe drugs are passed around, the beat throbs on. Feelings surge, spill over into damaging words. Catastrophe is probable.

I wished Harriet Reuter Hapgood could have found a different truth-telling climax, for elsewhere this is an original debut novel. But it's during an end-of-summer party that things fall apart for our narrator Gottie (Margot ? okay?). Everyone's more or less drunk. Her musician brother, Ned, is home from uni. Surrounded by the party debris in the kitchen, he has briefly put aside his guitar to attack a jammed and rusty tap with a spoon. Suddenly, he lays into Gottie for her selfish behaviour over recent weeks, concluding, ? ?... if you paid attention to anything other than yourself.?? Gottie is devastated, and even more so when her close friend Sof turns on her with ?a hiss so low and furious I can barely hear the words, ?...Gottie, you barely want me around! I can see it in your face every time I'm round here, and it sucks.?? Only the tap spurting out a ?geyser of water that threatens to drown us all? stops Ned. I was as surprised by this dual assault as Gottie, since I'd thought that she and her friend Thomas ? more of him in a moment - had been the only sympathetic main characters in the novel. It was all the others who seemed utterly self-absorbed, including Gottie's grandfather, Grey, who may have died a year earlier, but is a living presence shadowing every page.

Back to the beginning of summer. Gottie has finished exams, presumably at the end of Year 12, since the school is issuing her with UCAS documents. She's quiet in class ? has been ever since Grey's death. But her empathetic Physics teacher, Ms Adewunmi, knows Gottie's a genius. She can think, talk and write about Physics at a level that ? despite accompanying diagrams ? most of us will struggle to grasp; this matters here since Quantum Physics, Shrodinger's Cat et al are essential to the plot. Incidentally, given the Science, the characters' ages, their life-styles and relationships including some crucial off-page sex, it is surprising that Macmillan suggest the book's suitability for readers of 12+.

Gotte's home life is unconventional. In his ineffectual way, her widower ?Papa? ? the family is of German stock ? is more of a child than Ned and Gotte. Grey is the dominant figure; he's ?a supersize Gandalf?, a bear of a man who runs a chaotic Barn crammed with second-hand books, drives ?a crappy old VW Beetle? and still calls everyone ?man? or ?dude?. His thinking is time-warped somewhere in the late Sixties. Characteristically, one tipsy night around a family camp-fire, he roars ??I want to die like a Viking!....Burn me on a pyre, push me out to the waves!?? Hippie-thinking was

liberating and adventurous, letting in gales of fresh or strangely scented air; but when the world's work and its sadnesses had to be faced, that thinking too often fled ever inwards to Me and My Feelings. Here, we're told, family and friends are still grieving for Grey and his wisdom; as Sof says, "He was like, all our dads, or something." For this element of the plot to work for readers, we need to share Gotte's view of Grey; for me, he became the most self-indulgent of the lot, an alienating presence.

Meanwhile, Gotte is discovering her growing sexuality, exploring different kinds of love, even deciding what to do next with her life. To these ends, she journeys through "wormholes" to moments in her past, by way of a mixture of Quantum Physics and magic (or maybe voyages of the mind through dream and memory ? I wasn't sure and neither is Gotte). Her best support in this is Thomas, her inseparable friend in childhood, who emigrated to Canada years ago but is back for the summer, sensing he and Gotte might have more to find in that deep-rooted kinship. This plot strand is written with attractive sensitivity, and indeed the writing has a tireless, excited energy throughout. It will need readers able to bring a comparable energy to the text ? or those whose own intensity could be sparked by the writing. For them, this will be a memorable read.

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