



# Holding Up the Universe

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Book

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'I'm not a shitty person, but I'm about to do a shitty thing. And you will hate me, and some other people will hate me, but I'm going to do it anyway to protect you and also myself.' The voice in this novel's opening lines is hard to ignore and readers probably think they already know the kind of story which will follow. But the next sentence comes as a surprise: 'This will sound like an excuse, but I have something called prosopagnosia.' I didn't know either, so the explanation was essential: 'I can't recognise faces, not even the faces of the people I love. Not even my mom. Not even myself.'

YA readers know about 'sicklit' and the use authors make of acute ailments to enlist interest and sympathy, but Jennifer Niven takes things to a new level. We join Jack Masselin as he heads off each day to Martin Van Buren High School in Amos, Indiana, knowing he won't recognise anyone visually. There'll be kids who think he's their friend, others who can't stand him, others who don't know him at all. In particular, there's Caroline Lushamp, Captain of the High School Damsels, the finest drill team in the State. He's dated her 'in an off-again, on-again way' for four years; yet he recognises her only through 'identifiers' - her voice, hair, smell, clothes. When, despite his coping strategies, he mistakes her cousin for Caroline herself, the cataclysmic fall-out is inevitable. Because he is uncertain at this point about his condition - his diagnosis comes later - he's not talking to anyone about it. Not even his family.

He's not the only one at MVB High who has an issue. When she was 11, Libby Strout's mum died. She began to eat. And eat. She became so obese - she made headlines as 'America's Fattest Teen' - that she had to be cut out of her home by the emergency services (Google reveals such cases). That home, as it happens, was just across the street from Jack's house; he saw it all happen, and felt nothing but empathy for Libby - one 'freak' for another. Unlike those who bombarded her and her loyal father with poisonous emails (check out Google again). Now, supported by her indispensable therapist, as well as her consistently loving dad, she's lost 302 of the 653 pounds she once weighed and is as ready as she can be to face School again. Inside, she's a dancer, a swift and agile mover; so much so that her goal is to become a member of the Damsels.

Libby and Jack tell us their interweaving stories in alternating short chapters. Such a tale could so easily have become anything from sentimental to mawkishly earnest, but instead we learn how they come to see each other, as they have never seen anyone before. Niven maintains the narrow focus upon the two of them with intensity and yet the kind of

quick-slick humour we expect in the best High School sagas; crucially, she makes both of them subtle, engaging characters so that we too see beyond the obesity and the face-blindness to more essential qualities. Together, they navigate those all-important High School parties, the crass classmates, the face-offs in the Cafeteria, as they find friends whose own warmth and complexity surprise them. They discover seriousness and wit and vulnerabilities in each other and in doing so they realise they've found what they've craved ? normality. Of the two, Libby is the stronger, the more self-aware, the braver; despite inevitable setbacks and misunderstandings as love grows between them, she's able to sustain Jack on what becomes their journey, rather than two lonely individual quests.

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