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As Stars Fall

Christie Nieman

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A bush fire, and its aftermath, links a Bush-Stone curlew and three teenagers experiencing loss, love and change.

The fire was fast and hot ... only days after it went through, there were absolutely no birds left. I should have seen it as an omen, the birds all leaving like that.

Robin is a self-confessed bird-nerd from the country, living in the city. On the first day at her new school, she meets Delia. Delia is freaky and definitely not good for Robin's image.

Seth, Delia's brother, has given up school to prowl the city streets. He is angry at everything, especially the fire that killed his mother.

When a rare and endangered bird turns up in the city parklands, the lives of Robin, Seth and Delia become fatefully and dangerously intertwined ...

As Stars Fall Details

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Author : Christie Nieman

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From Reader Review As Stars Fall for online ebook

Maddy says

This book was odd. On the one hand, I could *not* bring myself to care about Seth or Delia, and even my affection for Robin was halfhearted. I also wasn't too fussed on the pacing, and reading felt like trudging through thick mud at times - you really had to struggle to get anywhere. And another criticism: why the heck was Robin's POV in first person and the others' chapters in third? That was disorientating and pulled me out of the writing, taking me about a page to readjust each time.

So after dismissing the characters, the pacing of the plot, and the structural choices made by the author, I guess I need to mention why this is getting three stars and not two. Easy: the setting, the description and some of the information. Everything to do with the bushland completely ensnared me; it was fantastic. All of the bird species mentioned (special shout out to the near-protagonist, the Bush Stone-Curlew, which you could feel a passion for in the writing), the Ash Wednesday link, the little excerpts from Delia's mother's ecology and conservation research papers, Robin's memories and descriptions of Murramunda - now that's the kind of shit that ecology students appreciate. :P That's where the book shined, and it's so obvious the author herself has a huge passion for bush conservation.

So, there's no way I could demote this book to a two-star rating - there were aspects that made that just not an option. But neither can I give it four stars when so many basic elements of the story were unengaging. And that's my stream-of-consciousness word vomit done.

Nomes says

4.5 stars

Beautifully written and compelling in both a quiet and urgent way. As Stars Fall was unexpected (both in it's captivating nature and in it's plot) and lyrical and haunting in that perfect way where the characters bleed into you and you feel their grief and wildness and confusion and hope.

As Stars Fall is an astonishing book in so many ways. It moves along to it's own beat blending two vivid settings (the city and the country) and three POVs that criss-cross and gain momentum so that I was holding my breath wondering how things were going to turn out. The narrative structure reminds me a little of The Accident -- though As Stars Fall has an extra element that just verges on magical realism (kind of -- mostly in the way that you can begin to maybe expect the unexpected -- and in the feeling that something horribly magical, or magically horrible could be just about to unfold). I loved it for that. The element of danger and impending doom just quietly bubbling away in the background. It was grounded and yet had exquisite moments of grief and paranoid delusion and heightened emotions mixed in with the everyday stifling, even boring, aftermath of tragedy and upheaval.

I loved reading this exquisite Aussie YA novel -- which didn't follow a set formula but was crafted with care and took me to places I did not expect and then had me suddenly realising how much I had come to care for the characters. This is a slower read -- but every scene drew me deeper in and I consumed in a 24 hour period. It's reeling with emotion -- but balanced with some sharp humour and a gorgeous and unpredictable love story. I loved the school setting -- Robin is so brave and wonderful to watch at setting into a new school

(she's daring and bold and clever and just such a great heroine to cheer for) and the farm setting and I loved the aliveness of the fierce and unrelenting, devastating fire. I am not really a bird fan at all but I loved the mysteriousness of the bush-stone curlew and how it tied everything together. The ending was stunning and really brought the book into a whole other level.

As Stars Fall is a favourite read for me this year and I recommend it to fans of Aussie YA -- to readers who like to sink into their books and quietly and unexpectedly fall in love.

ALPHAreader says

The book begins with a curlew watching a bushfire rage:

The light was strange. The darkness was a deep red, and there was a thickness between the stars.

There is a human caught in the “stinging air”, and the curlew watches on as the human is, “*Taken away. Bought forever to the stars.*”

Thus begins Christie Nieman’s debut Australian YA novel, ‘As Stars Fall’.

From the beginning alone, readers will know that they are about to go on a somewhat harrowing journey made no less painful for the poignancy of Nieman’s masterful words. I was not surprised to discover that Christie Nieman is in fact a playwright, even winning a Green Room Award for her play ‘Call me Komachi’. She sets the stage for this novel so beautifully – beginning with a scene many Australians will be familiar with. Even if you’re not someone who has found themselves and their town ravaged or threatened by bushfire, the summer seasons in Australia are often marked by a tragedy we are all too familiar with. Watching the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires on the TV, visiting the eerie memorial to the 2003 Canberra bushfires, I’ve even heard first-hand accounts of the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires from my dad, who was a police officer at the time and sent to direct fleeing traffic. Nieman’s book begins from the point of view of a curlew bird watching the flames come, and then alternates to the perspective of a human woman about to be swallowed up by the fiery monster – it’s a viscerally frightening scene made even more so for the calm beauty of Nieman’s words, describing something so sinister and mindless.

From there, we are introduced to three main players. There’s first-person narration from Robin Roberts (cruel parents), a country girl who has moved to the city with her mum – leaving behind her beloved Murramunda after fires ravaged the land.

Robin meets and reluctantly befriends a strange girl at her school called Delia ... whose mother was the human that the curlew bird was watching in the beginning, being consumed by a firewall.

Delia and her brother Seth’s chapters are in third person, perhaps a reflection of the disconnection they feel, living in the fallout of their mother’s tragic death. A lecturer, their mum was in the bush doing research on the bush stone-curlew – the very same bird that Delia notices Robin idly sketching during detention one day.

Robin is, in fact, a “bird nerd” feeling unsettled in the concrete city jungle, partly because she misses the variety of birds. When Robin, Seth and Delia discover a bush stone-curlew in nearby parklands, the discovery binds them together ever tighter.

Christie Nieman really needs to be commended – she’s clearly done a lot of research into the psychological impacts of bushfires, particularly on teenagers. Delia and Seth are coping in their own, very different ways. For Delia, it’s throwing herself into her mother’s research on the curlew and looking for connections and glimpses of fate in the wake of her loss. For Seth, it’s choosing oblivion with the drug ‘angel dust’, and many of his chapters read like wading through the smoky haze of his subconscious and self-hatred.

Robin is also feeling the impact of the bushfires, but mainly in the displacement of home and the fractures she’s felt in her family;

But two months ago, when the fire came through, all the birds disappeared. Dad said it was worse than any fire anyone had seen in decades. He said we were lucky that we’d had all our sheep up in the top paddock: we hadn’t lost any, not like some of our neighbours. The fire was fast and hot, which is bad. It killed someone, some woman up in the hills, not a local, right on the fire track where Dad and I used to go to collect wood. It was in all the papers. And the fire stripped so much of the landscape that only days after it went through, there were absolutely no birds left.

I should have seen it as an omen, the birds all leaving like that. They left first, and then Mum and I left for the city a few weeks later. And I haven’t been back since. I don’t even know if any of them have returned.

I really loved that Nieman went into the range of loss for these characters – particularly because their pain is so viscerally connected to nature. This is really a recurring theme in the novel, as Nieman explores the side-by-side affects of disaster on both humans, nature and wildlife;

And that’s the complicated thing about disturbance. It’s a natural part of an ecosystem. It compels life, it changes life, it makes like dynamic. It makes an ecosystem what it is, and it makes us who we are too. But it can be dangerous: give an ecosystem, or a person, too much disturbance, and it can drive them past their point of no return.

I did occasionally feel quite cold towards Seth and Delia, but only because they felt deliberately distanced from readers with their third-person narration. Compared to Robin’s voice – vibrant, sometimes combative, a little bit cheeky – Delia and particularly Seth’s chapters were harder to get through. I appreciate that this was deliberate, and a way for Nieman to communicate just how disconnected the siblings are after the loss of their mother, but it was my response to their chapters nonetheless.

‘As Stars Fall’ is a tender morsel of a novel, a ‘Silent Spring’ for young adults that also explores dramas of the heart in the wake of nature’s tragedy. Christie Nieman is bringing something very different to contemporary YA, and I can’t wait to see what she writes next.

Eugenia (Genie In A Book) says

This review also appears on the blog Chasm of Books

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review

That is my greatest fear: that one day when we finally stop focusing so hard on ourselves, we will life our hears, we will look around, and we will find that we are alone.

Beautifully told with a unique environmental focus, *As Stars Fall* is quite an interesting piece of YA Australian fiction. Told through the stories of three teenage characters as they deal with the linked repercussions of a fire which impacted them all, this novel is one with a subtle tone that tries to convey a deeper message. Although I found the writing captivating, for the most part the pacing was very relaxed, and I felt that it needed that little extra something to push it over the line for me. Nonetheless, if you are a birdlover or have an interest in stories with damaged characters and the challenges they have to face, then you still might like to give this one a try.

He feels partial, like something has been left behind, or something in him replaced. As if now, when he walks around in his own flesh, the world around him can move and shift and play tricks on him as it wants, can suck him into darkness or strange landscapes. He doesn't have the same relationship with the world he had before. He can't trust it.

This is just one example of where the writing style really shines through as something quite powerful. Although there are a few long-winded descriptions which may leave you wondering what the point of that block of words is, for the majority I felt that it reflected what the essence of this book was about. It's an exploration of how Robin, Delia and Seth are working through the changes in their lives and coming to terms with their realities. The different tenses and alternating POV's made this quite an interesting read, as the plot is almost entirely character-driven with the aid of some bird symbolism.

I couldn't question it. It was true. A true memory. An unseen curlew and I, sitting hunkered down deep in the valley of my home - of our home - while higher up in the hills everything we knew became so disturbed and so changed as to be unrecognisable.

The one character which I could neither understand nor connect with was Seth, who throughout the whole book just seemed to be in a monotonous downward spiral. He does drugs, smokes and is crying out for help in a world which just can't seem to help him, or that he doesn't want the help. In contrast, both Robin and Delia's accounts were nuanced and honest, with the addition of some fictional science observations about the Bush Stone-Curlew adding a distinctive touch.

CONCLUSION

As Stars Fall was an enthralling read which sweeps you up into its plot which flows as if the story itself is flying. On the whole, if you are interested in impacts on the environment and people that natural events can have, then this book is for you.

Annie says

I'd say a 3.5 rating for this one... It took awhile for me to get my head around the premise however this is an intricate story of a bush fire, its aftermath and a Bush-Stone curlew (bird) that binds three unlikely teenagers together.. An interesting read and concept..

Lynne Stringer says

This book was ambitious and had so much potential to be a great novel but it seemed to get in the way of itself. The continual changing of point of view, both in style and in characters, slowed it down, and combined with excessive and sometimes repetitive descriptions, and intense and long internal musings, made for a difficult read. A lot of information is given about the environment and endangered species, such as the Bush Stone-curlew, a native Australian bird that is featured throughout the book. While that is interesting, the way it's written makes the book move slowly, and considering the heavy emotional states of the characters, it is not an easy journey.

Andrew says

As Stars Fall, is an exquisite work of fiction, and a remarkable debut.

From its evocative opening, told from the perspective of a bush stone-curlew, separated from her mate in a bushfire in country Victoria, and forced to abandon her nest and flee, and at the same witnessing the demise of a woman trapped in the fire. The story moves to the protagonist "Flame" Robin, whose family has separated in the wake of the bushfire, and moves to the city with her mother, where she meets a strange girl, Delia, who has much more in common with Robin than she knows. The story shifts perspective between Robin, Delia, and Delia's brother, Seth, who are all connected through the appearance of the bush stone-curlew who has appeared in the neighbourhood - extremely rare and endangered in the region.

For me, as a reader, I found much of Nieman's prose extremely moving - especially having lived in Darwin where the bush stone-curlew is quite common. Its bizarre appearance and haunting call provides for the perfect inspiration for an astounding novel - which makes for truly Australian contemporary gothic fiction. It explores the aftermath of the destruction and grief that comes with the tragedy of bushfires and death, blending scientific theories of natural regeneration, but at the same time, explores the various personal trajectories that we follow after the loss of a loved one, where the bush stone-curlew is the uncanny embodiment of that which we cannot describe or explain - something that can be either haunting and grotesque, or rare and beautiful, depending on our perspective.

I cannot describe how much I loved this novel. Neiman's prose is flawless, and her characters very real and relatable. Whilst this is marketed as a YA novel, this is not reflected in her writing style, but merely through the perspective of its central characters who are teenagers. I would give this to anybody to read. It is a work of beauty that deserves to be read.

Melinda says

This book is set in the Victorian country of Murramunda and the city.

It follows the lives of Robin, Delia and Seth whom have been connected and brought together by a rare and

endangered bird: the Bush- Stone Curlew.

Robin follows her father and is a bird nerd who has moved from Murramunda to the City with her mother, who has a job at a prestigious girls school.

It is at this school that 'Flame' Robin Roberts meets Delia; the small freaky girl who has been put up a grade into Robins class and is still recovering from the accident that had happened.

Delia's brother, Seth, isn't doing so well about what happened to their mother either. He blames the smokes and marijuana for the unreal connection he seems to have with the curlew in the park.

This book is a slow read, but it's the slow read that allows the writing to soak in your mind, as it is written in such a beautiful, silent, yet lyrical way.

The characters in this book were unique, each with their own struggles they needed to face, through times of confusion. There is a lot of hope, especially at the ending, where they start to become resilient and regenerate, allow themselves to start anew like the bush lands after a fire.

It is the bird, the Bush- Stone Curlew, who is like this book, beautiful and eerie. You feel the grief not only from the human characters, but the bird as well.

I love how this book has blended so well; mixing grief, the wilderness and city/ country life together. It is written in Robins first person as well as third person for Seth and Delia. The different views of this book allowed me to see in the mind of Robin, but also how much Delia and Seth were actually feeling, struggling and grieving. I found this book quite compelling, beautiful, and captivating. And I am happy that the characters kind of found themselves in the end.

I give this a 4/5

Bethwyn (Butterfly Elephant Books) says

Hello lovely people! Please find my review of this book here: <http://butterfly-elephant.blogspot.co...>

And if you can't be bothered heading there, just know that I loved it!

Steph Bowe says

As Stars Fall is beautifully written, and a novel that I think will appeal to both older teenagers and adults. Not just the adults who already love YA (of which there are many! I guess I am one of them now?), but adult readers who prefer literary novels or who might previously have dismissed YA. It's a very 'literary' YA and doesn't fit what one might expect of a 'typical' YA novel. It's contemporary but it has a distinct other-worldly edge, mixing the real and surreal well.

Seth is a character whose actions make him incredibly difficult to like, and both he and Delia's perspective are told in third-person, making them feel more distant. Their sometimes questionable behaviours are made credible by their previous experiences - Seth's behaviours are pretty much consistently terrible, but his loss is explored very well. Robin's first-person narration is engaging and immersive, and while each of the central characters are well-developed, she is the most likeable.

It's described as a love story in the blurb but I wouldn't regard it as such, and if you come into it expecting that to be central you'll be disappointed. Similarly it is very slow-paced - if you're expecting something which develops quickly, you won't find that here. It's evocatively written and luxuriates in detail, including detail about the Bush-Stone curlew. It has a great deal of depth and atmosphere but not a lot of action until the very end. It's a story that's predominantly about grief.

I think this is an intriguing and original contribution to contemporary YA literature in Australia, and I'm very much looking forward to what Christie Nieman writes next.

Lily says

WOW. Just WOW. I didn't really know what to expect when I picked up this book on a whim. It didn't really strike me as anything special and even reading the blurb I really wasn't entirely sure what this book was going to be about. But colour me impressed. This is a strong and brave debut and it certainly hits the mark at being memorable and original. It is a book with a lot to say and it does so in a haunting and compelling manner.

As Stars Fall follows the lives of three teenagers, Seth, Delia and Robin, who are each dealing with the aftermath of a recent bushfire. Robin watched the bushfire almost destroy her home and separate her family. Siblings Seth and Delia lost their mother in the blaze. Their lives are inextricably intertwined by a rare species of bird that appears in the city parklands near where they all live.

On the surface, this story is a book about loss and displacement, about dealing with grief and tragedy as well as the nature of transition. It is a book that explores emotions deeply and painfully – acceptance, loneliness, confusion, hope, connection and belonging - within the context of disaster. It is about growing up and living through those moments that completely shatter your world and finding a way to rebuild yourself from the pieces. It is also, strangely enough, a young adult book that is about science and ecology and species conservation. It is about the fact that the world is larger than just ourselves. And I think those parts were why I loved it.

“there is only one safe way to think. And it is this: that, like us, other species are important. They matter. Even if they do things differently, they care about themselves and their lives. Therefore, we should too”

This is one of those books that is about thoughts and ideas, and if books heavy on themes and emotions are not your thing you probably won't enjoy this story. As far as actual plot there is not much in the way of movement or impetus, but that's fine because this book is about the emotional journey. The complementary strands of the story work incredibly well to create a powerful experience, with the exploration of natural disasters and ecosystem dynamics acting as a vehicle to explore human responses to tragedy.

“And that's the complicated thing about disturbance. It's a natural part of an ecosystem. It compels life, it changes life, it makes life dynamic. It makes an ecosystem what it is, and it makes us who we are too. But it can be dangerous: give an ecosystem, or a person, too much disturbance, and it can drive them past their point of no return”

The imagery in this book is stunning and there is an element of tension, urgency and danger that flows like an undercurrent throughout the story and is masterfully handled. There is also a lyricism and mysticism about the writing that is so powerful and poignant. I had to reread entire passages several times just because

they were so beautiful.

“That is my greatest fear: that one day when we finally stop focusing so hard on ourselves, we will lift our heads, we will look around, and we will find that we are alone”

It is quietly haunting and, while I admit the story initially failed to grab my attention, I found that almost without realising it the cartography of the world and the intensity of the writing etched itself into my skin and wrote itself into my heart. There is something very real and raw about these characters and their journey.

My main criticisms are that this is a slow read, so probably will not achieve broad appeal. While I loved the scientific aspects and thought they were incredibly well done, I also imagine that this will not be enjoyable for everyone. There is a thread of magical realism in the story that I did not really like, I actually felt like it was unnecessary to be honest and the story would have, for me, been no less poignant without it. I also found something about the disjointed narration off-putting and genuinely struggled with Seth's chapters. I didn't find him likeable at all and, while I understand why that is from a storytelling point of view, as a reader it made his sections a slog. The level of descriptiveness and dense imagery also created an almost stifling atmosphere at times and as a consequence it's easy to lose sight of the wider plot. Fortunately, the pay off comes with those beautiful lines that are so stunning you fall a little bit more in love with every word.

Overall, I would definitely recommend this book!

Clare Snow says

Wow! I have more to say later.

Mandy says

A good read albeit predictable. Really liked the use of the Bush Stone-Curlew and the emphasis on conservation and regeneration, doesn't happen often enough in Australian novels - now I am sounding like the mother of two scientists!

Amanda says

As Stars Fall is Christie Nieman's debut novel, set in Melbourne and the fictional rural town of Murramunda. The opening scene involving a bush fire and the death of a woman was haunting, especially as seen from the eyes of a Bush Stone-curlew, a rare native Australian bird. I knew from that moment that I was in for a moving and beautiful story.

Robin is struggling with the move to the city, but she doesn't want to upset her mum after her father's betrayal. Delia and Seth are both dealing with their mother's death in different ways. Delia finds herself wanting to scientifically investigate the appearance of a bird nearby, a bird that haunts her sleep at night, sure

that the bird is one of a pair her mother was studying before she died. Seth withdraws from the world, quitting school and spending his days smoking and getting stoned, and soon finds himself similarly haunted, but in his case by Robin's arrival.

The references to different birds and their behaviour was vividly described and it's clear that Christie herself is someone who has spent a lot of time watching birds. I enjoyed looking up all the different species, as well as their unique calls. As I'm writing this I can hear cockatoos, noisy minors, and lorikeets. We have a pair of lapwings in our area and I immediately thought of them because of their similar build and their funny alarm-like call. When I used to go running really early in the morning one of my favourite things was getting to see all the different birds and animals, and listening to the birds above me as I ran.

We're so lucky to have such amazing wildlife in Australia and this book really highlighted the need for us to pay more attention to caring for these animals, rather than destroying their habitat. This was conveyed through the passionate and thoughtful writing that Selina, Delia and Seth's mum, left behind. This aspect of the story really spoke to my vegan heart.

The characters and the location all felt completely real to me and I was intrigued as to how the characters lives would intertwine. It was lovely to watch Delia and Robin become friends, and it was equally sad to watch Seth struggle on his own. There was an undercurrent of urgency throughout the story, left over from the opening scene. I could feel the ending building and thought it was well resolved. It was heart wrenching, it made me cry, and I have to say I feel a little depressed, but there's a faint tinge of hopefulness too.

As Stars Fall is a gorgeously written novel that captures the essence of the Australian bush, and shows how friendship can help to heal grief and loss. I can't believe I've had this on my shelf for two years, unaware of what a gem this book is, I can't recommend it enough.

Thank you to Pan Macmillan for my review copy.
