



ROCKWOOD READS SHADOWING GROUP MAGAZINE

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ROCKWOOD READS SHADOWING GROUP

OUR REVIEWS



“‘The Things We Leave Behind’ is a powerful look at a near-future dystopia, which feels strangely prescient considering current global politics, in which the United Kingdom finds itself torn apart by fear and prejudice - forcing 16-year-old Clem and her sister to escape London, in an attempt to find safety, as their life and family are put at risk.

A story about finding hope and kindness in amongst the darkness of human prejudice and cruelty, Clem’s journey from the London to Edinburgh also questions our understanding of memory, of family, friendship and of loss.

At times the novel is both moving and worryingly accurate to present news events, I found this book to be an engrossing read, which I highly recommend to all teen-readers. Although I sort-of guessed the third-act ‘twist’ about halfway through, it did not stop the reveal from being an extremely emotional moment, which really resonated with the themes and message of this novel. Five stars - one of the best books I’ve read as part of the Carnegies. (*****).”

- Mr. Robinson

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“The story follows two boys and the past that haunts them both. We first meet Banjo (aged 17) settling in to his new home and new family - but it is the same story for him. He is struck by his past actions, which he cannot forget or forgive himself for. Then, we meet Finley, studying hard and trying to get by - trying not to fall head-over-heels with the boy he has just met.

When reading the book, I loved how the dynamics of how the events fell into place for the characters, it felt like I was there with them. I liked how the storytelling conveyed the emotions, using different techniques, to leave me feeling emotional at the end.

Overall, I thought the story points and twists were quite interesting, I found some of the choices that Banjo and Finley made a little infuriating, as different choices could have led to a better end - but, ultimately, the story follows the lesson that life may not go as you plan, but you can overcome the challenges if you try.

Rating: **** (Four stars out of five).”

- Habiba

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“The story is about the things we lose when our freedom and rights are taken away due to fear and prejudice. As Clem` and her sister run away to escape oppression, the story shows how things can still be with us, even when they may seem like they are gone.

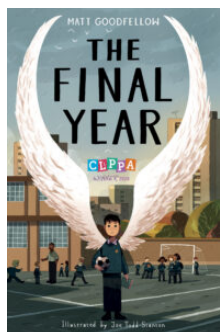
I really liked how this story made me feel something, while also making me think about the issues and themes in Clem`s journey - although I did find the story a little slow in places and a little confusing in parts, due to the jumbled nature of the story`s order and the nature of the narrator`s memory.

I liked how the story made me think a lot, but I wish that it had a bit more action at times - this story was more serious than what I usually read (I prefer `horror` and `adventure`), but, overall, I would give this book 4 out of 5 stars. (****)”

- Sudeys

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“The book is about Nate, a Year 6 boy in `the final year` of his primary school, facing big challenges, such as his brother being ill and losing contact with his best friend.

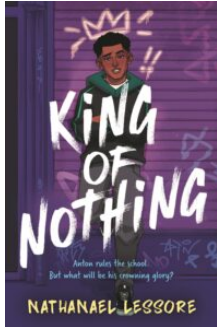
Overall, I found it quite a relatable story for many people, as it explores themes of friendship, family and grief. However, I found the book to be a bit boring and also quite difficult to understand what was happening in parts of the story.

Unfortunately, despite the relatable themes, this book did not engage me as I didn't feel that it fully explored some of the themes it raised.
Rating: ** (two stars).”

- Medina

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“This book is about a boy named Anton and his friends, who `rule the school`. Other kids don’t dare to step up to them. Anton thinks he is living his best life, but when Matthew (the `loser` of the school) saves his life things change.

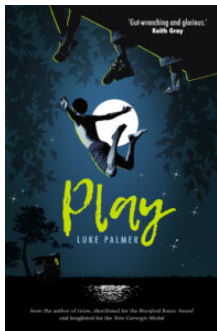
When reading `King of Nothing`, I liked how Anton slowly starts to realize who true friends are and how family is important in shaping your life (both for better and worse).

Overall, there was nothing I disliked about this book. I found it really interesting - a good adventure, with some good humour in places (an amazing rollercoaster of a read) Five stars: *****”

- Romeela

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“The book is about four boys growing up together at school, itching to get out of the small town they call home. They play games, scoring points from each other - anything to pass the time until they are free.

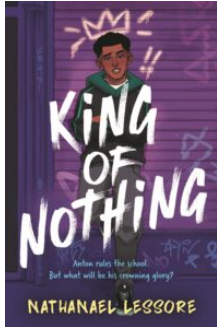
As I read the book, I liked how it was written - finding the dialogue throughout to be real and convincing. The themes of childhood, friendship, masculinity and loss of innocence are expertly intertwined.

However, I found some of the themes (such as drinking and drugs) and some of the language to be very intense and a tough read for young readers. I would recommend it, but only for mature readers (Year 11 and over). *** (Three stars).”

- Saim

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“‘King of Nothing’ tells the story of Anton, a Year 9 student with the reputation of being ‘King’ of his school. But when his mother decides to reprimand him for his recent behavior by making him join a local youth group, Anton is forced to question his own identity and life choices when he decides to help William, the school ‘loser’, to become popular to impress another student.

As I read the book I was surprised by how what I thought began as a modern interpretation of George Bernard Shaw’s ‘Pygmalion’ (with Anton trying to make William ‘cool’), actually became more like Charles Dicken’s ‘A Christmas Carol’, with the characters of Anton’s Nanna, William and Anton’s ex-con’ father encouraging Anton to look at his actions in the past, the present and the consequences for the future – if he does not change his ways!

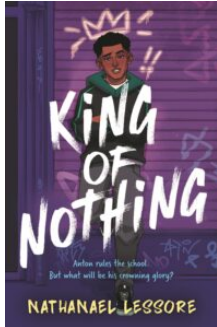
Although I did not particular enjoy Nathanael Lessore’s previous book (‘Steady for This’ – a Carnegies entry for 2024), I was impressed by how ‘King of Nothing’ addressed some very heavy themes (such as bullying, domestic abuse and toxic masculinity) in an engaging and considered manner, while still being accessible to teen-readers – having Anton question his own actions and those around him was a very good way of doing this.

If I had any criticisms, my only (minor) points would be the use of the ‘third-act death’ trope (similar to another Carnegies book from this year) and a finale ‘action sequence’ that (although enjoyable and effective) seems to spring up like something out of an American ‘buddy-cops’ movie and felt a little out of place with the rest of the book. However, both of these plot elements are handled well and did not take away from my overall enjoyment of this book. Five stars ***** (Highly recommended).”

- Mr. Robinson

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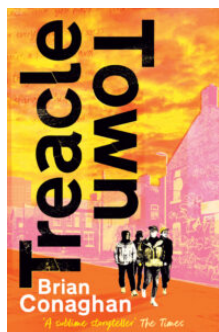
“‘King of Nothing’ is about Anton, a school bully who, unexpectedly, slowly turns into a real friend to Matthew - the biggest loser in school – after Matthew saves Anton’s life. This is a story that deals with the themes of ‘bullying’ and ‘friendship’. When reading the book, I liked that the main character cares about his friends and family and how his friendships change as he starts to question his own views and actions. The book also looked at parents and how their actions affect their children (such as doing something wrong).

Overall, I would recommend this book, I like how it depicts school life. ***** (five stars).”

- Saim

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“In ‘Treacle Town’, Connor is an 18-year-old boy trapped in a society of gangs and violence. After a close friend dies (due to gang violence), Connor delves into the world of slam poetry, and it might just be his means of escape...

Reading the book, I thought it seemed like a good representation of life on the streets. However, I found the language used to be quite difficult to understand in places and the plot did not engage me, as this genre is not what I typically read.

Overall: Two stars (**) out of five.”

- Bahja

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“The story is about Mati and her family, who are travelling to Zimbabwe, after the death of their mother. Their relationships are breaking – as seen with 17-year-old ChiChi and their father. In Zimbabwe, Mati meets Meticaais, a strikingly dressed and quite grumpy character, which only Mati can speak to and see.

As I read this book I liked the sense of mystery, as the reader is unsure as to who or what Meticaais really is – they may be a ghost, an imaginary friend or even an ancestral spirit guiding their broken family.

However, I didn't really like how the characters were not really explained about – at times, I did not know who they were or where they were, which made it confusing to read in places. Unfortunately, this is not my kind of book. ** (Two stars out of five).”

- Rayan

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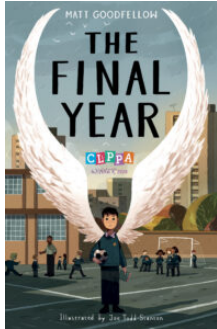
“The story is based in a Future-London, where an authoritarian government has taken control of the country, causing civilian distress and the mass-deportation of innocent people.

When reading the book, I enjoyed the writing style of the book and the dystopian feeling it created. I felt that the story was well thought-out and also well-written. However, I thought that the pace of the story was sometimes a little uneven, particularly in the middle – which I thought was a little slow. But, overall, I thought it was a decent book – four out of five (****).”

- Medina

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“The story follows 10-year-old Nate; who is in his final year in primary school. Taking care of his 2 younger brothers is tough, but at least he has his best mate PS... But things threaten to spiral out of control when his friendship becomes strained and a sudden health crisis in the family.

I really loved everything about this book; from the poetry, to the characters, and Joe Todd Stanton’s AWESOME illustrations. It has got to be one of my favorite books. It was such a powerful read, full of emotion, it had me on the edge of my seat – unable to put it down.

I felt the book had no real weaknesses, I just wish we could have had some more information about some of the other characters – like Caleb. Overall, I loved it and would recommend this book to others. Five stars (*****)”

- Bahja

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“The story is about a girl and her siblings. They travel from London to Zimbabwe after their mother died and are forced to confront family dynamics. During the trip they meet a spirit or ghost that only the girls can see.

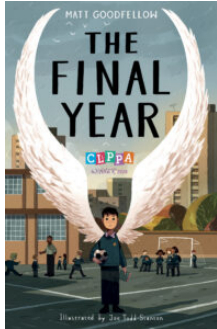
I liked the diversity represented in this book and how it embraces culture and many hardships people go through such as loss of a family member. I enjoyed the fact that it came with many plot twists.

However, I felt that the author only focused on using fancy words and I felt that the story was very rushed and I did not find it engaging - it made me want to go to sleep at times. This was not helped by the author's writing style which, I felt, makes no sense at all. Overall, I found the book to be boring and it did not engage this reader. Two stars (**).”

- Medina

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“The book is about a boy named Nate who is a young carer to his brother Jaxon and Dylan. Their life was normal but when he went to year 6 everything he felt like he had, everything he felt bottled up, come to the surface as new challenges come his way - and when his brother gets sick his life gets completely turned upside down.

I liked the concept and the drama of this book because it made the story unique. I also like how it was a poem. Honestly, I had my doubts about this book, like how was it a poem, but it surprised me. This book is a great story to read.

I felt it had no weaknesses because of how the story lines add up and I liked how the author used poems, but made the story feel normal and easy to follow. Overall, I would recommend this book – it was fun and unique to read. ***** (out of five).”

- Sabrina

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“‘Play’ is about four boys who grow up together, until they start to act differently and notice strange things happening to each other, then they play a game, which results in some bad news.

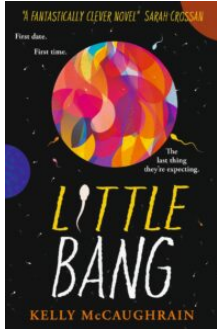
When reading, I liked the fact that there were three different perspectives from the three different boys on how they view the world and each other. I also liked the different styles of writing. However, I think the novel may have benefitted from the use of pictures, to help visualize some of the key moments of the story better.

Overall, I thought it was an amazing book and I liked it. **** (out of five stars).”

- Nadirah

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“‘Little Bang’ follows the story of a 16-year-old girl named Melanie and Sid, a rowdy teenager of the same age. After one night of fireworks, under-aged drinking and passion, Sid and Melanie discover that they are soon to become parents. We, the reader, follow them on their story, each of them having their own view on the situation – but what will Melanie decide?

As the reader, I liked how the author portrayed Melanie’s character and the conflict she experiences throughout the book – how, at first, she was willing to do this, but ultimately she decides against it and takes her future into her own hands, even if those around her disapprove. This reflects how those in this type of situation in real life are sometimes treated.

If I had to highlight a weakness, I would say that I didn’t like how the characters of Sid’s friend group were portrayed – leaning into the ‘trouble-maker’ stereotype, which I found a little distasteful. Also, the fact that many of Sid’s actions go against his initial thoughts.

However, overall, I thought this was an amazing book and loved many elements of how it was written (four stars out of five). ****”

- Habiba

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“Set in dystopian England, the book follows a young girl named Clem` as she leaves home to find safety. The story looks back on the rise of a far right politician to leader of the country and his racist and xenophobic policies. It is a story about protecting your own, blood or not.

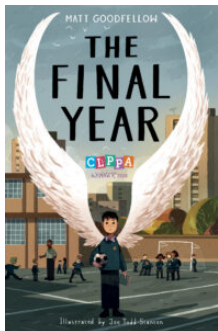
Overall, I loved the story line and I liked the switch from present to past - it felt like we lived in the main character's head and thoughts. I also appreciated the length of the book, as it wasn't too long.

However, regarding the structuring of the novel, there were no chapters so it wasn't very structured. It was also a slow start, but it was engaging once you get into it. Five stars (*****).”

- Hasher

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“‘The Final Year’ tells the story of Nate, as he enters the ‘final year’ of junior school – facing the challenge of SATS and school friendships as well as issues at home, as he prepares to move up to secondary school, whilst helping to raise his two younger brothers and dealing with his own mental health.

As a novel told in verse (each chapter is a poem), I found the book easy for the reader to access and engage in – with the relationship between Nate and his two brothers being very emotional and well-written. Similarly, the developing friendship between Nate and Caleb – with the section focusing on the Year 6 ‘residential’ (and the artwork in this section) being a real highlight of the book.

However, I felt that the novel perhaps had an excess of plotlines, with some of these feeling either under-developed or introduced for ‘dramatic effect’ (the third act of this book sees a traumatic family event take place which, as a parent, I found slightly distressing in the handling and then felt it was a bit emotionally manipulative as the author then seemed to reverse the event for narrative purposes *). I also felt that the depiction of the ‘single parent’ in the book was somewhat stereotypical and negative in its’ view of this type of character (which I felt was handled better in ‘The Wrong Shoes’ – a book from this year’s ‘Longlist’ selection).

Overall, I found the book to be an easily accessible read, with some really emotional moments, but some of the themes and narrative plotlines could have been explored further and perhaps handled differently. *** (out of five).

(* note: Having already looked at the follow-up book to this, I was disappointed to find the author backtracks on an aspect of the ‘twist’ in the ending of ‘The Final Year’ in a similar way that

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“The book is about two boys – Banjo and Finlay – who are both trying to fit in. They both knew each other from their adoption centre. Finlay is trying to finish his degree at Glasgow University, except he has no support network, whilst trying to find paid work and not fall in love. Meanwhile, Banjo is trying to settle in with his foster family, but his anger keeps getting the best of him – threatening his uncertain future.

I really enjoyed how this book was set in Glasgow, as most books I read are set in either England or America. As well as this, I liked how the story had two points of view, which joined together towards the end. I found this quite exciting and different to the type of books I usually read.

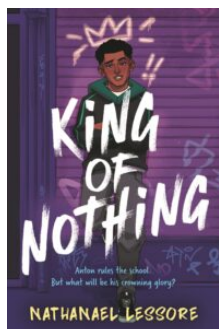
However, I didn't really enjoy how Banjo's accent is written – with words like “jus” instead of “just”, making it hard to follow sometimes what was being said, but I found the ‘glossary’ at the back quite useful.

Overall, I loved this book and would recommend it to others (perhaps older readers, as it contains some mature aspects regarding ‘relationships’). Four stars out of five. ****”

- Aleena

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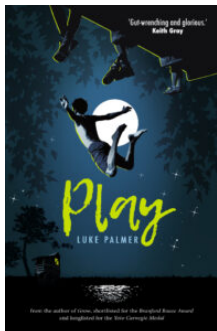
“The story is about a teenager who used to have a bad reputation for being a bully – mocking his teachers and ditching detention. Then he meets a person who changes his life and he starts to think about his actions. Meanwhile, his friends get upset and try to change his mind.

When reading the book, I enjoyed the funny jokes and the way the main character mocks his teachers and how the writer establishes him in the opening chapter. The only weakness I think the book has is that the writer introduces the person who changes the life of the main character a bit late in the story – but, overall, I thought the book was wonderful and fun to read. Five stars: *****”

- Sudeys

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“The story is about four boys playing games, scoring points against each other, but as the boys grow up, the games become more dangerous when Mark starts running errands for his older brother.

What I liked about this book is the bits of poetry and the bits about family.

The book made me laugh in places and was emotional in places. I honestly thought there were no bad bits in this book – it was fantastic. It had some really heart-breaking moments.

Overall, I thought it was amazing and would give it five stars (out of five) *****”

- Subhan

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“The story is about a girl named Matiponesa, who had a brother named Tana and an older sister named Chiwoniso (Chichi for short). When their mother dies, they travel from England to Zimbabwe, stopping at places along the way. Along the journey, Matiponesa encounters a ghost-spirit called Meticais – who helps her learn about her heritage and deal with her grief.

I really liked the title of this book – I found it interesting and adventurous, which was showing in the travelling aspect of the story. I also enjoyed the fact that it was written in the first-person perspective, which helped with the themes of the book – although I didn’t like that the narrator liked using the word ‘swearing’ and parts of the story (the mother’s death) were difficult for younger readers.

Overall, I thought the book was good for young-adult readers and would recommend it to them.

Three stars out of five (***)”

- Muhammad Bilal