Morning in This Broken World

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Reviewed by Stephanie Kendrick

As the world collectively creeps toward the proverbial light at the end of a long pandemic tunnel, Katrina Kittle gives a story that many of us are hungry for. *Morning in this Broken World* follows Vivian, newly widowed and coping through the COVID-19 lockdown after the devastating loss of her beloved husband. Kittle cleverly tells this story through the stream of consciousness narration of four characters: Vivian, Wren, Luna, and Cooper. In doing so, layers are peeled back and added to reveal and explore strong themes of community, identity, and survival.

As the novel opens, we meet Vivian and see her beginning the process of ending her own life. Almost immediately we witness the power of being needed and the importance of community when we meet Luna, who, at least temporarily, saves Vivian by offering her the task of looking after her daughter, Wren. Luna is a newly single mother who is struggling with a looming eviction, and Vivian loves her for taking such good care of her husband when he was alive. Serendipitously, Vivian finds the eviction notice and sees an opportunity to move back to her own palatial home and out of her husband’s assisted living facility with the people who finally quiet the dark voices in her mind—Luna, Wren and Luna’s son, Cooper. Luna perceives Vivian’s offer as a sign of her own failure as a mother, even though Vivian *needs* the support and company of Luna to make it without her husband. Wren symbolizes perseverance and acts as a stark juxtaposition to Luna. Wren depends on literal physical assistance from those around her because of her developmental disability, and is still arguably the strongest character in the story. Cooper, Wren’s brother, goes through his own identity struggle. After being forced to hide who he truly is for so long, living with Vivian gives him the opportunity to come out of hiding, allowing his character to transcend...
into a happiness that contrasts the heavier happenings around him. As readers, we get to experience the transformative power that true connection has on all four central characters.

Kittle delicately incorporates tough topics such as suicide, death, sexuality, addiction, and cancer—very human issues that fuel motivation, add nuance to identities, and ensure that this story is anything but one-dimensional. Because Kittle presents these topics so realistically and honestly, this novel is appropriate for a wide audience, including young adults. *Morning in this Broken World* validates that tragedy and hardships are parts of being alive, but also reminds us of the beauty and happiness that waits in the relationships we have with those who love us, and the importance of being seen and honored by those we love.

Poets have much to appreciate in this book starting with the title, which is a line from Mary Oliver’s poem *Invitation*: “believe us, they say,/ it is a serious thing// just to be alive/ on this fresh morning/ in the broken world.” Oliver’s poem implores the reader to appreciate the beauty of birdsong, and uses their music as a call to arms of sort, to live in joy. Then, Kittle opens the book with a poem: *This is How a Pandemic Ends, Not with a Bang But with Cicadas* by Kathleen McCleary. This poem is a perfect welcome to this story. “We went underground this year/ like the cicadas, burrowed deep…” Cicadas provide such a wonderful metaphor for our experience of Covid—our *burrowing* in our respective homes, the shells we create during trauma, and how short our lives are even when we erupt from those shells are all ideas that are speckled throughout this book. The final lines of the poem speak to the desire and importance of connection that veins throughout this story and holds it intact: “And I swear the other sound I hear/ is the crackling of millions of exoskeletons/ the shells we grew to harden ourselves/ against our longing to be touched.”
As the world struggled with the contradictory need of separation and connection, Kittle explores the risky and empowering balancing act of choosing your own family, setting boundaries, and diving headfirst into what it is you want, need, and deserve. This is a story that will feed us all.