

A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE THING

Miranda Moore

About the book

A Beautiful, Terrible Thing, the soaring debut from Miranda Moore, is an emotional *tour de force*, deftly unpacking the aftermath of tragedy and the fragility of hope and our sense of the future. When 13-year-old Simon is hit by a car and killed, the lives of the two families involved spiral out into grief and regret, rage and remorse. For the driver, Nathan, 18, his guilt threatens to destroy his own life until he meets Cara. But with secrets on both sides, and seemingly insurmountable grief, is there truly any hope for the future, and can any of the families move beyond this tragedy? Told from dual perspectives of Nathan and Cara, this is a YA debut with real weight; sad, funny, wry and unflinching in its portrayal of teen life and the impact of a few seconds on so many lives.



About the author

Miranda Moore writes fiction and non-fiction, and works as a freelance editor and writing coach. She is also a Royal Literary Fund Fellow, supporting students with their writing. Before books, she worked in newspapers as a features writer and section editor. Miranda won the DFB & Arvon Search for a Storyteller competition 2024 and the Wells Festival of Literature Book for Children prize 2023, and has been twice shortlisted for a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award. She has a degree in English and Philosophy and a Masters in International Peace Studies. Miranda runs the literary consultancy Wordwitch Editorial, sings in a band and teaches qigong. She lives with her family in the Scottish Borders.

General introduction

This novel contains much for discussion, however the central tenet of the novel demands appropriate preparedness and consideration of the members of any group. Opening with the death of a 13-year-old, hit by a car driven by one of the two narrative characters, it goes on to explore themes of grief, loss, depression, self-harm, suicide and incarceration. As such, ensure any necessary support is in place, and be confident that the group will be happy to discuss these topics freely. It would be worth revisiting any ground rules that exist for your group.

Discussion questions

GETTING STARTED

To begin, ask if anyone would like to share their thoughts on the book. What did anyone like about it? How did it make anyone feel? Did it remind anyone of anything else they've read, or seen? What is the book 'about'?

1. Nathan

'He's a fucking idiot. He's just swanning about. He has no clue how lucky he is.' - p.237

What did anyone in the group think of Nathan? How would anyone describe him? Was he guilty? Careless? Dangerous? Unlucky? All of these? Discuss how he describes an imagined version of himself in which the accident didn't happen – how would he seem to the reader if not for the accident? Do any of us have a 'clue how lucky' we are? How did anyone feel about his descent into depression, self-harm, even contemplating suicide – what could he have done differently, if anything?

2. Cara

'Grief coiled around me, sometimes tightening until I could barely breathe; occasionally loosening its grip for a moment. You had to seize those moments and breathe. It was still there, snaking around me, but it was slackening to rest and digest.' – p.50

How does the author introduce the reader to Cara? Is it important that we meet her before she knows what has happened? If so, why? How does the author create the sense of Cara's grief, for the reader? Do we experience her grief with her? What is the impact of the reader knowing who Nathan is (to her) before Cara does? What atmosphere does this create for the reader? What brings Cara through her grief? How important is her strength of character?

3. A Beautiful, Terrible Thing

Why is the title of the book, *A Beautiful, Terrible Thing*? What is this 'thing'? Why is it both beautiful and terrible? Can something be both things at the same time? How does the title reflect some of the internal conflicts within the narrative?

4. Claythorpe

'See those cliffs, how rugged, how sheer they are. There's something magical about them. I love those cliffs.' - p.128

Discuss the importance of setting in the novel. Why does Nathan go to Drumleith? What is significant to the characters about Claythorpe? Edinburgh? The hills and hikes the characters undertake? How do the characters explore their situation through the places they go?

5. Music

“But reading’s like breathing,” she said. / I shrugged. “Music’s more my thing.” - p.89

Music runs through the novel as a constant presence. Discuss the importance of music to the narrative, and its importance to the characters themselves. What did anyone make of the playlist at the end of the novel? Both Nathan and Cara are musical – how does listening to music compare to creating music? What is the significance of their both being creative in this way?

6. Siblings

‘Imagine if it was my brother. How would I feel?’ - p.145

Discuss the dynamics of siblings in the book. How is Simon presented? How is Damian presented? What about the similarity of their nicknames? Why is it significant that we see Nathan’s relationship with his brother develop, when Cara’s cannot?

7. Perspectives and parallels

‘I’ve started to feel that there is some future out there.’ - p.286

Why does the author choose to tell the story from both Nathan and Cara’s perspectives? How would it be different if told from, e.g., a third person, omniscient narrator? Explore the parallels and contrasts between the two central characters – their home life, family set up, aspirations, hopes, etc. How does Simon’s death disrupt these parallels?

8. Polaris

‘We talk about Polaris – the North Star – like it’s a single star but it’s actually three stars close together’ - p.94

Who is the central character of the novel? Is there one? To what extent is Simon the main character – the ‘supergiant’ with two smaller companions? What is the wider significance of Cara’s love of the stars? What about Polaris as constant, a way of navigating?

9. Friendship

‘I texted Scotty. Scotty always came to the rescue.’ - p.147

How important is the idea of friendship in the novel? How do Nathan and Cara’s respective friends, Scotty and Shell, impact the story? What do they offer the central characters? What about them, as characters themselves?

10. Saving

‘His voice came to me, that time at Claythorpe. “I need to do some saving.”’ - p.171

Discuss the concept of being ‘saved’ in the novel. What does Nathan mean when he says, ‘I need to do some saving’? How does the concept of ‘saving’ relate to forgiveness, within the narrative? Why does he want to plead guilty? What is it to be saved? Who ‘saves’ him? Does anyone ‘save’ Cara?

11. Justice

‘Yeah, there was quite a lot of dread, but a bit of something like atonement, too.’ - p.240

How do you feel about the verdict and sentence served to Nathan? How would you feel about it from the opposing perspectives of Nathan’s family and Cara’s family? Why does Nathan feel ‘something like peace’ (p.264)? What about Cara’s response?

12. Light and dark

The story deals with some extremely traumatic subject matter and themes, but also features elements of light relief. Why did the author include seemingly irrelevant passages such as Nathan and Cara discussing their favourite and least favourite sweets? As readers, do you need some moments of relief when you read dark stories, or can you handle a barrage of difficult subject matter? Does the dark material have more impact when it’s peppered with moments of lightness?

13. Young children

Both protagonists have an encounter with a young child which makes an impression on them. For Cara, it’s her client Maddie, who asks her very candidly about her brother. For Nathan’s it’s the ‘wee girl’, Billie. Why are these characters included in the story? Do adults tend to underestimate the emotional intelligence of young children?

14. A new beginning

At the start of the book, Nathan mentions the notion of ‘A new beginning’ (p.1). He reflects again on this on pages 10, 281 and 289. How does this idea evolve from the beginning to the end of the book? Does Nathan get a new beginning? Why has the author brought this notion back in at the end of the story?

15. Ending

‘It’s not nothing.’

Discuss the significance of the line repeated at the end of the book: *‘It’s not nothing.’* What do you think Nathan, or Cara, or the author meant by this? Does it have more than one meaning?