



We Are All Made of Stars: A Novel

By Rowan Coleman

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“Fans of Jojo Moyes will love *We Are All Made of Stars*” (*Good Housekeeping*). “A beautiful web of a book” (Jodi Picoult), this life-affirming novel tells an unforgettable story about second chances, the power of words, and the resilience of the heart.

A dedicated nurse, Stella finds comfort at the hospice where she works the late shift, especially since her husband returned from Afghanistan—cold, distant, and shattered by painful memories he refuses to share. The hospice at night is another world, where the dying receive closure by creating the letters that Stella helps them write. The pages are filled with love and humor, sometimes regret, and, occasionally, even instructions for a perplexed husband on how to run appliances. There’s one rule: The letters are mailed only after the patient has passed.

Suddenly Stella is faced with a dilemma: A woman under her care, Grace, has written a confession to the son she abandoned many years before. The letter clearly needs to be read before Grace dies. But if Stella mails it now, she breaks the rule—and risks tampering not only with Grace’s wishes but also with fate.

Navigating passion and grief, loyalty and loss, and a marriage threatened by silence and secrets, Stella discovers that letters hold a special power: granting solace, saving memories, nurturing relationships. As the words endure, love redeems.

Praise for *We Are All Made of Stars*

“A beautiful web of a book that reminds us of how we are all connected, and how to die—and live—without regrets. Is that a tear in my eye? No, that’s a tear in *your* eye.”—**Jodi Picoult, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Leaving Time* and *The Storyteller***

“*We Are All Made of Stars* will break your heart and put the pieces back together—fans of Jojo Moyes’s *Me Before You*, this one is right up your alley.”—**Refinery29**

“Coleman uses several voices and perspectives to turn a potentially dark story

into one filled with light. Fans of Jojo Moyes will love this beautifully written, deeply engaging novel that understands death and celebrates life.” —***Booklist*** (starred review)

“A powerful, emotional read.” —***RT Reviews***

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“Coleman has written a poignant story that examines the value of life, love, and forgiveness. . . . A tear-jerking but ultimately uplifting story.” —***Kirkus Reviews***

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We Are All Made of Stars: A Novel By Rowan Coleman Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #244348 in Books
- Published on: 2016-07-26
- Released on: 2016-07-26
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.60" h x 1.10" w x 6.50" l, .81 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Rowan Coleman is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eleven novels, including *The Accidental Mother* and its sequel, *The Accidental Family*, as well as *Another Mother’s Life*, *Mommy by Mistake*, and *The Day We Met*. She lives with her husband and children in England.

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Dear Len,

Well, if you are reading this, it’s happened. And I suppose that I ought to be glad, and so should you. We’ve both spent such a long time waiting, and I could see how much it was wearing you down, as much as you tried to hide it.

Now, the life insurance policy is in the shoe box in the bedroom, on top of the wardrobe, under that hat I wore to our Dominic’s wedding, remember? The one with the veil you said made me look like a femme fatale? You might not, you drank too much beer and four of Dominic’s friends had to carry you upstairs, you great oaf. It’s not much of a payout, I don’t think, but it will be enough for the funeral at least. I don’t have any wishes concerning that matter. You know me better than anyone else will. I trust you to get it right.

The washing machine. It’s easy really. You turn the round knob clockwise to the temperature you want to wash at, but don’t worry about that. Just wash everything at forty degrees. It mostly works out all right. And you put the liquid in the plastic thing in the drum, not in the drawer. I don’t even really know why they have those drawers anymore.

You need to eat, and not stuff you can microwave. You need to at least shake hands with a vegetable once a week, promise me. You always made the Sunday night tea, cheese on toast and baked beans on the side, so I’m sure you’ll be able to keep body and soul together if you put some effort in. I expect at first lots of

people will feed you, but you'll need to get a cookbook. I think there's a Rachael Ray under the bed. I got it for Christmas last year from Susan, and I thought, what a cheek!

Len, do you remember the night we met? Do you remember how you led me onto the dance floor, didn't talk, didn't ask me or anything, you rogue. Just took my hand and led me out there, and how we twirled and laughed and the room became a blur, and when the song stopped, you kissed me. Still hadn't said a word to me, mind you, and you kissed me right off my feet. The first thing you said to me was, "You better tell me your name, as you're the girl I'm going to marry." Cheek of the devil, I thought, but you were right.

It's been a good life, Len, full of love and happiness, just as much—more than—the sadness and the bad times, if you think about it, and I have had a lot of time to think about it lately. A person can't really ask for more. Don't stop because I've stopped. Keep going, Len. Keep dancing, dancing with our grandchildren for me. Make them laugh and spoil them rotten.

And when you think of me, don't think of me in these last few days, think of me twirling and laughing and dancing in your arms.

Remember me this way.

Your loving wife,

Dorothy

prologue

Stella

He was a runner. That was the first thing I knew about Vincent.

One hot July, four years ago, I saw him early each morning, running past me as I walked to work, for almost three weeks in a row.

That summer I'd decided to get up before seven, to enjoy the relative quiet of an early North London morning on my way to start a shift at the hospital. I was a trauma nurse back then, and there was something about the near stillness of the streets, the quiet of the roads that gave me just a little space to exhale before a full eight hours of holding my breath. So I walked to work, sauntered more like, kicking empty coffee cups out of my way, flirting with street sweepers, dropping a strong cup of tea off to the homeless guy who was always crammed up against the railings by the park, working on his never-ending novel. It was my rest time, my respite.

At almost exactly the same time every morning, Vincent ran past me at full pelt, like he was racing some unseen opponent. I'd catch a glimpse of a water bottle, closely cropped dark hair, a tan, nice legs, long and muscular. Every day, at almost exactly the same time, for nearly three weeks. He'd whip by, and I'd think, there's the runner guy, another moment ticked off on my journey. I liked the predictability. The flirty street sweeper. The cup of tea drop. The runner. Sort of like having your favorite song stuck in your head.

Then one morning he slowed down, just a hairsbreadth, and turned his head. For the briefest moment I looked into his eyes, such a bright blue, like mirrors reflecting the sky. And then he was gone, again, but it was already too late, my routine was disturbed, along with my peace of mind. All day that day, in the middle

of some life-and-death drama, or in the quiet of the locker room, I found the image of those eyes returning to me again and again. And each time it gave me butterflies.

The next morning I waited for him to run past me again, and for normality to be restored. Except he stopped—so abruptly, a few feet in front of me—and then bent over for a moment, his hands on his knees, catching his breath. I hesitated, sidestepped, and decided to keep walking.

“Wait—please.” He took a breath between words, holding up a hand that halted me. “I thought I wasn’t going to stop, and then I thought, Just do it, so I did.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I thought you might like to come for a coffee with me?” He smiled. It was full of charm. It was a smile that was used to winning.

“Did you?” I asked him. “Why?”

“Well, hoped more like,” he said, the smile faltering a little. “My name is Vincent. Vincent Carey. I’m a squaddie, Coldstream Guards. I’m on leave, going back to the desert soon. And you never know, do you, so I thought .?.?. well, you’ve got lovely hair, all curls, all down your back. And eyes like amber.”

He had noticed my eyes, perhaps in that same second that I noticed his.

“I’m a very lazy person,” I told him. “I never go anywhere fast.”

“Is that a weird way of saying no to coffee?” I liked his frown as much as his smile.

“It’s a warning,” I said. “A warning that I might not be your kind of person.”

“Sometimes,” he said, “you just know when someone is your sort of person.”

“From their hair?” I laughed.

“From their eyes.” I couldn’t argue with that.

“Mind if I walk part of the way with you?” he asked.

“Okay.”

I smiled to myself as he fell in step next to me, and we walked in silence for a while.

“You weren’t kidding about being slow,” he said eventually.

The second thing I knew about Vincent was that one day I was going to marry him. But the first thing I knew was that he was a runner—which makes him so hard to look at now, his damaged face turned to the wall as he sleeps, and the space where his leg used to be.

Hope

I can't sleep. I can never sleep these days, not in here anyway, when they don't let it be truly dark, not ever, but it's not only that, it's because I can't stop thinking about how I came to be here. I know of course. I caught something, a bug, bacterial which is dangerous news when living with cystic fibrosis. I almost died, and now I'm here, in this place where they never really turn the lights out on the long and painful road to recuperation. I know that, but what I don't know—what I want to know—is how. I want to know precisely the second that little cluster of bacteria drifted like falling blossom into my bloodstream. I can't know of course, but that doesn't mean I don't want to or that I can stop thinking about it. The frustrating thing about my condition is that I have a lot of time on my hands to think, but not a lot of time on the clock to live. Time moves slowly and quickly at the very same time, racing and stretching, boring and terrifying and you can live you whole life with the idea of mortality, that one day, it will be the last day, and still never really know or care what it means. Not until the last day arrives, that is.

I was at a party, when death came to find me.

I hate parties, but my best friend Ben made me go.

"You can't stay in all your life," he said, dragging me out of my room, and down the stairs. "You are twenty-one years old, nearly twenty-two. You are in your prime."

"You are in your prime. I'm most likely middle aged," I told him, even though I knew he hates me referring to my life expectancy of something like forty years. "And anyway, I could, I could stay in all my life and listen to Joni Mitchell and read books, and design book covers, try and work out the solo of "Beat It" on my guitar and I'd be perfectly fine."

"Mrs. K?" Ben dragged me into the living room, where my parents were watching TV, same old same old, some police detective, who drinks too much and lost his wife in a bitter divorce, chasing down some psycho killer. "Tell your daughter, she's a twenty-one-year-old woman, she needs to go out and have fun! Remind her that life is for living, and not for sitting alone in her room reading about how other people do it! Plus it's all the old crew from school, back from college. We haven't been together in ages, and they are all dying to see you."

Mum turned in her chair, and I could see the worry in her eyes, despite her smile, but there was nothing new there. She'd been worried about me for every moment of my twenty-one years, constantly. Sometimes I wonder if she'd wished she could change my name, after I was diagnosed as a baby—and the situation was officially hopeless—but it was too late by then. It was a name that already belonged to me, a cruel irony that we both had to live with now. My poor darling mum. She has enough on her plate. It wasn't fair to make her decide if I went out or not, because she'd spend the rest of the evening worrying either way and later, she would have torn herself to pieces with blame. So, making my own decision—that was one of the things I did right that night. It was just the choice that was wrong.

"Oh fine, I'm coming out. I'll get changed."

Ben grinned at me and sat down on the bottom step, and I thought of him there, in his skinny jeans, woman-sweater, sloping off on one shoulder, as I rifled through my wardrobe, looking for something, anything that might even nearly equal his effortless cool. It wasn't fair, really, that little odd duckling, the boy that the other kids left out or pushed around, had suddenly grown into a sexy hip swan. We used to be lame kids together. That was how we came to be best friends. It was part of the natural process of banding together,

like circling our wagons, greater safety—even in our meager number of two—than being alone. Him: the skinny shy kid with the gray collars and worn-down shoes; and me: the sick girl.

I don't think it was then—when Ben came into the house—though it could have been. He could have left a trace of a germ on the banister, or the damp towel in the downstairs loo. It could have been then, but I don't think it was because near death by hand towel isn't even nearly fitting enough.

I dressed all in black, and rimmed my eyes in kohl and hoped that would do the trick.

The moment we walked in through the door, and the wave of heat and sweat and molecules of saliva that I know are in every breath I take hit us, I wanted to go home. I almost turned around right then, but Ben had his hand on the small of my back. There was something protective about it, something comforting—and they were my friends, after all, the people I've grown up with, who are always nice to me, and do fun runs in my name, and who I could sit and have a coffee and a laugh with, who would always find something for us to talk about, carefully avoiding those potentially awkward questions like "How's it going? Still think you'll be dead soon?"

"Hopey!" Sally Morse, my sort of best female friend from school, ran the length of the hallway to engulf me in a hug. "Oh shit, it's so good to see you. You look great! How's it going? What's new? You're like an entrepreneur or something, aren't you?" She hooked her arms through mine, briefly resting her head on my shoulder as she led me into the kitchen, and I noticed the slight pinkness around her nostrils, the remnants of a cold.

"I'm okay," I told her, accepting a beer. "I started designing book covers for people, and it's going quite well."

"That's so cool," she said happily. "That's so totally cool, because you know really university is a huge waste of time. There are no jobs out there, and you end up in loads of debt. It's a very expensive way to get laid and drunk. Oh god, I emailed you loads, but you're shit at replying. Too busy I suppose, being a businesswoman."

She paused for a moment, scanning my face, and then dragged me into a hug, filling my face with lemon and smoke-scented hair, and I hugged her back. I'd thought I didn't miss any of that, the people I once saw almost every day for most of life. I told myself that anyway, but it turned out that I did. I was happy to see her in that moment; happy I had come. Perhaps it was then, perhaps in the little moment of optimism and nostalgia, in the midst of that hug, I'd inhaled my own assassin. I hope not. Although it would be just like the universe to try and undo you when you are happy, because in my experience the universe is an arse.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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