

The 2nd Runner Up of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Abbas Ifra Shahid

**Name of School : Delia Memorial School
(Hip Wo No.2 College)**

Book Title : *All The Bright Places*

Author : Jennifer Niven

Publisher : Alfred A. Knopf

All the Bright Places brings you to the world of Theodore Finch, who wakes up every day thinking of ways to end his life, and Violet Markey, who does not think she deserves to have survived a car crash in which her dear sister, Eleanor, lost her life.

Theodore and Violet meet on the ledge of their school's bell tower. He was contemplating whether it would be a good day to jump, and she was led to it

unconsciously by her guilt. Although by the end of it, it is uncertain who saves whom, it is clear that meeting on that ledge was the beginning of a tragic love story of two broken teenage souls, who not only take the reader through their wanderings of Indiana for their Geography project but also on an exploration of what it means to exist in this world.

What made this book stand out from others when I was at the bookstore was the fact that the blurb touched upon the topic of suicide, more specifically related to high-schoolers. I was intrigued as to how the writer would portray this sensitive subject, and I am glad to say that I definitely did end up spending my money wisely.

I extremely enjoyed the “paired up for a school project, then fell in love” trope because it is such a classic that never fails to disappoint. The bell tower incident led Theodore’s curiosity to wander, making him

want to know more about Violet. And so, he declared to his whole class that he would like to be paired with Violet Markey for their Geography project. Though it took a few attempts for Violet to agree, they both began their expedition to the wonders of Indiana on a set of ground rules: no travelling by car (because of Violet's trauma).

What I found to be very cool about Theodore and Violet's adventures was that the places they visited actually exist in real life. Like John Iver's mini backyard roller coaster, which I really wish to ride one day. It was really fun searching these places up because then, picturing the events that took place in the book becomes much easier, and makes the novel seem all the more realistic.

Mental health among teenagers is one of the big themes in the story. While Violet has trouble coping with

grief after Eleanor's death, Theodore suffers from undiagnosed depression, which turns his normal fascination with death into actual suicidal thoughts. Both of them have regular counselling sessions but neither are willing to openly share their thoughts. Theodore is notorious for his angry outbursts at school that have earned him the nickname "Theodore Freak" and is scared of being yet again labelled by society if his sickness is officially diagnosed, and Violet just hates that everyone is so eager to forget about Eleanor.

Though I am not someone who has experienced severe mental health issues, I could relate to Theodore's frustrations with society's love of stereotyping. His character really spoke to me because I come from an extremely religious Muslim family, and many people with the same background as mine only believe in "physical" illnesses. Claiming to feel depressed will just result in advice such as "pray for it to go away", or even

worse, accusations of having too little faith in God. Theodore's situation showed me how severe the consequences are of letting mental illnesses go unchecked and the importance of raising awareness of mental health issues in my community.

The part that touched me the most was when Theodore went on a reckless drive after a fight with his father. He drove endlessly and when the speed of his old car did not feel fast enough, he got out of it and ran, passing by farm after farm but he stopped when he saw a nursery. Even though his head was not in the right place, and he was overwhelmed with negative emotions, Theodore just had to get violets for Violet. The fact that thoughts of Violet could still get through his head filled with negativity at the time showed that even though his mental health was not on the right track, his love for Violet was the one thing that held him together. This really warmed my heart, because Theodore deserved to

love Violet with all his heart, without any bad thoughts pushing him away.

It may come as no surprise by now that Theodore Finch was my favourite character. I would compare Theodore's persona to the likes of Jack Dawson from Titanic. Memorable and tragic, he is guaranteed to occupy your mind for quite a while, especially if you tend to get emotionally attached to fictional characters. What made me love him was the fact that he really tried to be the best version of himself for Violet despite having a sickness that made it difficult to do so.

I have never really liked reading romance written for teenagers because it is all too cliché but this book was definitely an exception. Violet and Theodore's relationship will make you want to go out there and fall in love with someone and accept all their flaws because we're all just humans after all, who need warmth and compassion. In mainstream teen romance, you won't be

able to find the originality *All The Bright Places* possesses. What is especially noteworthy is that the unexplainable concept of love isn't just tossed carelessly into foolish melodrama. *All The Bright Places* will show you that teens are more than just reckless rebels, they are actual people with complicated thoughts who need to be treated with even more care. Like Theodore, who needed to have his thoughts understood, sickness treated, and no judgement for all of it.

Jennifer Niven wrote *All the Bright Places* in such a flow that you wouldn't want to put the book down, finishing it in just one afternoon, which was true in my case. I extremely enjoyed reading from the perspective of both Theodore and Violet, having my time connecting the dots as the events during the end were disclosed one by one. Even though it left me heartbroken, the ending opened my eyes to a whole new perspective on what it means to exist in this world. This book is a reminder to not take your life for granted and live your truth without

fear of judgement, so I would highly recommend this book to you if you are in need of encouragement to do the above. A quote that I have taken to heart is “You are all the colours in one, at full brightness.”, and I hope that you too would find solace in Niven’s eloquent words.