



# Looking at the Stars

*Jo Cotterill*

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Amina's homeland has been ravaged by war for many months, but so far she and her family are safe, together. When a so-called liberating force arrives in the country, the family think their prayers for peace will soon be answered, but they are horribly wrong . . . The country is thrown into yet further turmoil and Amina's family is devastated . . .

Through it all, Amina has her imagination to fall back on - of a better place and time. But can her stories get her through this?

### Looking at the Stars Details

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## From Reader Review Looking at the Stars for online ebook

### Daily Daydreamer says

*“The only way we can survive is to work together. Each of us must play our part. The minute we stand alone, we fall alone.”*

This book blew me away. It left me **angry** that all of the characters had to suffer because a few greedy people did not want to maintain peace and resorted to **war** . It left me grateful that I have a good, normal, boring life with a safe place to live in and that I still have parents who love me. I hated Lemo and was heartbroken that he had to suffer something so cruel at such a young age.

And, I wanted more Aron and Amina moments. I hope there is a sequel so that everyone gets a happyish ending. I think that this book is one of the best I have ever read.

*“The feeling of warmth and security, family and friendship. Laughter in grief. The feeling that imagination could overcome every hardship if you just tried hard enough.”*

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### Xylia says

*“The only way we can survive is to work together. Each of us must play our part. The minute we stand alone, we fall alone.”*

Amina’s homeland has been ravaged by war for many months, but so far she and her family are safe, together. When a so-called liberating force arrives in the country, the family think their prayers for peace will soon be answered, but they are horribly wrong . . . The country is thrown into yet further turmoil and Amina’s family is devastated . . .

Through it all, Amina has her imagination to fall back on - of a better place and time. But can her stories get her through this?

This book is awesome-count on it. At first when I found this book in the library, I was like: "Okay the cover looks nice and the summary is okay - but I don't really like war stories." And I don't.

But after quite a lot of advice(begging) from Bonny, my friend and book-worm("War stories are nice. You *have* to read this!" were her exact words), I decided to read it.

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It was quite nice, not what I expected! I'd always thought war stories to be boring and complicated, but this

one really blew me off. Ms. Cotterli is a great author indeed.

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## Noninuna says

It takes almost a whole day for me to gather my thoughts & put up a review because there's so much that I want to talk about. In the end, just put in a list form:

Pro:

1. First and foremost, this book hold a record for being a book with 300+ pages that I read the fastest. Almost overnight and I'm a slow reader.
2. Amina personality & her desire for education.
3. I like the relationship between the family members.
4. The companionship that formed at the refugee camp.
5. This reminded me of Fangirl by Rainbow Rowell (view spoiler)
6. According to the author, the story is based on a few countries that at war like Syria, Palestine, Congo (?)... I dont remember..but in here we dont get to see the religious aspect of the community. There's only a couple of moments that Amina said something about culture forbade them to do this and that (this book is from her POV) and for not touching religious aspects, I really appreciate it because IT IS a touchy subject even how modernized our generation is.

Cons:(view spoiler)

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## Raimy says

4.5

Warning: this book should come with tissues

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## Katherine Sunderland says

This is a really interesting novel about survival and what it is like to flee your own country and end up as a refugee. Cotterill has written a bold and important story which tells us the plight of Amina who lives in a developing country under an oppressive ruling "Kwana". It appears to be a fictional place and remains non specific which I did find a little confusing to start with but appreciate that Cotterill really wants to explore the human story behind the family's struggle rather than make a political statement or stick to factual events. The story begins with the aggressive intervention of the Kwana as the girls are unsuspectingly just walking home. Their mother is immediately suspicious: "Why did they pick on you?" "I was smiling....I looked too happy." The Kwana don't need an excuse and Amina's response is almost flippant in her acceptance that this is just how it is. "Nobody cares what I think," she continues, "The Kwana have taken away everything women had had- jobs, rights, freedom - when they came to power". Amina and her sister have to stop going to school and her mother has to give up her job.

Cotterill doesn't shy away from the more shocking aspects of a controlling, militant ruling power and the

story of Amina's brother, Ruman, is distressing and upsetting even though it is a powerful and necessary part of the plot.

The fear and hopelessness of the characters is palpable, their need to escape but with nowhere to escape to is well captured. The description of the refugee camps is convincing and clearly well researched and despite the sense of location throughout the novel generally remaining (deliberately) a little hazy, the scenes within the camp are very easy to visualise.

Amina remains a positive and optimistic character as much as she can and turns to the power of storytelling to help the people survive the atrocities. As in her other novel "The Library of Lemons", Cotterill shows us the power of stories, imagination and sharing in books to heal, unite, reassure and calm.

This is a moving story. It is one which will remain with you. It is poignant and definitely an important read for the now. It would be a good book to use in the classroom or with a young adult reading group because of the issues raised and also because of the characters and their fortitude.

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## Hazel says

*Looking at the Stars* by Jo Cotterill is a beautiful story targeted at older children/young adults. It handles serious themes that most readers would not have, and hopefully never will, deal with.

Amina is thirteen years old living in a country where women have absolutely no power. Prohibited from going to school, she spends her days with her sister, Jenna, weaving baskets and rugs, which they sell to stool holders in the local market. The novel begins with the two girls witnessing the arrival of foreign soldiers. They are overjoyed believing that all their troubles are over now that the liberation has begun. This, however, turns out to be a false hope.

Separated from their family, Amina and Jenna head to a refugee camp where they hope to find their younger sister, Vivie, and even discover information about what has happened to their mother. In order to prevent them from succumbing to despair both on the journey and living in the camp, Amina makes up stories about the stars in the sky – hence the title of the novel.

Amina and Jenna's personalities are vastly different meaning that the reader should be able to identify with at least one of the girls and place themselves within the story to get a closer feel of what their lives must have been like. It makes us wonder how we would cope ourselves in these situations. Amina is the kind of person who asks questions. She wants to know why things happen and is constantly asking "what if?" Despite being a year younger than Jenna she is the more confident of the two, and it is partly her determination that keeps them alive. Personally, I think I am more like Jenna: quiet, anxious, always wanting to do the right thing. Jenna "just wants everyone to be happy". Jenna is a realist, whereas Amina is a dreamer.

The storytelling aspect to this novel makes it unique to others in this genre. There are many books that deal with war, refugees and death, but Amina's stories provide something extra. They are beautiful and bring hope and faith into such as bleak and dangerous setting.

Whilst this story is set in fictional towns in an unnamed country, it is not unlike recent civil wars in Syria and conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mostly we are able to distance ourselves from these new stories, because to us they are just that: stories, reports; not something we have to deal with. But this novel, told from the point of view of a thirteen year old girl reveals to us what it is like for the innocent – the thousand of innocents. And even better, it tells it in a way that children/young adults will understand in order to learn more about what has happened and what is happening in these countries.

I think *Looking at the Stars* is a brilliant book that is, and I know I have used this word a lot, beautifully told.

I definitely recommend it!

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## **Moonlight says**

Won ARC on Goodreads First Reads, thank you very much to Random House Children's UK.

**A heart-wrenching and emotional story that will likely pull at your heartstrings and make you think about the events occurring in the world around us. The cover is lovely, it highlights the aspects of this story that you will truly remember: the strong and loving bond between two sisters and beautiful stories of the stars.**

War has fallen upon Amina's homeland. So far her family has been safe however, when new laws are pronounced, things turn upside down. As they travel across the country to find hope and help, they venture into a place that is different in ways from their own, they are alone and searching.

Amina and Jena are two sisters whom have a very strong bond, they constantly supporting and looking out for one another. They are both driven by love and hope, to help others and to make people smile and be happy again. Amina tells imaginative stories that uplift the emotion within everyone who listens, she consistently tries to remain positive to make sure everyone is okay and always thinks of others; I loved the idea of allowing some of the children they each meet to pick their own star.

I turned to Lemo. "Have you decided on a star?"

He pointed. I leaned across, trying to follow the line of his arm. "That bright one?" I asked. He nodded. I couldn't be sure I was looking at the same star he was, but it didn't matter. "Good choice," I told him. "This one's a lovely story. That warrior is called Clemus, and he grew up in the countryside. "

Page 229 (ARC edition)

This is a gripping and an emotional story, which is undoubtedly worth the read. It was beautifully written, engaging you immediately in a different country and events. This story will definitely make you sit back and think, gripping you in the story of two young girls fighting for survival and the importance of being with, and helping others.

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## **Adeleade says**

[Potta was murdered (hide spoiler)]

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## **L.H. Johnson says**

Amina tells stories. She has an imagination, a powerful one, and it's been her companion throughout the war that has ravaged her country. Her family have felt the impact of this differently, but they are together. That is enough. That is enough to survive. But then things start to change, and slide horribly out of control and Amina's family life is shattered. Nothing will ever be the same again. Will Amina ever tell a story again? What's going to happen to her family?

I am reading some good, good books lately. This, a tale of family and refugees and the terrible impact of war, is one of them and had me utterly in tears at the ending. Looking At The Stars is a book about imagination, voice and the power of story. It is also a book about the worst of humanity, and how people can so easily shift into horrific violence. It is, as you may imagine, hard to judge this sort of tone in a book for young readers and I think one of the strengths of this is that it is set in a fictional environment. This could be anywhere; there are echoes of Iraq, Afghanistan but also of Nazi Germany and the cumulative impact of this is to create a fictional 'everyplace' where, in a way, the story gains more immediacy precisely because it could be anywhere. It could be anywhere.

Cotterill pitches Looking At The Stars perfectly; she writes with a sympathetic warmth which doesn't shy away from detailing some of the more graphic incidents that occur throughout the narrative. There are some which are difficult to read (as ever, read the book if you are working with it and know the context of the children you work with) but they are never gratuitous. They are painful, heartbreaking, emotional, but they are never poorly handled. It's a great skill to have and one that gives this book its great strength. It is a story about stories and storytelling, and the delicious edge of that isn't dulled. If anything, it's sharpened through Cotterill's restrained and quiet prose and her beautiful ability to see the wonder in a starlit sky. What a book this is.

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### **Areej says**

It is in every way staggering, yet relatable.

This book is so raw and real like nothing i've read before, i think from quite early on I realised that this book isn't a book with an ending that sugar coats everything and shows just happiness.

It is so genuine, it shows everything.

And sometimes it hurt so much i felt emotionally drained that i wanted the writer for a page to just stop. To lie and write about rainbows and butterflies. Don't get me wrong, because the way they let their imaginations be their fuel is so inspiring.

Furthermore,at the end something in me changed, i felt acceptance overwhelm me.

And I really understood the meaning of how life goes on. Definitely recommend this, but if you cannot handle heavy books this isn't for you.

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### **Rachel Hamilton says**

Looking at the Stars is a book about life in Talas under 'the glorious leader and his glorious Kwana army', where women are considered inferior to men and where everyone is forced to wear badges indicating their class.

The story is told through the eyes of thirteen year old Amina, whose imagination offers hope in the darkness and whose voice cries out to be heard in a world where women are routinely suppressed and segregated.

In their different ways, Amina's family all rebel against their oppression. Eldest son Ruman joins a secret underground movement, Mamie continues to visit and help 'Q' families even when it's no longer safe, and Potta protests through the power of silence as he tries to protect his family.

Readers may be tempted to place the Kwana in a particular country and to link their oppressive laws to a particular religion, but Jo Cotterill avoids identifying regimes. She is even-handed, describing how the Kwana were initially a force for good, improving hospitals and transport, and illustrating how Amina is discomfited by the liberating soldiers who stare too openly and suggest that 'pretty girls' have ways of getting what they want.

Rather than making political statements, *Looking at the Stars* focuses instead on the human tale of Amina's struggle to survive, and on the people she encounters on her journey. The hints of romance are sweet and convincing, and if I had one complaint it would be that I wanted a more fulfilling ending for Aron and Amina (sequel please, commissioning people).

This is a powerful and compelling book. I opened it intending to flick through the first chapter, and ended up cancelling my plans for the day because I had to find out what happened to Amina after the brutal attack that separated her family.

As Amina shares stories beneath the stars, her sister is constantly checking, "This is a happy story, isn't it, Mini?" And although *Looking at the Stars* contains bleak moments, overall it is a story of hope, and of survival. Jo Cotterill has created an exciting, nerve-wracking and, at times, heart-breaking tale that will speak to readers of all ages. This is a book that I suspect will be talked about long after it has been put down

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## Emma says

Review by Beth 3.5/5

This novel is a chance to glimpse the horror of life in a seemingly developing country during a Civil War. I say seemingly as I found myself struggling with the concept that *Looking at the Stars* had no concrete sense of place – as someone interested in history and putting things in their correct places it did niggle at me throughout. I completely understand that the author was trying to make a point about how this type of event could and does happen in many different places but without any concrete grounding it meant I wasn't as connected with the characters as I could be. On another positive note I think perhaps younger readers may find it easier to understand as Amina and her family's plight.

Despite my misgivings Cotterill paints an honest and vivid picture of a family living through some of the most testing times and doesn't hold back when it comes to death, disease and the genuine nature of life in such testing times. As Amina and her sister arrive at the refugee camp they're met with every kind of horror, this is after watching the government forces tear apart their family and losing their mother, father and youngest sister along the way.

The only escape they have from the camp and their lives is Amina's magical stories, which give them and others in the camp a true sense of escapism. As she tells her mesmerising stories she helps countless people make it through another day and it's heartening to think the power of imagination can survive in such horrific environments.

Jo Cotterill has imagined a nameless world which is filled with real, believable events. As people are shot, die of malnutrition and are beaten beyond recognition, you have to remind yourself that Amina is only a child and alone in this with only another child, her sister, for company. Throughout the novel I had to remind myself of this a few times as the maturity they exhibit goes far beyond their years.

Cotterill's idea and concept are brilliant, trying to portray the effects of horrific Civil War for children is a big ask and I think she manages it very well. I can't say I personally enjoyed it as much as I could have because of the lack of grounding, I like my facts!

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## **Big Book Little Book says**

Daisy (13) for Big Book Little Book

Copy received in exchange for an honest review.

I loved this book, it is so honest and innocent but at the same time it is powerful and heart-breaking.

Amina Ambrose lives in Talas, an unsteady Dictatorship country on an unknown continent. The army who run it are called the Kwana and it is starting to exploit its power over the people in Amina's country. They have made rules in the country that are unjust, such as making females wearing headscarves and men having the power over the women and boys having power over the girls. A revolution is needed to save the country. Amina is about 14; she has an amazing imagination-brilliant for making up stories and telling them to her family. She lives with her Mother-Mamie, her Father-Potta, her older brother-Ruman, her sister, who is a year older-Jenna and her little sister-Vivie.

Kwana have bought in a new rule: 'Depending on your status or your family's status you will be given a letter of heritage which you will have to wear at all times'. The letters of heritage determine your rank in life so if a family member was part of the Kwana you would be a letter A. The highest rank is a letter A. Amina's family is an H. These letters were turning friends against friends and brother against brother. A family friend mysteriously disappeared and on their door was painted the letter Q.

Things started to look very bad. People were being shot, many were punished for saying anything bad against the Kwana and after school one day Ruman decided that he wasn't going to have it anymore and left to join an underground Rebel movement. Even at night Amina could hear her parents whispering things like: "we've got to tell them, sooner or later they're going to find out"...

War had broken out between the Kwana and an invading country to help save the people of Amina's country. In the dead of night the Kwana broke into Amina's house demanding to know where Ruman was. The family didn't know so in the end the Kwana dragged them out of the house and tried to get answers. Amina tried to lie to save her family but still there was a devastating outcome.

There was no way that Amina's family could remain in Talas so they left-and got stuck at a checkpoint. The Kwana were examining identification papers to see if they could leave. Sadly Amina's family had trouble at the checkpoint (by the way, I'm not saying what happened because I don't want to give it away!) and now Jenna and Amina had lost Vivie and Mamie! Can you guess what happens to the Ambrose family? Read the book to find out!

Verdict: I think this book was a real eye-opener to the wars ravaging other countries in the world. It shows peoples genuine struggle to stay alive and I thought it was a very good book and it was very interesting.

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## Miss Cleveland says

A very worthy winner of the Coventry Inspiration Book Awards 2016, Hooked on Books category. My book group unanimously voted this as their winner, with all saying they had cried at various points in the story (including the boys).

The story follows Amena and her family through their lives in a civil war torn country, where girls are second class citizens and their headscarves tell their age, and later badges declare their social status. From a loving family home divided by political beliefs and actions to a refuge camp, this book shows how imagination can help buoy human spirit and heal damaged souls.

Make sure you have your tissues ready; as an adult it is a harrowing, yet uplifting read. As for the children in my book group, it raised so many questions about current humanitarian crises. Any book that provokes discuss, questions the world children live in and has them clamouring to turn the page deserves more than the five stars I can give it.

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## Harj D says

'Looking at the Stars' is an incredible story filled with desperation, hope, grief and kindness. Honestly, when I first picked this book up, I was not sure what I was expecting. The first chapter or two seemed to linger, not really captivating me as much as I thought it might but then when things began to get heated and war reached the doorstep of Amina's family, that is when things really began to move along.

Amina herself, as a main character was brave, imaginative and independent and for a young girl thrown into the midst of war and destruction, it was difficult for her to adjust but with the aid of her sister Jenna, who was much more subdued, calmer and generous, Amina was able to learn that all good things take time and patience. Over time, Jenna herself began to learn that staying quiet was not always the best way and that sometimes, you did need to be more forthcoming, the way Amina was. It was beautiful seeing how both sisters were able to learn so much from one another on their journey and sought so much comfort from one another.

The family relationship later between Cosmina, Lemo, Aron and Jenna and Amina was heartwarming in that seeing that kindness and love during such a difficult time was rare. The way they all came together and had their own individual strengths in helping keep everyone's spirits high was wonderful, the highlight of course being Amina's storytelling.

Telling stories was such a simple yet effective way for Amina to help others and it moved me so much the way she was able to connect with others and comfort them just by creating this elaborate story about warriors in the sky. It distracted everyone from reality and it gave them hope and an escape from the perilous times they were currently in. I think this aspect of this book for me was what made me love it even more. Seeing the power of storytelling through Amina reminded me so much of how important having an imagination is and how it can bring others so much happiness, even during dark times.

I also love how the author did not set this story in a specific country and made it quite general because the events that took place in this book most certainly represented a lot of what is happening around the world right now.

Truly thought provoking, heart breaking and warm. Really would recommend this to everyone to read!

