

**Before I die, Jenny Downham** Definitions £6.99 (PB) Other editions available

Tessa is sixteen. Her story is told in the first person, and in the first sentence we know about her longing for experience: 'I wish I had a boyfriend.' We know she is an individual, and looks for her own answers. We know she has a close family. By the end of the first short chapter, we also know she is dying.

Tessa has leukaemia, and throughout the book she has periods when her body gives way, when her efforts to live fully bring on stays in hospital. But she's not giving up. She has a mission – a list of things she wants to do before she dies. And it's not smelling roses and meditating, it's having sex, taking drugs, doing what's illegal, and pushing every boundary she can.

We see the impact of her situation through the characters around her – the boy next door who initially says 'what would be the point?' of them getting closer; her father, who initially refuses to let him sleep with her, her best friend, who can't bear to be too close. They have to deal with the consequences of Tessa's careering journey through her list. But we see them all through Tessa's eyes, so the book never becomes sentimental or slushy.

From the beginning, I think we know that the end will be Tessa's death, and I was curious about how Jenny Downham would handle this. It's done with sensitivity and a low key – and it's because of this that it works so beautifully. For me, there's only one slightly false note, when Tessa mentions the Natural Death Centre – it seems too much like consciously giving out information to the reader.

This isn't an 'issue' book – the story is far too good for that. But it deals with dying and death in a way which made me think about my own life, what there is to live and what's left undone. It's not only about dying, it's about love. And, as the quote on the jacket says, it 'makes you happy to be alive'.

I found my way into life with the help of stories. Novels gave me a way of understanding deeper issues, and although we now have film and tv, I hope they're never replaced. As a teacher of psychotherapists and counsellors, I often recommended novels to trainees. This novel is now high on my list of books to find a way into dying – not just for young people, but for adults too.

*Maxine Linnell*