



Carry the Sky

Kate Gray

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Kate Gray takes an unblinking look at bullying in her debut novel, *Carry the Sky*. It's 1983 at an elite Delaware boarding school. Taylor Alta, the new rowing coach, arrives reeling from the death of the woman she loved. Physics teacher Jack Song, the only Asian American on campus, struggles with his personal code of honor when he gets too close to a student. These two young, lonely teachers narrate the story of a strange and brilliant thirteen-year-old boy who draws atomic mushroom clouds on his notebook, pings through the corridors like a pinball, and develops a crush on an older girl with secrets of her own. *Carry the Sky* sings a brave and honest anthem about what it means to be different in a world of uniformity.

"In the rich rarified world of a prep school, Kate Gray has woven two powerful personal stories into a charged and compelling human novel which shows us that swimming under that quirky, antic, off-beat community are also life and death. Gray has a sharp eye and tells her story with verve and a deft touch."

– Ron Carlson, author of *The Signal* and *A Kind of Flying*

"A splendid debut novel, beautifully written and brimming over with humanity and grace, alternately humorous and heart-wrenching."

– Christopher Buckley, author of *But Enough About You*

"Lyrical, moving, and hauntingly beautiful, Kate Gray's *Carry the Sky* winds between two voices, Taylor and Song, both navigating the narrow lanes of St. Timothy's boarding school where they teach, both hitting the walls that surround them. One uses science to make sense of loneliness, loss, and desire—the other uses the beat of a rower's oar in water. Together these two outsiders struggle to move past mourning, to seek hope as they crack open their insular world. *Carry the Sky* is full of unforgettable characters and images, each word carefully chosen, like a perfect fold in a paper crane, creating a graceful neck, strong tail, and mighty wings, perched on the edge of the page, ready to take flight."

– Hannah Tinti, bestselling author of *The Good Thief* and co-founder of One Story

"Set in a Northeast boarding school in 1983, *Carry the Sky* is a haunting exploration of loneliness, grief, and desire. In lyrical, elegant prose, Kate Gray spins a tale of characters struggling to forgive themselves and to find each other, and reminds us to pay attention to the ordinary and unexpected flashes of beauty around us: a brilliant kite, geese overhead, a paper crane in a tree."

– Carter Sickels, author of *The Evening Hour*

"*Carry the Sky* is as intricate and precise as the paper cranes its characters fold. It comes as no surprise that Kate Gray is a poet as well as a fine novelist. Here we are surely in a poet's hands, her lyricism and attention to detail elevating the boarding-school narrative to something heartbreaking and truly universal."

– Cari Luna, author of *The Revolution of Every Day*

Carry the Sky Details

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From Reader Review Carry the Sky for online ebook

Elena says

I consider myself among the lucky few who had an opportunity to read an advance copy of this book. I was quite amazed by the beauty of the language. Simply put, it is very well written in the most capable hands of its writer, Kate Gray, who is obviously a poet first. The book is set in the early 80's, in a boarding school set in the mid Atlantic. The main characters have much in common though they differ greatly. They struggle to make their place at the school while concurrently struggling to manage the legacies of their respective pasts. Each seems to swim in sea of anguish, equal parts guilt and longing. Each yearns to belong in a world that casts them as different. The grief each experiences stabs you in the heart from time to time with writing that makes you stop to take a breath -- yet it's impossible to put down. The characters are memorable for their unique voices, their desires, their humanity, their mistakes. Allow yourselves to be swept up into the undertow of a beautifully written book full of mystery and imagination. You will not regret it.

Patricia O'reilly says

There's not a character in this beautifully told story you won't care about. It will break your heart in sad and happy ways. Thank you for sharing it with us, Kate. One senses you've honored several people by writing it; readers will feel that deeply--just beautiful.

Sarah Cypher says

In her debut novel, award-winning poet Kate Gray breaks the surface of a calm New England boarding school to tell a breathtaking tale about honor, violence, and responsibility.

Set in 1983, in the days after Taylor Alta loses her best friend and beloved to a rowing accident, she arrives at St. Timothy's as its girls crew coach, grieving and unprepared for the curiosity of eighteen-year-old Carla. Carla's interest is uncomfortable and hyper-sexualized, a behavior rooted in her dark history. It's a past whose consequences also blur the teacher-student boundary with Jack Song, a Korean science teacher who tries not to fall for her.

These narratives connect to the bullying of brilliant oddball Kyle Harney. Taylor, Jack, and Carla have secrets that shame them, and each finds a brief moral balance in their concern for bullied Kyle. What they can't know is the weight Kyle himself carries, burdened by the threat of nuclear annihilation: a threat he understands all too well from his mother, a Japanese woman scarred in the bombing of Nagasaki.

There is a leitmotif of origami pays that pays off well, too, especially as the diverse planes of each characters' suffering begin folding together around the shape of Kyle's ultimate plan for getting back at his tormenters.

For all Jack Song's concern with honor, it is Kyle who feels like a moral axis. Secrets and injustices drive the story, as does the insider's look into the world of competitive rowing. (If the novel feels especially authoritative here, it's because Gray is a former crew coach.) Nevertheless, the attention to language makes

the writing one of the novel's most important elements. It sometimes competes with the story itself, but at its best, the characters' distinct voices resonate with their different notes of pain; and in Jack's chapters, the writing riffs between the world of science and the mysterious realm of the heart—with surprising, ingenious effect.

Kate Gray is amazing.

Jen May says

My mom's cousin wrote this very thought provoking book. She wrote it after witnessing bullying among students at a boarding school where she taught. She also used the book as a conduit to try to heal from a devastating personal loss of a woman she loved. Excellent writer. Really enjoyed it.

Karen says

Kate Gray's debut novel, *Carry the Sky*, holds what's best about both fiction and poetry. (Makes sense, since Gray is an established poet, a writing teacher, and a passionate advocate for those who have stories to tell.) Compellingly crafted with alternating points of view, *Carry the Sky*, like any great poem, can be read at the level of the line on the page, relished for the rhythm, texture, and sounds of the words. And I did read the novel in this way, taking my time, returning to reread particular passages. I did do this--when I wasn't propelled forward by the momentum of a truly engaging, intriguing plot, enticed by complicated characters who make surprising, often risky choices that ultimately make perfect sense in the end, which holds the kind of resolution readers want: satisfying, moving, and meaningful. Gray is one of those novelist who is able to explore an academic setting to reveal so much more; in this way, *Carry the Sky* recalled for me great work by the likes of May Sarton, Tobias Woolf, and Francine Prose. And on the poetry front, there are echoes of Mary Oliver here, too, and Adrienne Rich. Read *Carry the Sky* and weep; read *Carry the Sky* and rejoice. Debut novelist, seasoned poet—Kate Gray is a writer to watch.

Nicole says

What happens when a poet writes a novel? A different crash of words than I've ever experienced before, and now I'm fresh and raw after the reading's done and how to talk about it?

Maybe like this:

Starting this book is not like starting a book. The words are weighted, musical, all of them waiting for some other shoe to drop. We meet characters, feel their moments like shutters opening for just that long before being snapped shut again.

Somehow, maybe a quarter of the way through the book? Maybe a third? The realization that those shutter-snap pieces have woven together in some sneaky way to form a plot, things happening outside and within and between the weighty words, and suddenly we're moving through this with the characters, wondering what will happen next, afraid we might already know.

Or maybe like this:

This story is about how we treat each other when we think nobody's watching, about the limits of what we can hold inside our own skin, about grief and love, about the ghosts of things that shaped us. This story hurts to read. This story is worth the hurt.

Or a little like this:

This story takes place in a boarding school on the East Coast of the US. We follow the events of one semester (or, really, just shy of one semester) primarily through the eyes of two teachers there--one new to the school and to teaching (but not to water--oh, so much water), and the other not new but standing on the outside in different ways. Both have their own fears and pains and secrets. Those existing wounds merge with the train wreck of this semester in many ways, making a story bigger than the story, a story in 3-D.

I'm being vague, which is mostly unintentional, but also partly out of a desire to not spoiler this. I want you to read it without knowing, let the magic of those words sink in and take hold and rip you apart when they go off balance, a wreck you will be braced for but that will somehow sneak under those defenses anyway.

But mostly like this:

I loved so many things about reading this: the language choices, the way we got just enough of the characters, those origami critters, Carla's storytelling, Kyle's vulnerable brilliance, the weaving of all these pieces together until they meant new things, more things--the origami critters, a lesson on electricity, waves and ripples on water and between people.

What I loved most were the words. So, so many passages marked and starred and underlined in my reading of this. Here are just a few:

"On the Friday before, I took the launch out and filled the lake with the roar of the motor. There were no students, no impatient boys. You had died two days before. August 24, 1983. With the throttle open full, I made white water crash into cottonwoods on the banks. The race course on the lake, the sheltered cove, the starting platforms, the grand tour was pretense. I made wakes. I cut the lake. I carved your name in water."

"And she closes her eyes, and her body goes liquid. Like amber, electricity. Things that change substance. The way she moves, her jerky motions smooth out. She follows the form of the music. Her shoulders curl closed and open, and her hips and shoulders and knees turn little circles. The curves of her body catch her loose clothing, suggest the waves that bodies can make when skin drags across skin."

"'Why do you like rowing?' he asked. The question was drum roll, cymbal crash, horn.

I didn't answer because I didn't know.

It was something to do with not wanting to feel pain but wanting to know pain. Like wanting to know fire. You light it in front of you, the colors all over the place, the heat all over your skin, but you don't want to burn or anything. I don't know, but I understand him a little more in the middle of that field, with geese all over everywhere, geese getting along with swans, and all of us finding a place to land."

Bottom line: Read this, these words. If they wreck you, let them.

Gail Jeidy says

A fresh-faced teacher and rowing coach smacked with tremendous loss in her first days on the job at an East

Coast boarding school struggles to mentor teens whose troubles, possibly, trump her own. Gray's voice is absolutely fresh. Her writing reads as poetry, often metaphoric and, at times, a bit obscure, which has a cumulative (and likely intended) effect of nudging the reader to relinquish control of the page and let the words wash over and envelop you in this ride. The result is deep feeling, characters we care about, (some we hate such as the school bully and the priest at confessional), and a story that propels forward while going deep. By page 28, I felt socked in the gut. Protagonist Taylor Alta thinks in the cadence and rhythm of sculling. Second narrator, physics instructor (English-as-a-second- language) Jack Song, views relationships through scientific principles and acts via origami. This is a story where everyone has wounds, life is complex and gray, and growing up is hard, especially when you're different. Loved the Wyeth mural in the cafeteria, the origami touches, the integration of physics principles as metaphor (which bear rereading and restudying!), surprising acts of kindness and healing, including Jack Song's final take on what it means to be a teacher. I was left with the idea that we all need to do the best we can and learn from one another.

Nancy Slavin says

Carry the Sky is unique in that it's a book about young adults, but the narrators are actual adults and the novel is for adult readers. The uniqueness is in the structure, alternating narratives, and the narrative voices are not cute or meta or self-conscious, thank goodness, even though the characters are flawed like characters should be.

The story is about two teachers, one new and one an old-timer, both with secrets and inabilities to discuss those secrets. Their heaviness affects their relationships with the students they're supposed to be teaching and coaching at the boarding school, and eventually, has some heavy consequences.

The uniqueness of structure and voice also makes the book a bit hard to get into - one character starts by narrating in the second person "you"(always tough), another is talking to someone else, or very focused on that other, and it's as if as a reader you're watching these scenes without quite knowing what's going on. But that-piecing-it-together narrative is also why the book works - there are many pieces and interrelationships, and once you get the edges, you really want to fill in the rest to get the full picture. Also, the language, the writing, coming from a poet, is poetic in the best way; the metaphors and similes actually made me feel (yes, feel, the book didn't "give me the feels," like I said, a novel for adults). I recommend Carry the Sky.

Karelia Stetz-Waters says

This is a beautiful, lyrical book, almost a prose poem in its careful use of language. I enjoyed it as much for the writing as for the story; both were excellent. Many times I felt myself slowing down to savor a sentence or reread a passage. Now that I am done, the images from the story stay with me as though I had been there. I would definitely recommend this to anyone who appreciates craft in writing.

Debbie Blicher says

This novel is a marvelous example of what happens when a gifted poet writes fiction. Gray's intense, spare sentences convey emotion viscerally. Voice, rather than plot, carries this novel. Also noteworthy: much of the description is kinesthetic rather than visual; a very unusual sensory mode for prose. I won't give away the

plot except to say that we encounter the results of bullying in both a child character and an adult character. Five stars for voice and character and setting; four for plot. Why only four? Because the consistent up-close view of the narrators' inner turmoil prevents the perspective readers occasionally need. But I give the book five stars for breaking new ground, and doing it well.

Cheryl pdx says

The first time I fell in love with a novel written by a poet, it was Elizabeth Rosner's "The Speed of Light". The way language and sounds and images were crafted was so different from the zillions of novels I had read. I was hooked. Kate Gray's "Carry the Sky" shares that first language of poetry: the pace of this debut novel is quieter, the voices of the central characters are closer and more intimate, and the images she paints are somehow both distilled yet expansive.

As I read Carry the Sky I was taken into the life of a boarding school, of rowing, of people trying to heal and find their way. I am a fast reader but this was a page-turner of a different sort: wanting to know what comes next was in balance with my desire to savor each chapter as it unfolded. Without giving anything away, I can say my heart was truly taken on a journey. I strongly recommend Carry the Sky.

Doug says

I've never met characters as sharply drawn, lyrically portrayed and endearingly idiosyncratic as the four – Taylor and Jack, Carla and Kyle – we meet in these pages. As I came to the end of this book, I wanted to go hunt them down, put my arm around them, and tell them I loved them. I guess I'll have to settle for knowing that the author loves them – that's the secret of this book, I think, and the reason she is able to bring an aura of such mystery and enchantment to the most ordinary daily encounters while at the same time traversing with such deep sympathy the broken landscape of loss and longing that lies at the human heart of this story.

Julene says

This is a remarkable, exquisitely written book by Dangerous Writer Kate Gray. I had the privilege to study fiction and poetry with Kate in the early 2000s and I know how brilliantly she uses sound in her writing. She hears and understands the importance of how letters breathe, how they hit the ear. This book is a long breath.

She writes from the perspective of two main characters: Taylor Alta & Jack Song. The setting is a private school in the northeast. Taylor teaches English & Geography and is the leader for the girl's rowing team. Song teaches physics. They are outsiders at St. Timothy; he is Korean, and she has feelings for women, which are difficult to acknowledge due to her Catholic upbringing. Taylor's friend was lost during a row, when she went out alone, it took weeks to find the body. Song's sister died from a blood disease.

Carla, a third main character, is on the rowing team. We learn further into the book that she is in grief from the loss of her father and brother. Kyle, a second order student, we learn was adopted by a white man and a Japanese woman from Nagasaki, they met in war and married in peace. She is scarred from the nuclear blast. Kyle is smart but odd, and has become the object of abuse by the other boys, and in particular Donny, who is

a bully with a very influential father.

Kate Gray uses her vast knowledge of private school, rowing, physics, origami, Korean and Japanese culture, and English to write this masterpiece on bullying, grief and loss. We enter the private school world as seen through two outsiders. The quote, "Those who graduate from private education are the one percent of the population. They become the top ten percent who run and own the country. Behind the scenes they operate a very simple wave model, called Destructive Interference:", in a chapter where Song speaks. This quote reveals the heart of the book. There are many lessons in this book, but one of the main ones is uncovering the world our leaders come from. It exposes their faults and how they pass on these faults through physics lessons.

However, there is a crack, for the Japanese mother of Kyle is one of the new Japanese women, "Mrs. Harney has iron in her spine to speak up. She made moot the old boy network."

The bully is exited from the school with no lessons. He is still out there with the Trumps of the world, but in this case the lesbian found herself and left the private school and the Korean man was able to return and teach. He is also an agent of inside change questioning how the institution continues.

Kate Gray writes, "The loneliness we feel is as sure as water. It changes to fog and rain and a frozen lake, but its always water." She describes grief as, "dead weight in water." But she also writes about Gok, the wailing Koreans do that, "forces guilt and regret out of system." This book is a Gok, it's characters will stay with you, it will make you want to scream. It is a healing book written by a strong wounded heart writer, one of the best kinds of Dangerous Writing. Read it.

Reader Woman says

Beautiful, lyrical, full of tough and important questions with only a few answers. I can't say enough about how well written this is, and what she does with the language - I can hardly even draw quotes from the book, in spite of its beauty, because she is planting phrases and words and images that she cultivates throughout and revisits with different nuance - so it's not about quotes, it's about a relationship to the metaphors and the imagery, and pulling a phrase out almost does a disservice because it doesn't carry the full weight or the meaning behind it.

If you care at all about good writing, read this book. Bonus - there's even a worthwhile story!

Adrienne says

This book is both a prose poem and an urgent story that unwinds the ways that hearts break beyond repair and yet are mended. But again, it's wiser and more complex than that.

As I wrote to the author, when I finished this book, I spent a long time just looking out the window at the trees. Something shifted in me. Something about childhood abuse and water and birds. Something about loss and longing and confusion and despair. Something about courage and endurance and making it through it all.

Utterly magical, yet gritty. Astonishing, lyrical language. This book moved me deeply.
