

Starworld

Audrey Coulthurst

Paula Garner

Candlewick (Apr 16, 2019)

Hardcover \$17.99 (352pp)

978-0-7636-9756-3

In Audrey Coulthurst and Paula Garner's touching *Starworld*, high schoolers Sam Jones and Zoe Miller are the unlikeliest of matches. Sam is an awkward, artistic brainiac, and Zoe is outgoing, popular, and has a jock boyfriend. However, both girls struggle with loneliness and tumultuous home lives. Sam's dad lives abroad, leaving her alone to deal with her mother's extreme OCD, and Zoe cares for her cancer-stricken mother and her developmentally disabled brother. When one of Sam's paintings catches Zoe's eye, it strikes up a friendship that crosses boundaries and cliques.

The book's title refers to the imaginary world that Sam conjures up, where the two girls take refuge from the pressures of school and family life. Bonding over a continuous stream of texts in which they explore Starworld, Sam and Zoe give each other strength. Thanks to Zoe's support, Sam emerges from her shell, while Sam teaches Zoe to cut loose and not always be the perfect student everyone expects her to be.

Starworld's flights of imagination are amusing, but the story's heart lies in its characters' very real teenage world, in which wild parties, academic expectations, and pressure from peers and parents are always present. Coulthurst and Garner bring a bittersweet tang to pivotal moments, including a romantic breakup and a sudden intimate hug. During these passages, it's as if the world comes to a stop for its heroines, and the authors handle the drama with empathy and delicacy.

Sam's deepening crush on Zoe leads to *Starworld's* central dilemma: Will Zoe respond in kind? And if she doesn't, will the fragile world the girls have built for themselves come tumbling down? It takes a bit too long to arrive at this dramatic pivotal point, but the book's ultimate conclusion is worthwhile. *Starworld* is a convincing, empowering coming-of-age tale.

HO LIN (May/June 2019)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.