

## The Prettiest Star

**Carter Sickels**

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A family grapples with prejudice and impending loss in Carter Sickels's historical novel *The Prettiest Star*.

In 1980, Brian ran away from his conservative hometown and arrived in New York City, where he could live openly as a gay man. Six years later, Brian is dying of AIDS; he returns home to spend his last days with his family. At first, Brian's parents tell no one about his condition. But in a small town, it's only a matter of time before even the best kept secrets spill out into the open.

The story is told by Brian, his mother, and his sister. Brian mourns both his imminent death and the loss of New York's freedom. Brian's mother, who is at first almost as concerned with what the neighbors will say as she is about her son, grapples with guilt. Brian's sister is overshadowed by the chaos of her brother's homecoming; she deals with her mounting fear and resentment alone. Only Brian's father is excluded from narrating his story, reinforcing his depiction as distant and inscrutable.

The family reunion is haunting and awkward; no one knows how to react or what to do. This sense of confusion and incohesiveness plagues the family throughout. Even as their Appalachian community, which is poor in everything but faith and homophobia, rallies against them, they never quite manage to come together. Heartbreaking levels of bigotry and loss are conveyed through fluid, poignant prose. Amid the tragedy, threads of loyalty, strength, and pride result in a glimmer of hope—not for a happy ending, but for human beings' capacity to love one another through the worst crises.

Devastating and impactful, *The Prettiest Star* captures the profound effects of the AIDS crisis, and the lies and bigotry that contributed to it.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (March / April 2020)

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