

Bright Star

The literary life is notoriously difficult to capture on film, though that hasn't stopped filmmakers from trying. It's an understandable—perhaps unreasonable—challenge for a visual medium to make palpable what takes place in the interstices of the solitary brain of the writer. The new film “Bright Star,” looking at the last part of the life of John Keats, can't pretend to get at the intimate, creative processes of the poet's mind, but it does a more than creditable job of recreating the milieu in which he worked and of presenting one source of his inspiration.

The period of “Bright Star” is during the last years of Keats' short life, in 1818-21, when he was living in Hampstead in the house of his friend and fellow writer, Charles Brown (an ornery Paul Schneider). The house was shared by the Brawne family, the widowed Mrs. Brawne (wholesome Kerry Fox), her daughter Fanny (Abbie Cornish), and a younger son and daughter (Thomas Brodie Sangster and Edie Martin). Fanny is a bright girl, but not intellectual, rather fascinated by fashion (she designs all her own clothes) and the superficial—what's fashionably amusing. However, she becomes intrigued with the moody and mysterious Keats (Ben Whishaw), the more so after he offers her the only thing he has to offer: his latest set of poems to read.



The illness of Keats's younger brother draws the two together; Fanny's efforts to help the dying young man touches the poet, and he agrees to teach her poetry. She is at first blunt and philistine about his work, but she quickly grasps its beauty and depth. Though the poet remains almost painfully reserved next to the plainspoken Fanny, the two eventually attain an emotional understanding and talk of marriage, a prospect Keats at first deflects because he has no income. The two do become engaged, but the tubercular John, on the advice of friends, agrees to travel to Rome to avoid England's harsh winter. There, he succumbs, several months later, leaving Fanny a bereaved bride who worn mourning for him for years after.

The film takes place on a small canvas with a limited palette, mainly movements and conversations in and around the Brawne home, situated close to London. Its emotions are revealed in delicate increments, mostly through Fanny's growing

awareness of the quality of Keats' poetry—and, thus, his soul. Keats himself is also revealed as a brilliant yet profoundly modest writer who can do nothing other than his work. The film makes patent, too, the penuriousness of his situation and his dependence on Brown and others for his very life. Over all lingers the weight of Keats' early death (at 25), but the film doesn't wallow in it. This is one of "Bright Star's" best features in fact; the Tragic Poet story is mostly avoided for a richer, heartening story of blossoming love and shared sympathies.

Jane Campion, a versatile and distinctive writer/director ("The Piano," "Holy Smoke," "In the Cut"), has plowed period ground before, most notably in the not wholly successful "A Portrait of A Lady" (1996), adapted from the Henry James novel but for which—atypical for her—she did not produce the screenplay. This time, as her own screenwriter, her focus is narrow and biographical rather than expansive and literary, and that smaller canvas mentioned above makes for a more intense experience. The script and settings mix very well both muffled passions and elegiac moods. Campion also trusts her actors, and they come through for her.

The two leads are impeccable in their very different roles. Ben Whishaw (last seen most prominently as the dissolute Sebastian Flyte in "Brideshead Revisited") is physically right for the part, slight and vulnerable—even ethereal. He delivers the poetry (including "Bright Star," a sonnet written for his Fanny) earnestly and honestly, which revivifies these texts for the film audience. He and his director avoid histrionics for a portrait of the artist as an honest, if woebegone striver.

Abbie Cornish ("Elizabeth: The Golden Age," "Stop-Loss"), an Australian actress of 27, is a revelation. Initially a chatty, superficial maiden (Fanny was 18 when she first met Keats), Cornish is able to show how Fanny develops both an agile mind and strong womanhood as the relationship with John deepens. She balances Whishaw's languor and sensitivity with spirit and candor; she is a woman ahead of her time in showing her emotions and commitment (such as in her secret notes to Keats). You can see why she sparks such an interest in the shy poet. Hers is a well-rounded and intense performance.

"Bright Star" is very handsome and period-appropriate—much of its mood comes from outdoor scenes of English dankness and interiors of heavy fabric and deep mahogany. There was a slightly false note for me in the (overall excellent) costume design: though it is emphasized that Fanny is a clothes horse (she sews all her own outfits in the latest fashion), her character throughout the film is swathed in new threads in virtually every scene. Kudos to the costume designer Janet Patterson for the richness of those outfits, but the plentitude of those dresses and fabrics on a woman of modest income seems excessive, even comic by the film's end.

Jane Campion has noted her intentions in creating "Bright Star": "Some of Keats's poems are in the form of odes and some are in ballads, and I started to think about the story of Fanny and Keats as a ballad, a sort of story poem." I think she achieves this effect, with a delicate yet forceful depiction of a period and a romance that produced some of the greatest lines in our literature and, with luck, will send some filmgoers back to rediscover, or read for the first time, the works of that genius—lines such as:

*A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep...*

(The film is rated "PG," with a running time of 119 mins.)

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