

HELLO NOW

Books by Jenny Valentine

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For Jeff

NOVO

WHEN IT HAPPENS, I DON'T FEEL IT. I NEVER feel it. I just sleep. And they wash away, the things I've held on to, all of them. I let them go, leave them unchanged, and they are clean and new and nothing and then I am back. Never the same place – sometimes the cut and pulse of human traffic, sometimes a vast empty space. Anywhere and Always. The hot bite of dust, a blanket of snow. Soft opening of a morning or deep, sharp night. Sometimes before Now, and during, and also after, just the land holding bodies and the birds rising up over the sea. Square one, in all its different disguises. Always moving. Always alone.

I never forget what I am looking for, over and over, somewhere in that black-hole sleep. The one that keeps me. The one I can keep. My hook. A face at a window, the

air in a bubble, a bird in a cage. Consequence. Purpose.
Belonging.

A street. Here. Now.

Will it be this time? Will it be never? I get out of the car, know my name and my age, my own hands, all my histories, same as ever. Quiet facts come to me like old finger drawings on glass, only traces. These trees. This house. This beginning. I stand at the side of the road, taking it all in, hoping and hoping. And I wonder, not for the first time, if it has some kind of start, this life, and who's controlling it, and if it is ever, ever going to stop.

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JUDE

I'VE NEVER BEEN INTO LOVE STORIES. TOO MUCH sugar, too much gloop, same reasons I don't like candyfloss or fondue. Only so many sunsets and hand-holds and ever-afters I can stomach, honestly. Seven words for it in Greek. Twenty-seven in Tamil. All those subtleties, like Eskimos and snow, and we just have this one four-letter word and expect everyone to make a religion out of it.

I've never been into magic either, not the made-up miracle kind. Not when there's the miracle of actually existing to deal with, the magic of infinitely small particles, the exact same particles, coming together to make a human being or a seashell or the Earth's atmosphere or a cup of tea or just a log. There's magic in putting one foot in front of the other, isn't there?

There's magic in a foot, come to think of it. It's everywhere. Even to be here is so much.

That's what I knew about love before, when it was still just a spectator sport for me. Here's what I learned by osmosis. That people spend their time wishing so hard to be with someone else they forget how to be a proper version of themselves. That we are all too ready to give up our independence, ache to hand it over gladly like it's nothing, and make someone else responsible for our happiness, someone way less invested, way less qualified than us.

That kind of love is a selfish thing, transactional, an exalted kind of laziness, and that's why nobody says 'I love you' without wanting it said back.

But love is not a transaction. Four-letter love is a big black hole and that's why you fall into it. The finest bubble, the best dream, where you don't want to wake up, not for a second, not ever, because you know you have to, you know you will, and that then, nothing else will come close. It makes all the everyday miracles duller and more ordinary, just from having been there, from having gone. That kind of love and magic feel the same. I know that now, for a fact. I'm an expert on the things I used to say didn't exist.

Other loves aren't a difficult ask for me. I love my mother. That goes without saying, even when I don't like her. I love London, and my old house and all the days of my childhood, all my friends. I love the sea, and walking on its edges, and the taste of salt and vinegar on a hot chip. I love dancing in dark rooms and getting lost in a long book, and you've got to love laughing, everybody loves a decent joke. I love strangers and the internet and I love snow and sand and new places. I love obvious signs of loneliness, for some reason, and old people and young people and most dogs and the things we say to each other and singing and all types of fire and the underdog and a lot of movies, even bad ones, and marmalade on dry brown toast and clean sheets and ginger tea and I am really only just getting started.

Love is everywhere too.

I could fill this whole page with the things I love. I could carry on thinking of new ones without stopping, twenty-four hours a day, until I die. But all of them, standing together, armed to the teeth and in organised ranks with me leading the charge, still couldn't have prepared me for Novo. Of having him. Of having him with me, alone, the great weight of his arm. And then not.

When I think about that, I feel the impact in my chest,

the air pushed from my lungs, the clean sharp break of all the bones in my body. It hurts. It's a violent equation, love plus loss. I don't want that to be true. But I don't know how else I'm supposed to put it.

Look how hard it hit me. I'm bleeding love story all over the place.
