

Review #36 : *Bright Star* (2009)

Abbie Cornish and Ben Whishaw

TRAILER



John Keats was the last of the Romantic poets. He was the last born of the group that also included Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley. He died at 25 and remains forever young...

SYNOPSIS

The great and only love of his life was Fanny Brawne — the daughter of his landlady. He lived with his friend, Charles Brown, while she lived with her mother, sister and brother in the two halves of a Hampstead cottage — so small it gives meaning to the phrase *living in each other's pockets*. Their love was grand and poetic and — apart from some sweet kisses — **chaste** for he had neither the means nor the health to propose marriage, and they were not moved to violate the moral codes in what was to become the Victorian era.

Jane Campion's beautiful, wistful film shows them frozen in courtship, like the young man Keats wrote about in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* : the youth who is immortalized forever in pursuit of a maid he is destined never to catch :

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss

Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve.

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair !

It is almost as if they were spiritually inflamed by their doomed love. She was not shy but she was proper, and he loved her so and was not thinking of her as physical. When his younger brother Tom died and his own health began to fail, he immortalized his loss of that which he had never possessed. From his deathbed in Italy, however, he did indeed write his friend Brown that he wished he had *had her*.



Keats House is shocking small. The dividing wall between the two households was knocked out in the mid-1880s, but propriety must have erected a stouter wall. It is to Campion's credit that she doesn't heat up the story or go for easy emotional payoffs, and we're spared even the pathetic deathbed scene that another director might have felt necessary.

The key figure is Fanny, played by Abbie Cornish with effervescence. *I confess I do not find your poems easy*, she tells Keats. But she studies them earnestly, with a touching faith that they must contain clues to the stirrings in her heart. **He requires her as a muse.** For a reader, he has the bearded Brown, a possessive and demanding taskmaster. Brown is hostile to

Fanny's appeal to his friend and resents it when she interrupts them working, which seems to consist of him scowling morosely at a manuscript while Keats idly dreams. Brown is a poet himself, but to his credit, he recognizes better craftsman and behaves like an agent for Keats.

What Campion does is seek visual beauty to match Keats' verbal beauty. There is a shot of Fanny in a meadow of blue flowers that is so entralling it beggars description. It is famously impossible for the act of writing to be made cinematic. How long can we watch someone staring at a blank sheet of paper? It is equally unenlightening to show the writer seeing something and dashing off to scribble down impassioned words while we hear him reading them in his mind. Campion knows all this, and knows, too, that without the poetry, John Keats is only a moonstruck young man. How she works in the words is one of the subtle beauties of the film. And over the end credits, Whishaw reads Keats' famous *Ode to a Nightingale*, and you will want to stay +++



REVIEW

The vernacular of popular culture and the somewhat specialized language of literary history assign different meanings to the word *romantic*, but the achievement of director Jane Campion's learned and ravishing new film is to fuse them, to trace the cominglings and collisions of poetic creation and amatory passion...

This is a risky project — not least because a bog of cliché and fallacy lies between the filmmaker and her goal. In the first decades of the 19th century, some poets may have been like movie stars, but the lives of the poets have been, in general, badly served on film, either neglected altogether or puffed up with sentiment and solemnity. The Regency period, moreover, serves too many lazy, prestige-minded directors as a convenient vintage clothing store. And there are times in *Bright Star* when Keats, played by the pale and skinny British actor **Ben Whishaw** trembles on the edge of caricature. He broods, coughs — signalling the tuberculosis that will soon kill him — and looks dreamily at flowers, trees and rocks...

But these moments, rather than feeling studied or obvious, arrive with startling keenness and disarming beauty, much in the way that Keats's own lyrics do. His verses can at first seem ornate and sentimental, but on repeated readings, they have a way of gaining in force and freshness. The emotions, carried by an intricate music, seem natural and spontaneous. And while no film can hope to take you inside the process by which these poems were made, Jane Campion allows you to hear them spoken aloud as if for the first time...

Keats's genius — underestimated by the critics of his time, championed by a loyal coterie of literary friends — is the fixed point around which *Bright Star* orbits. Its animating force, however, is the infatuation that envelops Keats and Brawne in their early meetings and grows, over the subsequent months, into a sustaining and tormenting love. Keats, as his lover decorously calls him, is diffident and uneasy at times, but also witty, sly and steadfast.



The movie really belongs to Miss Brawne — played with mesmerizing vitality and heart-stopping grace by Abbie Cornish. The Australian actress has, at 27, achieved a mixture of unguardedness and self-control matched by few actresses of any age or nationality. And most of all, she has some of the **spirited cleverness of an Austen heroine.** A gifted seamstress, she prides herself on her forward-looking fashion sense and her independence. She is also vain, insecure and capable of throwing herself headlong into the apparent folly of adoring a dying and penniless poet, something no sensible Austen character would ever do.

If it were just the poet and his beloved, *Bright Star* might collapse in swooning and sighing, or into the static rhythms of a love poem. And while there are passages of extraordinary lyricism — butterflies, fields of flowers, fluttering hands and beseeching glances — these are balanced by a rough, energetic worldliness. Lovers, like poets, may create their own realms of feeling and significance, but they do so in contention with the same reality that the rest of us inhabit.



The film's designated reality principle is Charles Brown, Keats's friend, patron and collaborator. Charles is his main rival for Fanny's attention. In an Austen novel this friction

would be resolved in matrimony, but *Bright Star*, following the crooked, shadowed path of biographical fact, has a different story to tell...

The film is hardly blind to the sexual hypocrisy that surrounds them. Fanny can't marry Keats because of his poverty, but Brown blithely crosses class lines to have some fun with a naïve and illiterate young household servant. That Fanny and Keats must sublimate their longings in letters, poems and conversations seems cruel, but they make the best of it. So does Jane Campion with a sequence in which, fully clothed, the couple trades stanzas of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*...

Jane Campion, with her restless camera movements and off-center close-ups, films history in the present tense, and her wild vitality makes this movie romantic in every possible sense of the word without being uncomfortably sensuous.



Bright Star is rated PG for mature content but it's perfectly chaste.