

# Kingfisher

by Rozie Kelly



## PLOT SUMMARY

When a creative writing academic becomes infatuated with his colleague – the poet – it is not long before it begins to threaten his relationship with his partner, Michael. Michael is beautiful. Michael is safe. But the poet is everything he isn't; she has everything he wants.

While he writes about steel and sex, she dreams about the movements of swallows. While he tends to his budding career, she writes from her big, white house in the woods. As he slips between his old life and this new one, his fixation grows into something more powerful. The poet, his Kingfisher, is his sole focus. He is hypnotised.

When simultaneous illnesses threaten to destroy the precarious reality he clings to, he's forced to question what he can and cannot take from someone. This is a novel about grief, power and desire – and the tangles in between that make up a life.

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Kingfisher*, Kelly examines the complicated nature of power dynamics in relationships, both romantic and otherwise.

The unnamed narrator begins his relationship with the poet by fantasising about dominating her, assuming that his youth and physical strength make this a foregone conclusion. However, as their relationship develops, he realises that he is in fact the submissive partner: the poet never tells him she loves him, although he tells her; he washes her feet and paints her toes; later, when she's interviewed by the journalist, the poet tells her that she allows others to serve her.

The poet is older, richer and more successful than the narrator, even though she is physically frail. The narrator realises that the physical is not the realm where the battle for power is being enacted. He becomes the poet's carer in the last weeks of her life, and sees her for the gloriously powerful woman that she is.



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The narrator is also submissive in his relationship with Michael, who is the breadwinner, and wants a ‘pretty little wife’. Yet, in that relationship – which might appear perfect from the outside – the narrator increasingly feels unhappy because of his lack of agency.

Yet, as an attractive young man, the narrator still holds power, demonstrated when he meets the two young women in the student bar who are drawn to him.

As the story develops, we learn more about the narrator’s childhood with his cruel mother Hetty, who has abused him physically and emotionally. As he comes to terms with his experiences and allows himself to grieve his father, the narrator refuses to submit to Hetty and her bad treatment any longer, ending things with Michael around the same time. Slowly, he finds his independence again with the help of his friend Jess, taking back power and agency.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Kelly explores the theme of beauty in *Kingfisher* in a number of different ways. At the beginning of the book, the narrator, whilst tutoring a young poet, observes that he hates her poetry because it isn’t beautiful, and poetry should always be beautiful. At the same time, he is in love with Michael, valuing his physical beauty very highly.

The narrator knows that he is physically beautiful, and that beauty is a currency. His own beauty is a large part of the reason for his relationship with Michael. However, he does admit that beauty is a different currency for men and women:

‘When I look at beautiful women, especially young ones, there is a resignation to them. They understand that they have been gifted a very particular currency. They have lots of it to spend but it’s laced with mercury, or perhaps lead. Some kind of metal that will eventually make them sick.’

Conversely, it’s the poet who inspires a deep devotion in the narrator – who has had a double mastectomy, loses her hair and becomes emaciated from illness. Even in her last weeks, the narrator is physically attracted to her.

Kelly includes a quote from Mary Oliver:

‘And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?  
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?  
And have you changed your life?’

What is Kelly saying about beauty – both physical beauty, the beauty of poetry and of beauty as an abstract concept? Is beauty a currency for women? How is beauty a currency for a gay man? Who decides what is beautiful?



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## QUESTIONS

The narrator says, 'You are not supposed to use the language of battle when you describe cancer anymore, she'd told me. It's now seen as problematic, as it implies there are worthy winners and losers.' What are your feelings about this, both in life and in the novel?

When the poet tells the narrator that he takes more than he gives, how does that fit with the narrative that he serves, or is submissive, to her?

When Michael helps the narrator make the origami swan, what does that show about him as a person and about their "open" relationship?

What is the relationship between Hetty and the poet? How are they alike and different?

## NEXT STEPS

Write a poem about a particular type of bird. Choose a bird you like and do some research about it – what are its interesting features, habitats or behaviours? Is there a particular form of poetry that would suit your bird? Why would that form be appropriate? Perhaps you can arrange your poem on the page to look like a bird. Try out a variety of methods and see which one you like best.

Alternatively, make a log of brilliant first lines from books. The first line in *Kingfisher* immediately grabs the reader's attention: find twenty or thirty first lines from books you own (or from the library) that you admire. Do there end up being common themes, repetitions or patterns? Assess what it is about a first line that grabs your attention.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rozie Kelly** is a novelist based in Yorkshire. After reading English Literature and Creative Writing she moved to Hebden Bridge, where she works for the Arvon Foundation, hosting creative writing courses. She was shortlisted for the 2023 PFD Queer Fiction Prize, selected for the inaugural Prototype Development Prize for emerging writers, and won the 2024 NorthBound Book Award for *Kingfisher*, which is her debut novel.



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In *The Safekeep* by Yael van der Wouden, an unexpected relationship develops between two young women against the backdrop of a shared traumatic history.

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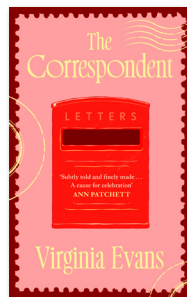
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