

Bright Star

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue



Bright Star is a die-hard romantic's romance, eschewing tawdriness in favor of shy smiles, stolen glances and soft kisses. It helps, of course, that half of its pas de deux is John Keats (Ben Whishaw), the frail Romantic poet who died of tuberculosis in 1821 at age 25. By including snippets of Keats's most personal poems, the film bathes itself in the sort of idealized love that was at the heart of his poetry.

Keats penned the poem "Bright Star" ("Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art") to Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish), his landlady's 18-year-old daughter. Brawne was a talented seamstress who cared little for poetry, but she came to adore the sensitive Keats, longing for him from afar as he buried himself in his study seeking inspiration. Watching her through the window, he gradually came to reciprocate.

The ebb and flow of this chaste love affair constitutes the main storyline of the film, the latest by the talented but uneven Jane Campion (*The Piano*). *Bright Star* proves to be one of her triumphs. The tale revolves around Campion's favorite theme of female empowerment, while also indulging her love for long shots of solitary women in flowing dresses walking through grassy fields. But this is not your standard-issue costume drama of fancy overcoats and overstuffed bodices. The art direction is actually quite stark, in part because both the poor Brawne and the poorer Keats are lacking in luxuries.

Greig Fraser's cinematography is inspiring. Like a great painting in a quiet museum, his shots make us wonder what exactly is happening just out of frame, or what transpired moments before or will once we leave the scene. Fraser and Campion are also masterful at creating frames within frames, which not only continue the painterly imagery but also suggest stanzas of poetry.

Cornish's remarkable performance does much to bring this mix of love and inspiration to fruition. She presents Brawne as a young woman harnessed by the social restrictions of 1820s England but also as an independent thinker trying desperately to push her way through them. Paul Schneider's performance as Charles Armitage Brown, Keats's friend and roommate, is delightful as well. His dislike for Brawne is palpable: not only does he think her a shallow girl with little to offer his talented friend, but he fears that her presence is a distraction. When this proves not to be the case, the film suddenly adds the vagaries of poetic inspiration to its thematic checklist.

It was during his short fascination with Brawne, whom he never married, that Keats was at his most brilliant and prolific, suggesting the poet he might have become had he not died so young. This story would lead many directors to indulge in a tubercular eureka moment, with the dying poet coughing specks of blood onto an unfinished poem. (The master of this genre is Ken Russell, who always makes sure there is plenty of blood and plenty of paper.) Campion resists such clichés and delivers a restrained and engrossing film.

The languid poetry of the English Romantics, with its difficult symbolism and classical allusions, is not an easy sell in this age of instant messaging and immediate summary. But for those willing to invest two hours in a moving but unhurried tale of a true love that was never meant to be, *Bright Star* is all aglow.