It’s Christmas Eve in Harlem, but twelve-year-old Lolly Rachpaul and his mom aren’t celebrating. They’re still reeling from his older brother’s death in a gang-related shooting just a few months earlier. Then Lolly’s mother’s girlfriend brings him a gift that will change everything: two enormous bags filled with Legos. Lolly’s always loved Legos, and he prides himself on following the kit instructions exactly. Now faced with a pile of building blocks and no instructions, Lolly must find his own way forward.

His path isn’t clear—and the pressure to join a “crew,” as his brother did, is always there. When Lolly and his friend are beaten up and robbed, joining a crew almost seems like the safe choice. But building a fantastical Lego city at the community center provides Lolly with an escape—and an unexpected bridge back to the world.

David Barclay Moore paints a powerful portrait of a boy teetering on the edge—of adolescence, of grief, of violence—and shows how Lolly’s inventive spirit helps him build a life with firm foundations and open doors.
THEMES
Family and Environment
Relationships
Grief and Acceptance
Forgiveness
Friendship

PRE-READING DISCUSSION
• Look at the cover of the book. What information does it provide you as a reader? How does it make you feel?

• Before turning to the first page of the story, return to the title, the author’s dedication, and Richard Chenevix Trench’s quote. How are these three elements of the book related? What message do they convey? How do they prepare the reader for the story?

“★This well-honed debut novel paints a vivid picture of Lolly and the choices that he must make, but beyond that, it introduces a cast of memorable, fully realized characters, each of whom will stay with the readers long beyond the closing page.” —School Library Journal, Starred
QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Family and Environment

• What do you learn about the setting of the story in chapter 1? Where does the narrator live? How does he feel about this place? Who do you think Jermaine is? Why would he “never, ever be coming home”? (p. 1) How would you describe the narrator’s mood? What helps you understand that that is how he is feeling?

• Steve says to Lolly, “If you only expose yourself to whatever everybody else does, you’ll never create anything new.” (p. 14) What do you think he means? Why did Steve present Lolly with A Pattern of Architecture?

• What do you learn about the narrator and his family? Why does Lolly ask, “Who would choose to be gay when they knew it was so much easier to be straight?” (p. 18) How does this question relate to Lolly?

• Lolly states that Rockit’s “console felt like it was a gift for another kid.” (p. 25) Why? Compare Steve’s and Rockit’s presents. How do these gifts influence Lolly’s decision to break down his Lego kits that are built “exactly how [they] appeared on the box”? (p. 9)

Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L 5-7.1, Craft and Structure R.L. 5-6.5, R.L. 5-6.6; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 5-7.1, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas S.L.: 5-7.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 5-7.1, Knowledge of Language L. 5-7.3.
**Relationships**

- The story starts with Lolly being followed by two older boys (Harp and Gully) and his explanation of how “crews” work where he lives. How does the author manage to transfer this feeling of being followed and under pressure throughout the story?

- Why does Lolly resist telling Mr. Ali what happened between him and Jermaine? How does he feel about it?

- Why does the author include flashbacks in which Jermaine is alive? What does the author achieve with these transitions?

- Why does Vega disappear from Lolly’s life after the incident with Harp and Gully? Do you think Vega is a supporting character or a main character? Why? When Lolly finally visits his friend, why does he have a heavy feeling in his chest after Vega shows him a gun he got from his cousin Frito? How does Lolly’s thought about “hoping for a life maybe making art” (p. 235) conflict with that feeling?

- Why does the author choose to create a sense of ambiguity when describing Vega and Lolly’s late-night walk in chapter 35? What is your reaction to the actual purpose of their walk? What does the gun symbolize?

- What does the coyote, Nicky, bring to the story? Why are these two quotes about Nicky important?

  “Our coyote was part of a species in danger. Hunted down and shot up. We knew how it felt.” (p. 170)

  “Our coyote was nowhere. Disappeared. Like everything else does sooner or later. Nicky was gone. Like Harmonee. Like Jermaine.” (pp. 244–245)
Why does Lolly agree with Mr. Ali’s comment that a storage room became his world? How does Lolly’s world feel “hijacked” (p. 98) when Big Rose joins him in the storage room? Why is Big Rose there in the first place?

Lolly describes Big Rose as “special” when the reader first meets her. (p. 56) How does the connotation of this word change throughout the story? How do Lolly’s classmates’ attitudes toward Big Rose change?

How does the dynamic between Lolly and Big Rose change throughout the story? What would you say they have in common? When Big Rose cites the following quote, what does it tell the reader about her and her family? “Rosamund, when you die, they bury you, but your soul flies to the stars. Your mama, your daddy—they were buried under the ground, but they’re stars now, girl, stars beneath our feet.” (p. 164) What connection do you see to Richard Chenevix Trench’s quote?

Lolly and Big Rose are building bridges out of Legos. What do their bridges symbolize?

How would you define art? How does art make you feel? Do you agree with Mr. Ali that Lego constructions are art? Why or why not?

Grief and Acceptance

- Why does Lolly find more comfort in building a Lego castle than talking to Mr. Ali? What do the following thoughts indicate about Lolly’s inner state? “I wished I could lose [Ma and Yvonne] and Mr. Ali from out of my life.” (p. 43) “I’d rather keep closed. Nobody got me. Nobody cared.” (p. 60) How do you think he is coping with his brother’s death?

- While talking to Mr. Ali, Lolly realizes that he never thought about how Jermaine’s death affected his father. Is it okay to be selfish while grieving? Why or why not? Does Lolly see his mother’s grief?

- Lolly goes from “What I couldn’t get out of my heart was this joy-grabbing stone I felt there” (p. 1) to “Ma’s face had made something true for me. From that whole Yvonne experience and looking back at Jermaine too, my rock was gone. I wouldn’t let it grow back.” (p. 269) List the occurrences that lead to this transition.

- Explain Vega’s suggestion to ask Steve “what he did to survive . . . [the] St. Nick projects.” (pp. 269–270) How does bringing up Steve at the end of the novel indicate a new stage in the boys’ lives?

- Explain the following metaphor: “Kids like us, me and Vega and Rose, were our own islands, living in a mad river.” (p. 270)

- What does the eventual removal of Jermaine’s bed from Lolly’s room symbolize?

- How would you explain Lolly’s decision to be called by his first name, Wallace, at the end of the book?


Prepared by Iryna Kuzmich, an educator in Brooklyn, NY, who is pursuing her MA Ed at Brooklyn College.
A CONVERSATION WITH
DAVID BARCLAY MOORE

Q: *The Stars Beneath Our Feet* is your debut novel for middle-grade readers. How did you come up with the idea behind the story?

A: Most of my work tends to center around Black male cultures, and being a Black male myself, I’ve come into contact with many of our stories and experiences. Often, those stories aren’t told enough. *The Stars Beneath Our Feet* is one small example of one of those stories.

I am also a creative person for whom imagination and creativity are my engine. My novel encourages readers to value their own creativity.

Q: Did you always know you wanted to write a novel and that its audience would be young readers?

A: I’ve been a storyteller all of my life, practically. And though it sounds trite, I’m still a big kid at heart. I’ve got lots of stories inside of me. In particular, I love children’s stories, middle-grade, and YA. There’s a purity to middle-grade fiction that is hard to find elsewhere.
Q: Lolly is a young boy navigating his way through life in Harlem, where he is dealing with the grief over losing his brother and figuring out the path he will take in life. Why did you set the book in Harlem, and did you pull anything from your own life and experiences when writing this book?

A: I love Harlem. It’s one of the first neighborhoods I lived in when I moved to New York. There are lots of stories in Harlem. In some ways, the neighborhood is a metaphor for Blackness. Over the years that I’ve lived in New York, I’ve always listened very carefully to its inhabitants. And though the city is safer than when I first moved here, it still has its pockets of violence—specifically, gun-related violence. Parts of Harlem are home to some of that. Too many children and young people die from gun violence. I lived in Harlem for several years and also worked there. During the eight years that I spent as communications coordinator at Harlem Children’s Zone, one of the country’s most successful anti-poverty organizations, I got to experience Harlem’s people in a different way, a much more intimate way. Harlem and its residents inspired much of The Stars Beneath Our Feet.
Q: Legos play a big role in this book. How does Lolly use them to help him work through his grief?

A: Legos serve several roles for Lolly. First, they are an outlet for him to release creative energy and to shape that energy into something real. Moreover, his Legos hold memories. Both happy and sad times are remembered through the act of building. Also, I think, the blocks are a coping mechanism for Lolly. He is able to partially retreat to this constructed world when the pressures of our real world are too much to deal with.

Q: Creativity and art can be seen in Lolly and Rose’s relationship. Why did you choose to interweave it there and throughout the story?

A: I think we need more art in our elementary schools. When I was in grade school, I benefited a lot from music, art, and even PE classes, which have fallen by the wayside in too many school systems. For poorer school districts, the resources devoted to these classes are even scarcer. I had wanted to draw attention to how important the arts are to ALL of our lives and how curative they can be. We can solve so many problems through our imaginations. Unfortunately, we as a culture have lost how very beneficial the arts and creativity are. They aren’t superfluous; they are necessary. I believe *The Stars Beneath Our Feet* reveals how crucial the arts are to emerging young lives in particular.
Q: Do you have a favorite character from the book, and if so, why is he or she your favorite?

A: Well, I like all of my characters as if they were my own children, so I don’t care to pick favorites. But I really enjoyed creating and writing Lolly. Though I put him through a lot of hardship in my novel, I think he emerges from it stronger. I like his creativity and intestinal fortitude, which are traits I believe he and I share.

Q: Where do you write?

A: Besides writing at the library or at my favorite café, I have a nifty home office where I write. It’s small and filled with shelves of toys, knickknacks, books, art, and figurines along the walls. My office is painted all orange and is the closest I can get to being inside my head without actually being inside my head.

Q: What is your favorite moment from the book?

A: One of my favorite moments from *The Stars Beneath Our Feet* is when Rose comes to Lolly’s rescue and saves him from being terrorized by Harp and Gully. Though it’s a tough scene, there are some funny moments. It also allows the readers to cheer both Rose and Lolly. The experience helps draw those two even closer together.
Q: What is something readers would be surprised to learn about you?

A: When I was born, I nearly died. Though I was a big baby, I was born with complications and had to remain in the hospital for several weeks until I got better. According to my parents, visitors to the hospital’s maternity ward would often wonder aloud why such a big, healthy-looking baby was there amongst all of the vastly smaller preemies.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away after reading this book?

A: I hope readers, principally young ones, come away with an insight into the process of grieving and healing and the impact that both violence and creativity can play in our lives.

Q: There is a lot of discussion in the literary world right now about diversity and the need for more diverse books. What is your response to this, and where will your book fit into the conversation?

A: *The Stars Beneath Our Feet* is definitely a “diverse” book. But I think it doesn’t wear its diversity on its sleeve. I wrote it in the same spirit as I encounter life; much of my own perspectives on life and art and community are included in its pages. Not only does my book give voice to communities who are not usually heard from, but it also sheds light on ways of being and living that may be foreign to so many more readers. I hope a lot of people learn from it.
Q: Are you working on a new book right now?

A: Yes! I am writing another middle-grade novel in the vein of *The Stars Beneath Our Feet*. This one deals with issues around STEM and poverty and friendship and prejudice—not just along racial lines, but other ways as well. Plus, it should be a lot of fun!

Q: Where do you see Lolly in five years?

A: In five years, Lolly will be content. And headed off to college to explore the next exciting phase of his life. I think he will have figured out a way to appropriately deal with his antagonists, Harp and Gully. He might even befriend them and have some positive effect on their lives. Sadly, I don’t believe he and Rose will meet again. As is often the case in childhood, we lose friends, mourn, and then move on. But those experiences we share with them may last a lifetime.
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