

The missing constant

Fabien /
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S. Nichèle
C. Cruickshanks

The Missing Constant

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C. Cruickshanks (US version)

Summary

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When a graduate from a French elite school teaches a student the world looks at with suspicion, mathematics becomes the language of a genuine encounter.

The missing constant proves nothing. It reveals—in another way—beauty, intelligence, and fragility. In a landscape saturated with loud narratives, it is a novel of subtlety and emotional rightness.

About the Novel

Alicia is eighteen. She lives with a rare syndrome that has shaped her face as much as the way she navigates the world. For years, she has studied at home with her mother Anne at her side, caught between chosen seclusion and enforced solitude. Until the day Fabien, a young math teacher, enters their lives.

What begins as simple tutoring becomes a shared space, at once delicate and genuine, a place of trust where each of them, in their own way, learns how to grow closer, while Anne keeps watch.

Over the course of nearly a year, the novel follows three alternating internal viewpoints—Alicia, Fabien, and Anne—moving between math lessons, the weight of social scrutiny, and the slow rebuilding of confidence. Alicia grows from an isolated student to a young woman ready to face the world. Fabien wavers between returning to academic research and the bond taking shape. Anne understands that a chapter is finally closing.

Characters

Alicia, eighteen, lives with Treacher-Collins syndrome. A gifted illustrator, she notices everything—shapes as well as hidden intentions—yet she never draws faces. Hyper-alert under other people's eyes, she has learned to protect herself by staying out of sight. With Fabien, she discovers that she can be seen without being judged, and that she has the right to live fully.

Fabien, a young graduate from the École Normale Supérieure (a French elite graduate school), is passionate about mathematics and committed to meditation. Shaped in part by psychological difficulties he has learned to manage, he feels torn between a cutting-edge research project (a continuation of his PhD with his former colleague Ameziane) and the very particular bond taking shape with Alicia. Teaching isn't a side job for him: it's a practice in focus, a way to stay grounded when his mind threatens to drift.

Anne, Alicia's mother and a project manager at a large firm, has long put her personal life on hold, balancing professional demands with her daughter's daily care. As Alicia grows, she finally allows herself to imagine something different—including her developing connection with Franck, a colleague whose own struggles echo hers.

Treacher-Collins Syndrome

Treacher-Collins syndrome is a rare genetic condition (1 in 50,000 births) that causes craniofacial bone malformations and, frequently, hearing impairments. Its severity varies widely from person to person. Intellectual abilities are not affected.

Beyond the medical aspects, the syndrome often exposes individuals to other people's gaze—an experience that varies greatly. Some, supported and surrounded, thrive; others face exclusion and invisibility, which the novel brings to light.

From the early stages of writing, the author worked with a young woman living with the syndrome, who confirmed the accuracy of Alicia's portrayal.

To learn more: Two sisters living with the syndrome offer a direct, joyful, and authentic testimony: [Identical Twins Refuse Cosmetic Surgery On Facial Differences | SHAKE MY BEAUTY](#)

Themes

- Self-acceptance and difference
- Solitude and genuine connection
- Identity and recognition
- Mutual learning beyond appearances

Excerpts

The first meeting: a look that changes everything.

Alicia pauses at the doorway. For the moment, Fabien still has his back to her.

Tallish. Slim build. Messy black hair. Plain, professional outfit. He's sitting in a posture that's halfway between stiff and relaxed.

Her gaze is fixed on the young man.

A collar that doesn't sit quite right. A few stray cowlicks. Hmm.

Fabien slowly turns around.

Okay... here we go...

Alicia waits for their eyes to meet. Just a split second during this first encounter. She will know right away what kind of person he is.

Hazel eyes, at once playful and dreamy, meet hers.

The polite smile doesn't fade.

He's not staring.

He is not looking at her chin, mouth, or nose.

He doesn't look away.

"Hey! Hi there, Alicia!"

His smile widens. He quickly stands and walks towards her, extending his right hand.

What is he doing?

Alicia finds it hard to believe.

A young guy, barely older than her, is meeting her for the first time and approaches her *with zero hesitation?*

Fabien, some years earlier.

The idea stuck.

After several weeks of researching online, he bought a plane ticket and set off for Kathmandu, Nepal, along with three other French travelers.

A guide was waiting for them on arrival. After gathering a few supplies, they immediately began a two-day trek. Fabien commended himself for developing the habit of walking the hills of Montmartre for at least an

hour a day since moving to Paris, as it had strengthened his legs and increased his stamina.

The first day was cold, sunny, and breathtakingly gorgeous. They trekked for ten hours over rugged, demanding terrain that pushed them to their limits.

By evening, they reached a small mountain shelter where they set up camp, worn out and grateful for the well-earned rest. Wrapped in thick animal-skin blankets, sitting around the fire beneath a beautiful starry sky, the group shared intimate thoughts on topics that Fabien had never spoken about with anyone before.

In that remote and symbolic place, the faces around the hearth seemed transformed as the flickering flames cast a glow that revealed something deeper in them. For a moment, it felt as if their souls had stepped outside their bodies, shrouding them in a veil of truthfulness.

The guide sat apart, strumming a small, handcrafted mandolin and murmuring softly in his native language.

That night, under the half-full moon, everyone felt as if they were softly brushing their fingers across truths meant only for them...

When everything hangs in the balance: Alicia on the edge...

She remembers the novel about the boy, and how the story unfolded through multiple characters' perspectives, letting the reader anticipate what would come next.

Internal and external points of view. Exchanges of confidences between characters. For the all-knowing reader, it's a *piece of cake!*

Of course, real life is quite different.

Genuine relationships should follow the same clear logic. Clear guidelines. Action and reaction, like in science.

Where are the enlightened, compassionate people who care deeply about others? Am I the only one who doesn't get it?

Approach and Tone

The novel addresses readers from age 14 and up, as well as adults. It follows three alternating internal viewpoints—Alicia, Fabien, Anne—each taking over without blending together. Italics convey inner thoughts; the dialogues remain brief and realistic; free indirect discourse allows smooth shifts between perception and reflection.

The writing favors precise sensory detail (gestures, glances, silences) over sweeping statements. No omniscient narrator, no explicit moral: the novel raises questions and lets the characters—and the reader—answer them in their own way. The tone is understated and empathetic, shaped by close attention to everyday details that gradually become signs of transformation.

A girl bearing visible after-effects of cancer recently won The Voice Kids—a sign that public representations are evolving, slowly. The Missing Constant aligns with this shift: widening the stories available to us, giving narrative space to those usually deprived of it.

Behind the book

“Writing is an act of love. If it is not, it is only writing”.

— Jean Cocteau, *Le Potomak*

What if I gave a voice to someone who is never heard? What if I showed a face that is never seen? What if caring for someone else allowed me to step beyond myself?

I read and absorbed many novels, attentively. And then I knew: it would be a young woman born with a different face. So slight a difference... yet enough for society to reject her, to reflect back at her the idea that she has no worth, that she is useless. That she is no one.

Wonder did this with August, a young boy. I am doing it now with Alicia, an eighteen-year-old girl.

I wanted a story without clichés, without pathos, without perfect heroes or convenient deus ex machina. A human story, true; full of nuance, doubt, and a great deal of gentleness, empathy, and light. A story that offers solace, simply, without artifice.

This is Alicia's story...

But it is also the story of all those who have ever felt rejected or unseen because of their difference.

About the author

The Missing Constant is my first work of fiction.

A software architect by training, I come from a rational world where writing is expected to be rigorous and scientific. But by bringing rigor together with emotion, I found the balance I had been missing. Writing to connect logic and humanity, mind and heart. This dual commitment—formal precision and emotional accuracy—shapes my approach to storytelling.

As a teenager, I wrote short stories for my friends in high school, with a fair bit of success. The dream of completing a novel never left me, even as life took me in other directions. Finding my way back to writing has allowed me to bring to life characters who now accompany me every day—and to spark encounters that would never have happened otherwise.

Reception and Outlook

When I began writing, I knew where I was heading, without knowing whether the path was the right one. I needed to test my vision. That's when I met my first beta reader: a young woman only slightly older than Alicia, also living with Treacher-Collins syndrome.

Her response was illuminating. For her, Alicia and her story felt truthful, free of false notes—moving, and painfully real. A necessary story, for her and for others in similar situations. After rereading the hospital scene, she wrote to me: "I feel so seen and heard. It's like somebody finally gets it. It's one of the best feelings in the world." That validation confirmed that the novel was keeping its promise: to show without betraying, to acknowledge without reducing.

The book's release surprised the people around me. A simple post on social media, a small circle at first... then word of mouth took over. With no advertising, no campaign, the book passed from hand to hand. Six months after publication, nearly fifty readers had discovered *The Missing Constant*—teenagers, forty-somethings, retirees, friends and strangers alike.

The spontaneous, enthusiastic feedback reveals the diversity of readers who were touched by it. A teenage girl praised the book for having "no clichés or big dramatic effects. It's nothing like the formulaic American-style young adult stories." A mother recommended it "especially to teens who struggle with their self-image." A retired physician, delighted, lent it to her friends, who shared her enthusiasm. The profiles vary, but one thing remains constant: the recognition of the book's emotional accuracy and the depth of its characters.

An English edition of the novel came out in September. An American reader active in the craniofacial community discovered it and shared her reactions as she read: "I'm really into the book! You're a fantastic writer! [...] It is rare to read something and understand exactly how the main character feels!!!! You're truly wonderful." This response—coming from another language and another culture—shows that the story reaches beyond borders: its honest look at differences resonates universally.



The Rare Disease Network for Craniofacial, Head, Neck, and Dental Malformations (TETECOU), a specialized department at Necker Hospital in Paris also read the novel and wrote to me:

"A very enjoyable read—a well-written novel that beautifully captures the challenges and feelings of a teenage girl living with a craniofacial difference, without falling into misery or pity, but instead offering kindness and hope."

Following the release of a podcast episode dedicated to Treacher-Collins syndrome, the organization highlighted the book on its Instagram account with these words: "We've read it and highly recommend this novel for teens and young adults—and for older readers as well. (...) Its emotional truth and sensitivity moved us." This confirms the text's credibility and depth.

The novel is currently finding its readers through direct transmission, from one person to another—because it looks difference in the eye, without pity or glorification, and shows how genuine connections can change lives.

Stories like Alicia's are rare in today's literary landscape. They deserve to exist, to be read, to create spaces of recognition for those who feel invisible.

A second volume is in the works.

Practical Information

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The Book

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