

THE GREATEST LOVE STORY NEVER TOLD

He was the Heath Ledger of his day. She was a flirty, fashion-fixated teen. Jane Campion, director of new literary biopic *Bright Star*, talks to *Stylist* about the ill-fated love story of John Keats and Fanny Brawne

Death. Where would a cracking literary romance be without it? Romeo and Juliet, Heathcliff and Catherine, Gatsby and Daisy... all cruelly aborted courtships that inspired generations of angst-ridden teens and hopeless romantics. But whereas the tortured prose of Shakespeare, Fitzgerald and Brontë was spawned from pure imagination, the poetry of John Keats came straight from the heart. His frowned-upon real-life love affair with next-door-neighbour, Fanny Brawne, inspired his greatest poems, yet it is the true story behind their young relationship that is the genuine literary romance: short-lived, taboo and ultimately tragic.

For a man who died young (25), unknown and penniless 188 years ago, John Keats hasn't done too badly in the posthumous fame stakes. For years, his poems have been recognised as some of the most sensual words ever committed to paper. But until now, nobody bothered much about the young lady who inspired them. This week Jane Campion's new film *Bright Star* hits cinema screens, and chronicles the final three years of the poet's life and the love affair between the two young people who Campion describes as the "*Twilight* couple of the 19th century."

Fanny Brawne (played by Abbie Cornish) is arguably the real centrepiece of *Bright Star*. A fashion-obsessed 18-year-old, Brawne subscribes to fashion magazines like *Le Voleur* (think *Vogue* with etchings of ladies in painful-looking corsets) and is a proud owner of "the first gown in Woolwich with a triple-pleated collar".

"I fell in love with Fanny as much as Keats," says Campion. "She was a clever, witty woman, but her interest in fashion did make people think she was shallow." One of the only ways Brawne could express herself was via her needlework. "That's all women did back then," adds Campion. "Sew, and wait for things to happen."

And something *did* happen – one day in 1818, when Keats spied Brawne pottering around her Hampstead garden. He regarded the coquettish teenager as "a minx", while she fell underneath the aphrodisiac-like spell of his poetry and cool looks.

"There are parallels between Keats and people like rock stars and Heath Ledger," notes Campion. "He was a cultural rebel, shocking morals of the day. Fanny met

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somebody who she never imagined she'd fall in love with, because he was so unsuitable."

Unsuitable because, back in the 1810s, when everybody spent lots of time bowing and holding teacups, Keats represented an antidote to fusty convention which Brawne found irresistible. "This is why I think she fell in love with him and the reasons why I would fall in love with him – he's funny, he's honest, he says what

he thinks, he teased her mercilessly. I think that's incredibly attractive."

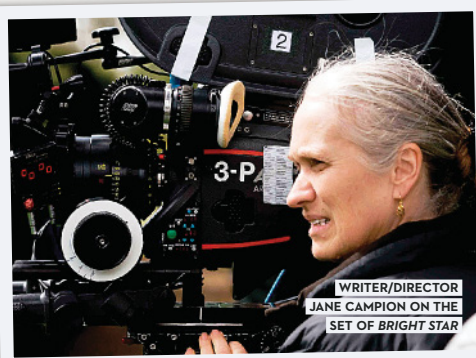
And so they fell in love – although in *Bright Star*, physical affection is limited to a few kisses and polite hand-holding through daffodil fields. So did they break cultural taboos and sleep together? "What do I know?" exclaims Campion. "There's no evidence their relationship was anything other than chaste. But there was no lack of intensity in that love affair."

And no lack of angst, either. When Keats holidayed on the Isle of Wight, Brawne stayed in bed for five days. After he wrote to her: "I almost wish we were butterflies...", she filled her bedroom with all manner of weird-looking moths. And she was clearly no stranger to the dramatic gesture – her younger sister once ran into the kitchen announcing: "Fanny wants a knife to kill herself!" In fact, Keats and Brawne's relationship could easily take place in the bedrooms and bus stops of suburban Britain today. "Girls who are 17 now do exactly the same thing. Trying on dozens of outfits, etc. We take our emotions a lot more seriously when we're younger," says Campion.

"I used my daughter, Alice [she's 15], as inspiration. She's got the right temperament. She's very dramatic. She lives every moment intensely, as does Fanny. One moment she's a depressive, the next she's happy. It's the whole hormone surge of being a teenager. What I love about my daughter and, I guess, Fanny, is whatever they're doing, they're totally in that moment. They totally believe that they're in love."

Soon after the pair became engaged in October 1819, Keats contracted tuberculosis – the same disease that killed his brother and mother. Keats' supporters clubbed together to send him to Italy to convalesce, but there was only enough money for one ticket, meaning Brawne had to stay behind.

"He proposed to her before he got really sick. He tried to keep away – all I could imagine





BEN WHISHAW AND ABBIE CORNISH APPEAR AS KEATS AND BRAWNE IN *BRIGHT STAR*

was that he adored her. He basically thought I'm going to accept my fate and go with this. So she started wearing his ring. Her family [wondered], what the hell is he doing? But then he started to cough blood."

They never saw each other again. Keats died in Rome in February 1821, a genius snuffed out in his prime. After three years together, Brawne was distraught. She spent a further three years wearing a black dress and re-reading his letters. But even though she married in 1833 and had three children, she never stopped wearing the ring Keats had given her until her own death aged 65.

Campion says: "I don't think she could have gone, knowing he was going to die. What could her mother possibly be thinking by letting her do such a thing?"

Fanny desperately wanted to go, but her mother realised that he'd never come back and she'd be left in a foreign country alone."

When Keats lay dying in Italy, aged just 25, he wrote to fellow writer Charles Brown, saying: "The persuasion that I shall see her no more will kill me... O that I could be buried where she lives. It surprises me that the human heart is capable of such misery."

"We're so lucky he left behind these love letters," says Campion. "I sobbed that a young man with so much died in such a terrible way. A couple extraordinarily in love will never realise their passion. You can't help but be moved by it."



Bright Star is released in cinemas nationwide on 6 Nov

PASSION AND THE PEN: OTHER LITERARY LOVE AFFAIRS

Keats wasn't the only love-struck scribe. Take these enamoured wordsmiths...

F SCOTT AND ZELDA FITZGERALD

The tempestuous marriage between *The Great Gatsby* author and his wife produced many love letters, but was blighted by his alcoholism and her schizophrenia.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND ANNE HATHAWAY

Scandalously, Hathaway became pregnant before her marriage to the Bard - who, at 18, was eight years her junior.

VERLAINE AND RIMBAUD

Sixteen-year old *enfant terrible* Arthur Rimbaud embarked on an absinthe-fuelled affair with French poet Paul Verlaine in 1871, until the latter decided to try to save his marriage.

JAMES JOYCE AND NORA BARNACLE

The Irish writer went on his first date with the amusingly named chambermaid on 16 June, 1904, which later became the day his novel *Ulysses* was set. They inspired the Ewan McGregor film, *Nora*, in 2000.

LORD BYRON AND EVERYONE

The Russell Brand of his day (sort of), Byron copulated his way around Europe, having scandalous affairs with Lady Caroline Lamb, Anne Milbanke (her cousin) and Augusta Leigh (his half-sister).



SYLVIA PLATH AND TED HUGHES

The seven-year marriage between the poets ended in 1962 after he abandoned her - a year later, Plath killed herself.