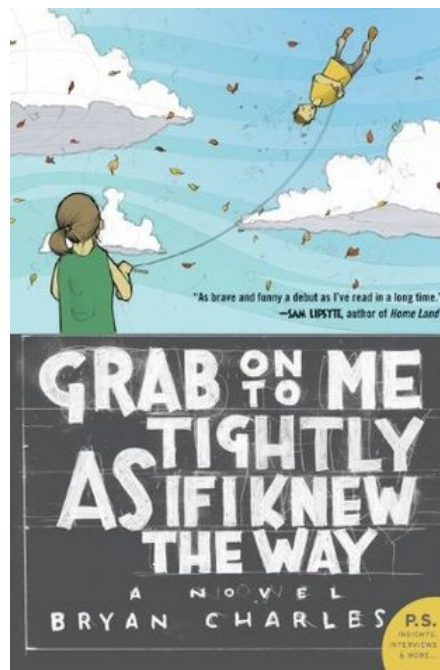




Grab On to Me Tightly as if I Knew the Way

Bryan Charles

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A wise, bighearted, and hilarious look at one teenager's life by a remarkable new voice in contemporary fiction

It's 1992, and as Vim Sweeney deals with the recent end of his high school career and the uncertainty of his future, America shares his angst. In Seattle, Kurt Cobain reeks of teen spirit. In Washington, George Bush (the first one) has just finished rattling his saber at Saddam Hussein. And in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Vim is trying to put off adulthood and all that comes with it, whatever that is, for as long as he can. He's already juggling guitars, girls, and a long-absent biological father who's suddenly making noise about Wanting to Be Involved. And he still can't convince his friends why local schoolboy hero Derek Jeter is bound for obscurity.

Grab On to Me Tightly as if I Knew the Way traces Vim's stumble toward adulthood as he comes to terms with his parents, balances friendships and infatuation with varying levels of success, and accepts that the things he thought would last forever probably won't. Generous in spirit and laugh-out-loud funny, here is a novel that introduces a tremendous new talent and deftly captures the alternately amusing and harrowing process of holding on until you find your way.

Grab On to Me Tightly as if I Knew the Way Details

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From Reader Review Grab On to Me Tightly as if I Knew the Way for online ebook

James says

This is set in 1992 and following the life of Vincent "Vim" Sweeney. Vim is an eighteen-year-old who falls for his friend and bandmate's girlfriend, loses his virginity in a one-night stand and falls into heavy drinking. He lives with his mom and step-dad and feels estranged from his father, who was largely absent while he was growing up. This is an angst-y coming of age novel. Bryan Charles writes some of these like stream of consciousness and the effect is you feel like you are in Vim's head. Unfortunately, Vim is a shallow eighteen year old with delusions of grandeur and pretended depth. I did not find him a particularly likely protagonist. Vim sexualizes his interaction with women throughout this book and drinks way too much. I didn't think he grew much through the novel, though he does learn to express his anger to his dad and let go of some bitterness. He is still a punk kid and I found the pop-culture references a little cliché.

Cara Tobe says

I absolutely loved this book when I was 16 and after lending my copy to numerous friends, I eventually lost track of it. Then as time went on I forgot the title. And then I realized that it wasn't as popular as I once thought and finding the name again became a task I obsessed over numerous times but I always came up empty handed. Just now, I was going through old posts on Facebook, remarking on how the phrasing of status updates changed along with the drastic changes Facebook went through. And I found it.
"the dreams that mock you the death that awaits you the love that escapes you"

Carrie Wilson says

Meh.

Years ago, I picked up this book because the title intrigued me, as well as the short plot blurb on the back cover, which mentioned Kurt Cobain and Vim's "stumbling" toward adulthood. A coming-of-age story set in the early '90's? I'm there!

So I thought. I was a fourteen year old Nirvana fan when Kurt Cobain committed suicide I would have liked this book better back then, when I was an angsty lost soul like Vim (minus the drug and alcohol abuse). The plot is aimless, Vim is a whiny, self-centered brat, and the characters are largely defined by their hang-ups and/or substance abuse problems. Charles does have potential, though, and the poetic use of language and his startling imagery kept my attention long enough to finish the book, which ended on a hopeful note.

I wouldn't recommended this book to anyone I know, including any of my library patrons. It is too "mature" for YA collections, though, and too immature to appeal to most adults.

Eme says

This book takes place right in the middle of where I grew up, so I inevitably felt a kinship to it from the start. I also feel a connection to this bored, horny, grungy boy with a penchant for rock and abstract poetry, in spite of the fact that while this was all happening, i was just being born. I understand where people are coming

from when they talk about being frustrated with the wayward style of writing and being confused by the mix of tenses and first/third person; however my mind works the same as Vim's and I drank it all in. My self-indulgent writing has always been an uncharted mix of personal essay, streams of consciousness, lack of punctuation, effortless metaphor and simple poetry, as well as the occasional, profound, revelation. I judge books more based on the way words are strung together than the actual plot. What I'm interested in is beautiful writing, not genius. Things that feel genuine resonate more with me, which is why I really appreciate this book. I assume it is probably difficult for some adults to connect, as this period of their lives is long past, and I think being closer to Vim's age, and generationally, provides a greater insight. I'm quite enjoying this novel; though it is not a literary masterpiece, it is neither an empty nor fruitless read. For those whose thought process works the same, the writing style will not be something to "get past" but rather a relatable experience.

Jennn says

So, our main characters Vim (Vincent) is fresh out of high school, works as a dishwasher (for a short period of time before thinking he's above it and quitting), and is in a band (with the unfortunate name, Judy Lumpers).\

I will admit that he does have a way of expressing himself. The weirdest phrases pop up without rhyme or reason, almost interesting enough to inspire, but so over-done that you soon realize that it's just a one-trick pony. The main character is a lot like the guy in high school that tries way too hard to be cool, deep, and mysterious. In all the mess of striving to be this persona, he's lost himself and what he really wanted to express in the first place. He stumbles over his words, keeps rambling, thinking if he just keeps talking something at some point will sound cool and maybe become believable.

Some examples I'd like to share are:

"I lean in and stare down her scars, no shame, like if I just stare long enough they'll open like little mouths and say how they got there./Scars with voices telling me their funny tales of mutilation./Please baby, tell me what happened./Let our scars have a conversation." Pg 8

"I need everyone now, all the love and titties or hey a fist in my face or an elbow to the chin foot in the gut hot iron on the balls hey smash me I turn beautiful turn a thousand shades of green color of my eyes of my father's eyes color of the place in my head where desire is a symptom of disease." Pg 35

"punch me, baby, with hands like pale birds diving away from earthwork scars and your eyes, holy shit, your eyes lit up like groovy blue storms"

And also, laugh-out-loud funny? There were jokes? I couldn't tell since the dialogue was so awkward and nonsensical. Example:

"We? Who we?"

"Me."

"We is me?"

"Oui, oui. Like a fuckin French porno."

Is that the joke? There are many examples of this kind of conversation that lost me because I couldn't find anything funny. I, too, am a Michigan native and my friends and I never had discussions that resembled anything like the ones presented in the book, so you can't blame dialect. Not everyone in Michigan talks like that. The dialogue didn't run smoothly together at all, instead felt more like it was flopping around, unsure where it was really going and, for the most part, not caring where it was going to fall.

Also, it boggled me the violent swings between 1st and 2nd person (and even sometimes third). I got dizzy and threw up in my mouth a little. I don't mind it changing, but it got the point where it seemed to be in mid-sentence. I like a little warning, please.

On one hand, the author will be very creative, in fact, too creative – or at least trying too hard to be creative (“Then we kiss. Tongues touch. Open mouth to open mouth. Sounds like a baby chewing bananas but who started it?” pg 45), but then suddenly things change, his words become prosaic and predictable (“Beauty exists, so does pain.” 191, “Because you can't have light without its opposite,” and “You are the truth and I am the lie.”) before pressed back into the meat grinder of drugs, sex, and music.

I couldn't relate to any of the characters. Not Helene (the cutter-girl desired) not the protagonist Vim or any of his crazy friends or his uncle Bro. No one. Every character just struck me as annoying and pretentious. The female characters were mostly sluts (like Rachel's speech: “He's not my boyfriend. I don't really have boyfriends. I'm more about experience.”) or self-destructive. When describing Helene, he becomes poetic, but each compliment seems more confusing than romantic: “Her face is so pale you could touch it and make it ripple,” “Her eyes are so light blue and calm they make me feel like I've been talking too loud my whole life,” “She's an academy of eyes,” and apparently she makes you feel like “You want to rip out her scars and eat them like Twizzlers.” (Pg 40)

The character also has a deep fixation with his heart, or at least comparing it to numerous, tedious things. There are several references such as:

“Your heart grinds away constantly, burns itself into ashes, always materializing. Choose your own adventure. It's winter in your bedroom. Make a gun with your finger and thumb.” Pg 89

This one is particularly annoying since it rambles on and on: “Heart as collapsed time, as dug-up grave, as simple machine. Heart as big black bugs bleed blue blood.”pg 106

“Someone's sculpting my ice-block heart with a chainsaw.” Pg 141

“The heart is paper and any jerk with half a face can call you a name and turn it to ashes.” Pg 156

“The phone isn't a hammer, it's a giant sucking heart.” 185

“Is the planet trembling or only my heart?” Oh gag. 36

“I see a drop of sweat at the top of her cleavage and wait for it to drip./If it won't drip, if it won't fall, I'll walk out in the yard and throw stones at my heart. I'll fucking get in my car and smash into a tree.” Pg 8-9

Some other winners are:

“I lick my fingers and I swear I can taste pain.” Pg 120

“I wish I could make my hands a snow globe and hold this moment under glass forever.”

“Working the pussy like a five-year-old filling out a job application.”

“We drink. One shake, two straws. Earth angel. The night continues.” Pg 198

“And I would like, since you asked, to crack the world in two and fuck its blistering molten core.” (No, actually, I didn't ask.)

The redeeming factors:

-I would actually like to take a look at his poetry. I think the chaotic, wild jabs with his words would work enormously better if taken out of prose fiction and placed into poetry. I think it would be a more interesting read.

-It was short. 211 pages, and you're done. Thank you for not prolonging it any more.

-The format was loose and I found that enjoyable.

-At the end of the edition I had, there was a Q&A, plus background of writing the story and even CD recommendations. I thought that it was a fantastic idea, especially since the book is so music-driven. I actually would like to see little bonuses like that in more books. What was Chuck Palahniuk listening to when he wrote Lullaby? What CDs inspire some of the authors of today or recommendations for writing? I like to write, too, and I find music a huge support for writing, it gets me in the mood, it pushes me through tough parts, and pumps me up. I would love to see more writers take that approach.

In Summary:

What I learned: Don't tell a guy that you met in the bathroom that his girlfriend has big boobs and proceed to keep repeating that. Don't bribe cops with one dollar bills when drunk. Don't have unprotected sex.

Product placement: Twizzlers, Pepsi, etc.

Worst moment: Anything to do with Helene. Things would become real stupid, real quick when she would enter the picture. Plus....baby eating bananas? Seriously? O.o

Best moment: Telling his dad to eat his dick.

Pet Peeve: How did “modern” or “hard-core” become the synonyms for “bad grammar” and “lack of punctuations”? I've read other “modern”, “edgy” books that are filled with yummy punctuations and structured on good grammar. It's the way you tell the story that makes it edgy. And I love coming-of-age stories, and I love nitty-gritty, rough-and-hard, punch-me-in-the-face-again-bitch type of stories, but there has to be something behind it. A structure that makes it shine, that holds it up and allows it to be punk, while still being well thought-out.

One sentence summary: Annoying kid graduates high school, meets a fucked-up girl, plays some music, and then goes on some life-seeking trip up North.

Rating: D- It's not "Kill Kill Faster Faster" but it leaves something to be desired.

Nancy says

This was a Bookbub (or another similar site) special deal that I decided to download to my NOOK because there were apparently many references to Kalamazoo. Having lived most of my adult life there, I was curious about it. Well, I really appreciated the many Kalamazoo and Michigan references, because I could visualize ALL of those places. I must say, however, that I really didn't care for the book, because it was a coming-of-age story about the 1970's. This writer was really into pop music and pot smoking, which hold no interest for me -- I am a classical pianist who grew up in the 50's and 60's. This book is fascinating-ly written, because there are 110 chapters, some of which are merely one sentence or one paragraph long. I guess that I am too old to appreciate or understand the need for vulgarity in the language -- it must be the way teenage boys speak when they are together.

Kristen says

This was a really differnt book for me. My awesome friend, JD, bought it for me after we had a conversation about fascinations with book covers and titles and this book came up.

It is written in a very fragmented and poetic fashion. It reflects alot on the mass feelings of anxiety demonstrated by adolescents and young adults in the 90's. I enjoyed the elopement from my usual genres and topics of interest.

It's a quick read too and far from the sameold, sameold we can easily run into. His method of writting is very architectural. He writes a sentence and reconstructs it. His style is minimalistic, but is also high impact.

While I enjoy and feel it's easy for me to relate to nearly any cultural study, I could see how some of his references to early ninety's culture was lost on me. Someone older and wiser...like Doug (haha) could maybe "get it" more.

Chris says

I get it. I see why this book is so polarizing. By the first 20 pages, you'll know if this is a book for you. Is it one for me? Yes. Yes it is.

It has some problems and is--perhaps--a bit too fragmented at times. But, holy shit, there are some killer lines and moments in here. The kind that make any writer jealous and awed at this author's ability to spin a sentence. Mr. Charles has many of those moments, and the book becomes ridiculously fucking beautiful.

And, again, I get that some would think this is pretentious and overblown puffery. But it works because it's written by a recently graduated singer for a band. Of course it's going to be a mash-up of genuinely heartfelt moments and forced attempts at sounding smart/deep/insightful. It's who Vim is, and I loved his voice, his outlook, and ultimately what he discovers. Because in the end, this is really just a book about loving life for what it is, in those moments where you're too full for another second. And, honestly, that's something all of us should be reminded of as often as possible.

No, this isn't a book for everyone, but for those that it will resonate with, it will linger and reverberate in the best of ways.

Alan says

Self-indulgent self-conscious coming of age story all the worse because it is speckled with lines of brilliance, like vitamins in a turd. Think an indie rock-themed Good Will Hunting. Or Kerouac cameos the O.C.

Laurie says

The first half of this book reads very fast- there are a lot of events, the characters being introduced are interesting, and the main character develops a great voice that he expresses with some examples of really poetic writing in some places.

It does hit a wall though, which seems like it may have been the intent of the story but ultimately made me less excited about reading it. As the main character flounders and sort of flails around his life, you are expected to care, but somehow- I don't know if it is the age of the main character, the lack of connection I felt with him, or what- you just don't care. And that is really sad.

The book overall felt a little self-indulgent and psuedo memoir-ish, neither or which I really felt were redeeming in any way. I am giving this book three stars though, because of some truly wonderful pieces of writing that I really enjoyed in snippets throughout the story. This is very much a first novel, but given the quality of those snippets, I would be open to reading more by this author.

David says

I wanted to like this book. I wanted to like it after picking it up, I wanted to like it after the first 10 pages, then the first 50, but by the first 100 I was starting to face up to the fact that I just wasn't feeling it with this debut novel from Bryan Charles.

I especially wanted to like this book after reading the author bio and the "about the book" section in which Charles says the book is an "intangible force that gave back everything I put into it and more." I love that sort of passion, and as a writer, I get it. But I just don't feel it with this book. It's kind of a mess, it doesn't really feel like it did much more than meander through it's characters and situations. The random song quotes in the prose was more jarring than anything else it was intended to be: it came off as more of a random insertion to establish that yes, this does in fact take place in the early '90s.

But I guess my biggest problem with this book has to be its tone. The author is going for an accurate portrayal of a teenage boy and his march toward adulthood, which just happens to take place in 1992...I guess it may have been what suckered me into reading it in the first place. To me, Vim is unlikable, a snotty teenager. I'm not faulting the accuracy of this portrayal, but at the same time, it is not a character I want to spent time with, and this is an almost insurmountable problem for a book that could have been so much better, if perhaps in an overdone genre (the "coming of age story.")

However, even after all this, I am going to put this out there: I would read another Bryan Charles book. There were times I was very impressed with his writing, and there must have been something compelling about this for me to read all the way through (I have no qualms about giving up on a book I don't like.) This

book was not my cup of tea, but his writing wasn't a total turnoff, either.

Oriana says

What a surprising and terrific book!

This is one of those books that actually changes the cadence of your thoughts as you read it.... The author's voice is so intensely urgent, so fervent and sure. Vim is the boy I would have been (and was!) in love with in high school.

Tim Lepczyk says

The main strength of this book besides a catchy title is the narrative voice. The narrator takes the reader into the story and sustains a semi-lucid story which weaves through a highschool kids year summer after graduation. That being said, the rest of the novel is just a standard coming of age story. These novels have their place, especially for angsty young teens; however after reading a few you never need to read another one.

In the end, the main character seems shallow and naive, nothing has really changed for him and his problems are so small. It's the scale of a teenager, if I don't learn how to drive - I'm going to die! No, you won't die, and not driving is not that big of a deal.

Watching the kid in this try to stumble through life and "figure things out" is comical in how unimportant it is.

That being said, this might be a great book for a teenage boy. The language and description should be enough to keep their attention, and the subject matter might be applicable as well.

Tiff says

Portions of this book are pure poetry. The shorter sections, the stream of consciousness. The storytelling is a bit weak and I felt like flipping through those parts to get to the beautiful writing. Some paragraphs I wanted to print out and hang on my walls and other drug out. It took me longer to get through this book than it does most and this is a relatively short book. Bryan Charles is a good writer, I'm not not sure if his talent was put to best use in this book.

Bandit says

Great cover, terrific title...and the story that doesn't quite live up to either. Even if you were a teen in the 90s, something about this nostalgia trip just didn't quite sing. Angsty 17/18 year old(as if there is any other kind) doing his best to sort out his life and falling in love. Nothing really original and while some of the writing was quite good, overall it was heavily stylized (intentionally or not) as someone I can't quite put my mental finger on. At least it was a very quick read.

Robert Wells says

I only read this because it was written by a friend of a friend's boyfriend... or something like that, and I was glad that this friend had that friend who had that boyfriend because I would have missed out on some good adolescent angst.

Olivia says

I was excited to read this book because of the title, but gosh.. it was disappointing.

I always try to see books through even if I lose interest in the first few pages b.c I want to give them a fair chance to get better.

This book did have redeeming qualities but only in form of a self-reflective sentence amongst a paragraph filled with trashy attempts to explain Vim's bumpy "boyhood". Vim is obsessed with a girl named Helene, but, only because he 1. "can't" have her as she's dating his band mate and 2. she's hot in a way. every character in this book is written as less than human, they're all relatively one dimensional. if you want to read about a boring, horny and pretentious young man written by a pretentious older man, this is for you. if you'd like to avoid the angst i'd recommend steering clear.

Here's an instance where I should've put the book down for good,

for context: the instance I'm about to quote is, a girl comes crying to Vim (main character) because the events of 9/11 have her very distraught. the quote is his reaction to the hug after being pretty callous about the whole event.

spoiler in the form of a quote:

"and then she walks toward me and she hugs me. oh my fuck. she holds me tightly around the neck and she's warm with her tits pressed against me, crying softly, her body shuddering, oh my fuck," (pg.119,Charles) not at all captivating nor cheeky! this reads like he's on the precipice of writing a porno about his meek teenage experience with girls.

Beatrix says

This is such a heart-shattering and beautiful book. Which surprised me a bit – after all, this is supposed to be just another average coming-of-age novel.

In fact, it's more restrained, more average than a lot of other coming-of-age novels I know: the main character's, Vim's family is just averagely screwed up (his parents only divorced and looked for new partners once, and Vim's stepfather, for instance, isn't a brutal child-abuser, but a totally normal and likeable man); Vim doesn't suffer from any – diagnosed or undiagnosed – mental or physical condition (sure, his behavior is often morbid and obsessive-compulsive, he has some inclination towards self-harm, he's very melancholic and alienated and clueless, and he's full of teenage angst – but to all this I say [not cynically, but with well-remembered heartache]: so it goes); and his agonizing first attempts at sex and relationships, and his fears of growing up are all well-understandable and don't seem to be anything out of the ordinary.

The initial setup isn't anything new, either: Vim's just graduated from high school, he's going to college in the fall, and in between graduation and college, there's that weird no man's land between being a teenager and being an adult – that scary, unsettling period when nothing is certain, where childhood has already ended

but you have no idea yet how you're supposed to play being an adult from now on, and whether it's worth it, anyway.

The story (which is very fragmented and far from linear – I'll get into this a bit later) is driven by two emotional forces. One is the hatred and bitterness Vim feels towards his father. His father quit playing family when Vim was still a baby, but he has a tendency to show up from time to time and explain why he was a bad father, and how he plans to be a better father from now on. Vim is less than impressed by his father's bullshit, and he spends a sizeable chunk of his time pondering why and how he hates his father, and why he feels uncomfortable in his father's company.

The main story-line is driven by Vim's almost-hopeless attraction towards the girlfriend of one of his friends – towards Helene, who is way more screwed up than Vim. Vim's feeling towards Helene is a mixture of teenage crush and lust, the „we don't know each other but I'm sure you'd understand me" illusion, and the „I want to save you" syndrome, and this curious emotion deeply unsettles the boy's heart and mind – which weren't too peaceful to begin with.

All this, though, wouldn't necessarily be special – a significant percentage of teenage novels deals with themes like these. What makes this novel special is Vim's voice and narration.

As regards, for example, the fragmented quality of the novel I already referred to: the novel is only about 200 pages yet it has more than one hundred chapters. There are a couple of longish chapters, in which Vim really describes a particular event (a party, a night by the lake, a band rehearsal), but even these descriptive, story-telling chapters are chaotic and incomplete (probably because the events Vim narrates usually involve the consumption of alcohol, therefore Vim's recollections are somewhat hazy). And there are dozens of micro-chapters (consisting of a single sentence, a couple of sentences, or a single paragraph), which are not directly attached to the main story-line, however, it's from these chapters we learn the most about how Vim feels and thinks about life and the people around him.

Because on the surface (in his usual human relationships) Vim tends to act like a cynical and nonchalant teenager, and he also tends to react to events with an extremely tiresome, smart-ass kind of humor. As soon as he remains alone with his thoughts, though (which happens often, even during parties, band rehearsals, and so on), Vim transforms into a freely associating, emotional and deeply sensitive poet-brute, driven by rage and passion. The result of this transformation is a beautiful and tangled mess of self-expression which almost brings me to tears. Not because it's so tragic or painful, but because it's so precise: being a teenager can be exactly like this.

The atmosphere and poetics of the novel remind me of the music of the Smashing Pumpkins – say, like their song 1979, which – like this novel – always makes me feel that being a teenager is exactly like that. Even if my teenage years had been nothing like that.

And even though the Smashing Pumpkins is not mentioned in the novel (it could have been – the story is set in 1992), a lot of other songs and bands are, Vim himself also plays in a rock band, and the rhythm of the novel is very musical. And I can easily imagine Vim's poetic and associative flows of words as the lyrics of a more melancholy rock band.

And I repeat: his voice – it disarms me.

Darga says

"Give me a sweater made from your smell and whispers."

"The fatigue setting in, the emptiness, the dull panic, an alarm clock blaring, banging against the love and desire. The certain knowledge that all of these things will live within you and fight for dominance the rest of your days."

"The power light on the Twin Reverb glows like god's electric blood."

"You lean down, closer, closer, close enough now to feel the heat of her breath on your mouth, and to taste it, sweet and vaguely smoky. You are the drift of days and the unknown future. She is an academy of eyes. Your hands move slowly up her arms. You want to rip out her scars and eat them like Twizzlers."

I've read this book four times in the past six months. It's prosaic and musical and has what I consider to be the best dialog I've ever read.

(I accidentally discovered today that the first half of this book goes really well with Violent Femmes, and the second half goes really well with The Arcade Fire.)

wendy says

i read 30 or 40 pages and realized THIS BOOK SUCKS AND IT'S NOT GETTING ANY BETTER. i hardly EVER give up on book. i've done so only once or twice before. thank goodness this was an advance and i didn't spend any money on it. piece of garbage.

alright. so i read some more. i hate giving up on books. i'm still not liking anything about this thing but i haven't thrown it out yet.

i finished it. waste of time. it's so disjointed and not very interesting. i don't feel for the kid... don't bother with this one.
