Alice Nightingale is fifteen, with tumbling autumn hair and violet eyes, but something inside her is broken. She has Acquired Brain Injury, the result of an assault when she was just twelve, and her words come out in surprising and strange sounds. So she writes poems to express the words she can’t say and leaves these in unexpected places around the town. Manny James is a refugee from Africa. He is sixteen and appears to be adapting to his new life in Alice’s town, where there is comfort and safety. But at night he runs, barefoot; running to escape the memory of his murdered family. When he first sees Alice she is sitting on the roof of her ramshackle house in the moonlight. She throws up her hands and paper falls around her like snow. It’s the picture of Alice that Manny keeps in his head.

Alice’s brother, Joey, and grandmother love her dearly and protect her as well as they can but the family’s close ties begin to loosen when Joey becomes involved with Tilda, and Alice with Manny. Things take a turn for the worse when Manny is told by Hamish, a boy in his AFL team, that something bad is going to happen to Alice. Hamish blames Alice for the death of his older brother, one of the two boys who attacked and raped her and who subsequently died in a car crash during their escape. The story comes to a dramatic climax during a flash flood which threatens to wash the Nightingale home away and destroy everything and everyone she loves.

Glenda Millard's stunningly original text takes the reader into the minds of two main characters. Firstly with the stream of consciousness of the protagonist, Alice, she introduces a character (and voice) like no other. Alice’s words, rendered in lower case and with often broken sentences, at first hints at poetry and then becomes poetry. The second voice - that of Manny - isn't introduced in alternate chapters as is increasingly common, but arrives in a rush, nine chapters in. His is a more formal voice, yet less confident and less flowing. It, too, is filled with trauma yet this is expressed in an entirely different way. The two voices butt up against each other, drift apart and close again, creating a braided narrative that brings their shared story alive.
In the author’s own words:

‘The idea which got me started was gleaned from a newspaper article about a homeless girl who sang and in doing so had earned a scholarship to study music at a prestigious conservatorium. I began writing with the single intention of telling the story of a girl who sang as a means of escaping a tragic past. But as usually happens, the story become more complex once the character began to evolve and other information came to hand, informing and expanding the writing. My daughter was studying for her Masters in Speech Pathology at the time I was developing the manuscript and I became aware of language disorders, their causes and effects, and this information impacted on my story.

‘Initially I wrote in third person but felt like an observer. So I rewrote it all in first person, wanting to feel Alice’s pain and longing more acutely and allow her to express her troubled past, present and uncertain future.

‘Giving Alice a voice empowered me to use a means of expression unique to her. And although her syntax was somewhat unfamiliar, especially in the early stages of the novel, that was when my writing began to flow. Alice thinks of her writing as a means to freedom beyond her circumstances - to flying. That is what recording Alice’s thoughts felt like to me - a breathless leave-taking of all that was known and familiar.

‘Alice writes in her book, ‘these new words, many, love and peaches, hungered me in places that never before seemed empty, for things I never dared want.’ and strangely, I have just realised that there is a parallel between Alice and [me] the girl who left school at fifteen, who never dreamed of being anything more than being a wife and mother, who never dared want. Words have given me freedom.’

Author Background:

Glenda Millard is a highly respected author who writes for children of all ages. Her novel A Small Free Kiss in the Dark was the winner of the 2009 Queensland Premier's Award for young adults, Honour Book in the 2010 CBCA awards for older readers, shortlisted for the 2010 NSW Premier's Literary Award, and included on the Honour List for the 2012 International Board of Books for Young People. Books from her popular Kingdom of Silk series have also received individual awards. Her novel, The Novice, was chosen for a White Raven Award in 2006. Glenda has also written many picture books, including The Duck and the Darklings, illustrated by Stephen Michael King, which was shortlisted in the 2015 CBCA awards.

Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application:

- Pre-reading research topics:
  Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)
  Sierra Leone – where it is, its civil war, the refugee experience in Australia
**Fly tying** - what it is and examples of how flies may look.

- Read the first eight chapters of *the stars at oktober bend* and make a list of the literary devices that the author uses to convey the idea that Alice has ABI. Give an example of each of these devices.

- While we know that Alice has ABI because of what she says and the ways she says it, the reader soon realises that she is remarkably intelligent and insightful. Find clues in these eight chapters that indicate this.

- Chapters 9 and 10 are from Manny’s viewpoint and hint at a very different but equally disturbing experience in his past. Ask students to break into pairs to make a list of what we know about Manny by the end of Chapter 10.

- Ask students to circle the correct word in the following sentence.
  
  Both Alice and Manny tell their stories in (first/second/third) person narrative. This gives the reader a sense that they are (distant/close) to these characters. The first sentence of both Chapters One and Nine are in (present/past) tense but the remainder of these chapters are in (present/past) tense.

- Ask students to break into groups of four and write a script for the scene where Manny takes Alice home after her fit in the railway waiting room (Chapter 36). Alice gives the reader very little information about what Manny, Joey and Gram say to one another so students are free to imagine what each would have said to the other.

- a) Read the following poem to your class and discuss the literary devices used to intensify emotion.

  **desire**
  
  my desire is
to be
understood
my soul is filled
with songbirds
but when I open myself to
set them free
they shit
on my lips
anon

- Whole-class discussion: Does Alice’s poetry extend the story in *the stars at oktober bend*? Would the book be better without poetry?