Young Adrian’s Murky Fears

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Sonya Hartnett
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In PRIMARY SCHOOL, we were shown a video warning children not to get into strangers’ cars. We were told to note the places with Safety House stickers on the way home. I remember wondering if, on being pursued, I’d be able to run all the way to the nearest one. Every so often, we heard about a kidnapping on the news, so we took these warnings seriously.

Sonya Hartnett’s Of a Boy, written for the adult market after her many successful young adult novels, begins with a kidnapping, which provides a counterpoint to the central story of nine-year-old Adrian.

Veronica, Zoe and Christopher Metford go to the milk bar one afternoon to buy ice cream, and never return. Adrian watches this news story with interest and trepidation, asking his grandmother if it happened nearby. Adrian keeps a list of his ordinary fears. Reading a newspaper article about a sea monster found off the coast of New Zealand, he ‘adds the sea monster to the list of things he finds disquieting’. Just as he remains attentive to the story of the kidnapped Metford children, he searches throughout the course of the novel for more information regarding this sea monster. His list of fears includes the concrete (he ‘dislikes seeing his cupboard door ajar, especially at night’: this is common sense), but it also encompasses murkier fears. Adrian is afraid of everything, especially being left alone.

Taken away from his mother, Sookie, then abandoned by his father, Adrian now lives with his maternal grandmother and his uncle. Removed from one school at which he was an outcast, he clings to a shadowy marginality at his new school, where he meets his best friend, Clinton Tull, over a tin of Derwent pencils. His relationships with friends and family are etched with quiet precision: the warmest, and, one senses, the most hopeless, is his relationship with his Uncle Rory. Rory, too, is haunted by living. Having once been involved in a car accident that caused the death of a close friend, Rory is now unable to leave the house, and, though he wants to help Adrian, he proves as incapable of this as everyone else in Adrian’s life. The reader feels the immediacy of their failures, which are presented in the present tense.

When a family moves into the house across the street, Adrian befriends the three children. Nicole, the eldest, speaks for them all, and is peculiarly reticent to answer Adrian’s questions. Their appearance, and Nicole’s evasiveness, play upon both Adrian’s and the reader’s expectation about the missing children. This is made explicit when Rory says: ‘Two girls and a little boy. Like those kids we saw on the telly.’ The friendship that develops between Adrian and Nicole is at the heart of the story, and is successfully and sympathetically portrayed: the fits and starts of their interactions providing a natural tension and shape to the unfolding narrative.

Hartnett’s observations of the children are acute. Her creation of Horsegirl (Sandra, a student in Adrian’s class from St Jonah’s Orphanage) is particularly memorable. ‘Not really an orphanage,’ Clinton informs Adrian, but ‘an orphanage for kids whose mums and dads are still alive.’ Horsegirl is the most far-gone of the marginal children. Unruly, easily enraged, ‘defiantly crazed’, she is left to do what she likes, which is to be a horse. Showing up at school with a bridle and reins, Horsegirl whinnies and neighs, providing an example for all the students of what it is to fail utterly.

The children of St Jonah’s are a source of terror for Adrian, who feels akin to them. He, too, is living away from his parents, and has experienced the loneliness of being a misfit. His precarious friendship with Clinton stands between him and another social failure. With the disappearances in his life — his mother, his father, the Metford children — Adrian grows more afraid of being cast out.

This book is full of the domestic details of Adrian’s life, and they are lovingly rendered. Reminding me somewhat of Joan Didion’s essays of the 1960s and 1970s, Hartnett provides the contrast between the world stage and the suburban landscape. Establishing her story, she lists significant events of 1977: ‘the United Nations banned the sale of arms to South Africa, US President Carter officially pardoned those who’d draft-dodged the Vietnam War.’ In contrast, she situates the small scale of her own story: ‘three children bought no ice-cream, did not return home.’ Descriptions of household objects are returned to, just as the news stories Adrian follows and his relations with friends and family are skilfully threaded through the story.

It is wonderful to see such a well-written and adult book focusing with shifting degrees of tenderness and darkness on Adrian. Given her solid reputation as an author of young adult fiction, and given the youth of its central character, this novel may have difficulty in finding its audience, which would be a pity. Hartnett’s style is well-suited to adult fiction, and Of a Boy is a rewarding novel. Full of the complexities of its characters’ perceptions and Adrian’s immobilising fears, it is a deeply moving story.