
It’s a tricky business writing in the voice of a child, and even trickier when that child suffers from some kind of autism. Which kind afflicts little Jimmy Flick, the narrator of *The Eye of the Sheep*, is never spelled out, but think Geoffrey Rush playing David Helfgott in the film *Shine*. Jimmy demonstrates the same enthusiastic and energetic highs, the mental and physical excitability and the same rapid speech patterns and repetitions of remarks made to him:

> ‘How do you like your cock pit?’ I shouted. ‘Cock! Cock!’
> ‘That’s enough, Jimmy. Sit back and settle down.’ Dad sounded scared. (103)

This is Dad Gavin in a good mood. Easily embarrassed by his son’s manic enthusiasms and often enraged by them, especially after he’s been drinking, Gav is more likely to call his son a ‘bloody little retard’ and punch his wife Paula in some sort of retaliation. He punches Jimmy, too, and his older brother Robby, and the family live in dread of this monster who emerges as the level of the whisky bottle drops. The tension in the household is brilliantly conveyed, and it doesn’t make for comfortable reading.

Sofie Laguna’s previous novel, the much acclaimed *One Foot Wrong* (2008), her first for adults, also visited some dark places. As it also featured a naïve child narrator in a severely dysfunctional family, comparisons will inevitably be made with *The Eye of the Sheep*, but the novel it most closely resembles is Laguna’s children’s novel, *Bird and Sugar Boy* (2006). Both child narrators are called James, both come from divided homes, both run away from home to find a saviour, both end up in hospital and both their single dads turn up trumps at the end. In a children’s novel a positive or hopeful ending is mandatory; in *The Eye of the Sheep* it is a plot flaw since the previous chapters have done little to prepare us for one.

For over three hundred pages and over a period of some six years or more, Laguna addresses the failure of adults to look after children, whether they be parents, foster parents, or simply the system. Who will look after Jimmy? Not his abusive, alcoholic father who abandons his family after he loses his job. Not his big brother Robby, who can’t leave home fast enough once he grows big enough to punch back. Not his Uncle Rodney, who finds running a bait shop and looking after a problem child too much. Not the foster parents, with two other disturbed children to look after and strained nerves. Not the family doctor or the specialist who offers little hope. Not his teacher, who finds him a disruptive influence in class. And ultimately not his morbidly obese and asthmatic mother Paula, the victim of Gav’s rages over the years but who never fights back and always comes back for more. Paula is Jimmy’s refuge: she wraps her arms around him and calms him when a manic mood overrides him; she shares his bed and counts sheep with him when sleep refuses to come; she allows him to stay home from school and away from the bullies in the playground. But when she is removed from his life, Jimmy’s world falls apart.

This sounds pretty grim, but it is not relentlessly so. Jimmy and Robby have adventures in the wetlands behind their house; Dad makes a go-cart and he and Jimmy have a rare afternoon of comradeship; he and Jimmy holiday at Uncle Rodney’s, fishing and swimming, and the boy and a dog called Ned make a lasting connection. Like Jimmy, Ned is prone to high excitement, yapping and running in circles:

> Uncle Rodney caught him by the collar. ‘Easy does it, Neddy, settle down.’
It was the same thing everyone said to me! The *same* thing! (104)

Jimmy has only to touch the dog and ‘messages carried by his blood came to me from the animal kingdom’. Jimmy hears and sees connections everywhere, in the ‘networks’ that are inside people and plants and machinery and shops ‘and underground in the earth’s core’. It soothes him to read his collection of appliance instruction manuals (‘how to connect the hairdryer nose to the body...’) and he sees the ‘strings’ that join people. It is impossible not to be moved by this stoic little battler, or not to feel despair for the circumstances that have burdened him with such a handicap in life. But Laguna plays fair: she shows how domestic violence runs in families and how an abused child will often grow into an abusive parent. We may hate Gav, but we understand where his violence comes from.

And the title? Jimmy tells us that ‘If you look deep into the eyes of a sheep you can see a light. It burns right at the back of the head and it never goes out, no matter what happens to the sheep’ (21).

Sophie Laguna’s light continues to burn.

**Ruth Starke**