Once on a Road, Mary-Ellen Mullane. Vintage, 2010.


Once on a Road is documentary film producer Mary-Ellen Mullane’s first novel, a powerful story about a fragmented and devastated family in crisis.

Naomi and Noel Adams have been looking after their grandsons, Max and Chris, since their sons Ben and Jesse were killed in a car accident eight years ago. The boys’ mother, Zoe, who was badly injured in the accident, has drifted off into a haze of drugs and depression and left them behind, or rather, ‘Zoe hadn’t left them, so much as lost them. Not in a misplaced sort of way. She’d lost the idea of them. The idea of herself as a mother.’

Noel and Naomi rub along together, avoiding the subject of their sons’ death, concentrating on providing a stable home for the two boys. Their lives are busy but not really happy, with many problems unresolved and words left unsaid. And suddenly 60-year-old Noel is struck down with a heart attack. Zoe comes to the funeral – barely remembered by 10-year-old Chris, not at all by his younger brother Max – and announces to Naomi that she wants the boys back.

Naomi is a strong, capable woman, a midwife by profession. She’s not ready to give the boys up without a fight. But Zoe puts on a good face for the counsellors and the courts, and wins custody, while Naomi is allowed only an access visit every fortnight.

The strength of this novel is the controlled alternation between all the points of view. The boys are not just pawns to be fought over, but sentient human beings. Chris is determined to make this new chance to be with his mother work, although she has no idea of looking after them and he has to try to find food and some comfort for his little brother in Zoe’s bare Department of Housing townhouse in Mt Druitt. He also feels responsible for Zoe. At the same time, he neglects his schoolwork and the music which had been his consuming interest, and begins hanging out with the cool kids at the skate park. Max is grateful for his brother’s protection, but doubts whether life with Zoe is worth all the hunger. But Chris convinces him that if they go back to Naomi, Zoe won’t survive.

The way Max saw it, he only had a few possibilities. He could go to Gran’s by himself, but then he would have to worry all the time about Chris at Zoe’s. They
could both go to Gran’s, but Chris would take off, or worry about Zoe all the time. They could both stay at Zoe’s and be miserable. He would worry about Gran a bit of the time, and miss her all the time. But Gran was basically okay, whereas Zoe was totally random.

Sessions with counsellors and court appearances are described with devastating detail: well-meaning and possibly intelligent people are unable to see the complications in this situation, let alone the fact that these children are not being fed properly. And in the end, it’s the kids who take the initiative and bring about a resolution.

*Once on a Road* is inspired by the biblical story of Ruth, the daughter-in-law who refuses to leave her mother-in-law Naomi and travels with her back to her home town of Bethlehem after the death of their menfolk. In her Postscript, Mullane writes that ‘the idea of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law co-operating, yet alone pledging loyalty to one another, is almost unique in literature. … I began to wonder about what went on before the women’s grief-stricken journey to Bethlehem.’ This is a re-imagining of the situation rather than a re-telling of the story, and it’s a wonderful read, perceptive and wise and deeply moving.