

What About The Children?



Little Disasters by Sarah Vaughan

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The title of this novel, 'Little Disasters', is ironic as of course the events that happen in this story are not 'little' but quite monumental in the lives of the characters - a friendship group of professional middle-class 30-something mums living, it appears happily, somewhere in north London in houses with gardens and bay trees in pots on either side of the front door. They hold dinner parties and barbecues and belong to book groups; so far so good, you would think.

But all is not as rosy as it appears, at least for one of the mums, Jess, a cool, 'caramel-cream' beauty (referring to her hair, not her skin colour), who appears to have it all: a well-paid – but often absent – husband, the perfect family of two little boys and a baby girl, a nice house and garden and no need to work, so she is a stay-at-home mother. Her other friends are working mothers, but she is held up as the epitome of the 'perfect mother' who seems perfectly in control until the impossible happens and her baby is rushed into hospital with a suspected skull fracture: why? The whole plot is a psychological whodunit tracing the ins and outs of what has happened to ten-month-old Betsey Curtis, via the police, social workers and doctors, one of whom is her close friend Liz, also struggling with family problems in the form of an alcoholic mother with dark secrets of her own.

The story deals with the subject of maternal anxiety and OCD, as well as the darkest reaches of early mothering. It deals with the judgements we all make on other people's lifestyles, including parenting, but on the plus side it reveals the warmth of female friendship and the need to check on our friends to make sure they are OK and happy. The writer shows that most of us have no idea of the traumas others may be going through, behind the smooth exterior of their outward lives.

In a Woman's Hour interview (6th April 2020), Sarah Vaughan admitted that the story is loosely based on her own experience of postnatal anxiety and OCD after the birth of her second child, over ten years ago. She had been a successful journalist on The Guardian but had to give up her job when her husband's job moved out of London, so she had to move, with her first child, to a strange place where she knew no-one, and endured a problematic birth with her second baby, leading to pelvic problems which meant she couldn't even walk: a prime recipe for mental anxiety and uncontrollable intrusive thoughts. The combination of a high-achieving professional woman, plus traumatic birth, plus geographical displacement is a classic recipe for postnatal depression, which apparently affects around one in ten new mothers. But Sarah Vaughan praised modern attitudes to mental disorder – and programmes like Woman's Hour – which discuss these issues openly so that help may be at hand for suffering mums. There is no distress to equal the cry of a colicky baby, and no anarchy like the demands of a new-born to intrude upon the most carefully ordered professional life!

This is a highly entertaining read for anybody, not just pregnant mums, and don't worry, it does have a happy-ish ending.

Reviewed by Sally Greenhill, April 2020