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## Book Review

# Glasgow Boys

**By Margaret McDonald**

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*Glasgow Boys* is the debut novel of Scottish writer Margaret McDonald. You know it must be good when the cover recommendation is provided by Andrew O'Hagan. And it doesn't disappoint.

The novel is structured around the developing storyline of the two main characters, Banjo and Finlay, revealed in interwoven chapters which move like scenes in a drama between their apparently separate lives. The storyline begins with Banjo moving to a new high school in East Kilbride, a town 30 minutes by train from Glasgow, while Finlay is beginning nursing degree studies at the University of Glasgow in the city's affluent west end. What they have in common is that both are adjusting to unfamiliar studying and living circumstances, and a nagging feeling that they don't belong.

What they also share is care experience. Banjo has moved in with a new foster family ('He's not even sure how much they get to pick – any child in need goes, it seems' [p.7]) and Finlay has recently 'left the safety net of social services' (p.13). Fiction and drama writers rarely hit the mark when dealing with care experience, very often perpetuating stereotypes like criminality supposedly being explained by early life in a harsh care system. McDonald's portrayal is different, intricately layered, and the main characters are not defined by their care experience. Banjo and Finlay are complex individuals, both exhibiting vulnerabilities rooted in their youth and the life events they have to face up to, and both



displaying huge strength of character. Banjo is a talented athlete. Finlay has a way with the older people he looks after at his care home placement. Both display a capacity to love, Banjo for Alena Lekkas, Finlay for 'perfect boy' Akash Singh, but both are wary of receiving it.

The book's other characters are also authentic and portrayed refreshingly positively. Banjo's new foster carers, Paula and Henry, hover in the background, respecting boundaries, providing just the right amount of support. Alena's parents welcome Banjo in ways he's never experienced before. When Alena is hospitalised, he's included, 'cocooned in their warm wee circle' (p.243). When a combination of a pending assignment deadline, demanding placement, and an early morning job conspire to overwhelm Finlay, he withdraws from flatmates Derya and Jun. Derya sends a message: 'Hey Finlay, just wanted to let you know if you need us at all for anything we are here. Placement can be tough. Take your time. Love you' (p.262).

Selfishly, I willed the plot to include an adviser who helped Finlay with his rights to continuing care beyond 18 years old and to be supported by his local authority as specified in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. It would have been great too if Finlay received the Care Experienced Bursary, as well as the discretionary scholarship he was getting from his university, so he wasn't having to do early shifts as a cleaner to pay his rent. But then I have to accept this is a work of fiction, and in any case real life is not perfect either, and I know too well that care experienced people don't always get their legal entitlements.

*Glasgow Boys* is categorised as 'young adult' fiction and its themes will resonate with young people, but it should also be enjoyed by a wider readership. The voice is very much west of Scotland dialect and while this may pose a challenge to unfamiliar readers, it is unlikely to be offputting, and in any case a glossary is provided. The book won the Saltire Medal for Writing 2025, the Branford Boase Award, the UKLA Book Award, the UKLA Shadower's Choice Award, and has been shortlisted for several other prizes. And no wonder.

## About the review author

Dr Graham Connelly has an honorary post in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde and CELCIS, and is



editor-in-chief of the *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care* and a member of the editorial board of *Youth*.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

