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Book Review

Blood red sky

By Sara Cullen

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Blood Red Sky is a novel that depicts the lives of the Smith family, focusing largely on the eldest son, Aaron (16 years old), his brother, Dylan (14 years old), sister, Chloe (12 years old), mum, Mhairi, dad, Grant and gran, Irene. The Smiths live in Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland, a setting familiar to this writer from many childhood visits to the Kirkcaldy Links – a yearly fairground that appears on the Kirkcaldy coastline, featuring in the latter chapters of this book. International readers may find it difficult to adjust to the Scottish dialogue in the story, but it feels realistic and necessary to ensure events feel authentic.

The Smiths are facing many challenges. Dad, Grant, has spent time in prison in the past for domestic abuse and violence. Aaron and Dylan have been displaying antisocial behaviours at school and in the community. The family are struggling financially, relying on a local food bank to help meet their needs. They are indicative of many of Scotland's families today, where 21% of children live in poverty (Brit et al., 2026), trying their best to get by with what little they have available to them, knowing that they have very little power to change their circumstances.

The novel opens with a fire at the local high school, the one that all three children attend. Mum, Mhairi and dad, Grant, are at the local food bank picking up supplies for themselves, the children and gran, Irene. Aaron is trapped in the toilet block of the physical education (PE) building, surrounded by smoke that is only getting worse. He is scared, not only of

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the fire, but of the consequences that await him and his best friend, Jack. As Aaron is rescued and taken to hospital in the back of an ambulance, he is followed by the police. He is later taken into custody and charged with wilful fire raising, spending one night in the policy custody suite while he waits to see the Sheriff at court in the morning. He is 16 years old, not fully understanding what is happening to him or what will happen to him in the morning. No one takes the time to fully explain his circumstances or legal options, and when information is given, it is often in terminology that Aaron is unfamiliar with.

As events in the novel continue, Aaron is held on remand in November 2019 at *The Brightons*, the term used throughout to describe the Young Offenders Institute Polmont. His brother, Dylan, is increasingly struggling, drinking alcohol and taking drugs more often to escape from his circumstances. His sister, Chloe, feels responsible for what is happening, as Aaron was only trying to protect her by confronting a boy that was threatening to release intimate photographs of her. The whole family is suffering in Aaron's absence, with a court date set for April 2020 and the COVID-19 Pandemic is looming. The reader has the unwelcome benefit of knowing that COVID-19 is only going to make things worse – and it does. Aaron's time in *The Brightons* is marred by limited socialisation as COVID-19 restrictions take hold, leading to 23+ hours per day alone in his prison cell, usually with his television for company (unless this has been removed for infractions). His contact with family outwith the prison is also infrequent, as all communication requires money; payment to make a call, payment to send or receive an email, payment for public transport to visit the prison. All while Aaron has yet to stand trial.

Cullen set herself a very difficult task with this novel: to accurately describe the devastating effects of generational trauma, poverty, deprivation, mental health issues and limited support from health, education, policing and social services without sensationalising or trivialising the real-life experiences of many families. She has done well to toe that line in this novel, managing to stay true to reality without drawing on outdated or stereotypical tropes. Cullen weaves a tapestry of imagery that the reader will find emotional – frustration, sadness, worry, devastation, grief, hope, horror and happiness – all rooted firmly in the real world while being a work of fiction.

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I was endlessly struck by the truth that *Blood Red Sky* displays. A system that treats a 16-year-old boy as a fully-fledged adult, sending him to prison for a crime he has not yet been found guilty of. A system so disconnected that none of the services seem to work together. A system that forgets not everyone is 'fluent' in 'the system'. As Cullen writes in Chapter 34: 'Court and prison language are not known by most people, but those who know it, know it fluently' (p. 198).

We would expect the system to do better today. The Care and Justice (Scotland) Act 2024 redefines the age of adulthood to 18 years old and prohibits the use of Young Offenders Institutes for anyone under 18. It established that anyone under 18 years old for whom deprivation of liberty is required should be cared for in secure care, as a 'looked after child', rather than prison environments. *Blood Red Sky* does remind the reader that secure care can also be imperfect, but, in Chapter 12, Cullen shows how the practitioners working here do try to bring warmth to their roles and do care about the children they are responsible for.

This is a theme that recurs in the novel; every day, there are people who can make choices that bring a little ray of light to those whose lives are otherwise challenging. These may be small acts of kindness, such as Mr B, the prison officer, who takes Aaron to the music room whenever he can, or deciding to speak truth to power and advocate for those who have cannot advocate for themselves, such as Miss Brown, the guidance teacher, who writes to the First Minister of Scotland to complain about Aaron's treatment. There are also those who can significantly challenge the status quo and stand up to a system whose established practice fails people daily, such as the Sheriff, John in Chapter 39, who decides to take a chance on Aaron and the Smiths.

These scenes remind us that hope is never lost. That there are things we can, and should, do to help families like the Smiths, as individuals and wider society. As the Sheriff posits: 'The rules of the world changed overnight in 2020. That was proof, wasn't it? The rules weren't fixed; anything could change' (p. 250). The COVID-19 Pandemic was exceptional in many ways and is unlikely to be something any of us would like to repeat. Nonetheless, what it demonstrated is that, when the circumstances are right and there is enough buy-in from those with power, we can make radical changes to our systems and processes. The changes made in 2020 were not all positive, as Cullen demonstrates

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throughout Aaron's stay on remand in *The Brightons*, but they were swift and radical. All too often we console ourselves with the narrative that change is slow, progress doesn't happen overnight and impact takes time. These things are true. It is also true that when there's a will, there's a way.

We have made great strides in how we treat children in conflict with the law. We have also made great strides in how we support families who need help. The Promise of Scotland's Independent Care Review, published in 2020, has been a gateway to changing attitudes and practices for the better. Families like the Smiths should receive more support now than they did in November 2019. However, I'm sure many families would say we are still falling short of our goals, and we still have a long way to go before we can truly say that Scotland is 'the best place in the world for children to grow up' (Independent Care Review, 2020).

In *Blood Red Sky*, Cullen demonstrates how systemic social issues and generation trauma can collide to create the perfect storm, whereby a child trying to stand up for his sister can find themselves making a choice that has devastating consequences for everyone around him; a trigger point that sets in motion a sequence of events with life changing outcomes. Without spoiling the story, Aaron spends 266 nights on remand in *The Brightons*. Two-hundred and sixty-six days living in prison without being found guilty of a crime, all at 16 years old. Is it any wonder that the Care and Justice (Scotland) Act 2024 has banned this practice?

Blood Red Sky is a fiction, but it is also a lesson. A lesson in failure, and a lesson in how we can be different.

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