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Book Review

Ootlin

By Jenni Fagan

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Ootlin, a memoir of growing up in care in Scotland by Jenni Fagan, gives one person's first-hand experience of growing up in the Scottish care system in the late twentieth century. However, it is so rich with detail that it sheds light on many aspects of that system, particularly on how easily child care practices can fail children. It is, therefore, useful to a wide range of professionals and others with experience of that system. Moreover, it's strong focus on Fagan's inner life gives it far wider relevance. Seeing how a child with enormous potential navigates years of chaos is something everyone can learn from.

Tolstoy famously began *Anna Karenina* with the claim that all happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. The logic is that happiness requires many basic ingredients – food, shelter, love and physical safety being four obvious ones – and the loss of any of these causes misery. Jenni Fagan experiences many such losses at different times and there are more twists and turns in this book than in a murder mystery. This includes the reappearance – often in disturbing circumstances – of characters from earlier in the narrative.

Given that Fagan is already a prolific author, it is unsurprising that her memoir should have literary qualities. Nowhere is this more true than in the early chapters, where pregnancy and babyhood are described as if observed at first hand but also externally. It is an unusual authorial

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device that works because it matches the strangeness of the experiences that infant and mother are navigating at the dawn of Fagan's life.

What began as a book-length suicide note was transformed, after two decades and with much more information, into this polished memoir. Helpfully, we get a short note on Fagan's methodology at the end of the book and it is clear that the early capturing of so many childhood memories in the first version of her book was, along with the contents of her care file of over a thousand pages, central to her being able to write in such unusual depth when returning to the subject in later life.

A couple of failed adoptions, multiple moves in the Scottish foster care and residential care system and experiences of teenage homelessness are enough for a lifetime of experiences, but those bare details only scratch the surface. The early and middle part of the book are also peppered with evocative photographs of variable quality that are, nevertheless, valuable in situating the account in its historical era; childhood hairstyles and clothing are an unfailingly accurate dating device.

Fagan's mother's mental illness, which led to her daughter's entry into care, features heavily in the early chapters and her thoughts on this are a recurring presence throughout the book. Episodes in Fagan's early life are described as vivid, sensual memories that are often unlinked to a narrative, making them more strikingly immediate. Adults, children and homes arrive and disappear with startling speed. The physicality of life – such as food and bodily functions – features heavily, as it does for all children. Memories from the latter part of her first five years are, paradoxically but appropriately, more childlike than the earlier descriptions.

In the second part of the book, from ages 5-12, memories become more detailed and fluid. Experiences of bullying at school and the failures of foster care and adoptions give a sense of insecurity without end, like a permanent form of whitewater rafting. Amidst the chaos, though, we get a sense of the author's growing power over herself. Also, words and music occasionally take her to better places. However, life is so routinely volatile that even a detailed description of a suicide attempt and its aftermath feels, ironically, like a natural part of the flow of the author's life.

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The years from age 12 to 16 are amongst the most brutal but are merely an extension of what went before with the added dangers of adolescence. Time in a children's home is just a different variety of chaos. Amongst the brutality there are, as in all but the worst lives, acts of kindness from relative strangers.

Adults and children continue to come and go but Fagan is good at describing people and places sparely. The seediness of drugs safe houses carry a sense of threat even before we meet their occupants. A dangerous atmosphere of sexual threat, drugs and teenage rebellion provides what is at times a nightmare version of a picaresque tale; though, as with all such tales, with occasional comic flashes. The police begin to feature heavily.

Even amidst the carnage of a life spiralling out of control there is an undercurrent of growth. The author is increasingly coming to understand the people around her better than they understand her. The literary flourishes also continue to pop up in unexpected places, such as a roar in the middle of an outdoor fight that is so powerful, 'that all the trees stop rustling their leaves and grass becomes as brittle as shards of glass' (p. 251). We've all heard such roars.

There is a lot of darkness but also irregular shafts of light. A moment later in the book, when Fagan and another girl from the care system decide not to fight each other for the entertainment of other girls, is symbolic of a wider theme of searching for and recognising goodness where it exists. She is always searching for goodness in others and sometimes it finds her without asking.

The book is rich and deep, like a journey into a bottomless soul caught in a vortex. Dive in but maybe have a stiff drink beside you before you do. Some of the later scenes have a Hieronymus Bosch quality to them. By the time you come out the other end either the world will look different or you will feel different, so powerful is this book's impact.

About the review author

Jim Goddard is a retired social policy academic who taught mostly at the University of Bradford (1998-2021). He has been Chair of the Board of Trustees of The Care Leavers Association since 2011. He grew up in children's homes on Merseyside between 1966 and 1980.

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