



BOOK REVIEW

Swimming by Enza Gandolfo

To help me prepare for this book review, I decided to turn down the corner of any page that I thought I would want to refer back to at a later stage. After just a couple of chapters, it seemed there were more pages turned down than not!

Very early on in reading this book, it became very clear that Enza Gandolfo had either researched the subject unbelievably well or she'd experienced infertility herself. A quick rummage on the internet revealed that Enza works as a lecturer in creative writing at Victoria University in Australia and has tried unsuccessfully to have a child. For me, this added real credibility to the novel as the author understood so much of what we have experienced and was not trying to second guess what it is like to walk in our shoes.

Kate, the main character, is a teacher, writer and swimmer. The book is a clever combination of two books. The main part, written in the first person, is Kate's story about her own struggle with conception, the miscarriages which follow and ultimately the breakdown of her marriage. The secondary part, written in the third person, is cleverly interwoven with the main story and is the manuscript for "Writing Sarah", the book Kate wrote to the daughter she always imagined she would have.

The broad details of the story roll out in the very early chapters. When the book starts, Kate is in her fifties living with her new partner, George. Kate bumps into her ex-husband Tom who asks if she thinks they would have stayed together if they'd had children. Kate laughs at the question since it was Tom who had an affair, left her and had two children with his new partner. This meeting stirs many memories for Kate and as the book unfolds we learn about Kate and Tom's life together; the pain they suffered and how wanting to conceive took over their lives. So much of what Kate experiences and describes in detail are feelings, especially those of isolation and uselessness that are so familiar to us all. Then there is her questioning of whether she had done enough to try to conceive and hating being barren (a word I don't like, but have used in my own angriest moments). At the beginning, we'd all understand why she lies when asked by her students why she doesn't have any children. Later Kate also explores Tom's feelings and how difficult it must have been to reach her in her darkest days.

There were no real surprises in the emotions displayed in this book, but I found it comforting to share Kate's journey knowing that Enza must have drawn so deeply on her own experiences. The one gap is a detailed account of how Kate worked through her loss once Tom had left her and how she built her new relationship with George. The most important message is that Kate had a fulfilled life as a childless woman. Children did feature in her life especially Tess, the daughter of her best friend, Lynne. Kate had always imagined that Tess and her own daughter, Sarah, would have grown up

and shared their lives together. Sadly, Lynne has early onset Alzheimer's and this theme also runs through the book. Kate and Tess both miss Lynne, her advice and her sense of humour and this brings them closer together. Kate was brave enough to meet Tom's children and for that, I take my hat off to her!

There are so many quotations which I found helpful and which resonated with my own journey. Here are a few which I hope you'll identify with:

"...if I'd had a baby ...we would've been different people."

"... should I have tried harder? IVF? Adoption?"

"It wasn't my choice to remain childless.."

"... I remember Sarah. The child I imagined into existence... I continue, twenty years later, to see her face. In a way she never left me, though I mourned her after each miscarriage ... I have always been able to conjure her up at a moment's notice."

"All conversations with Tom, with Lynne, with my parents, were tainted with my fruitless quest for a child and by my grief, a deep chasm I couldn't escape."

"We are alive until we take our last breath....We are alive whether we are happy or we are sad. Whether we chose to continue our lives, to shut ourselves away or go out and find our place in the world."

"I'm sure I would be a different person if I had children, maybe not a better person - I don't know about that - but certainly a different one. And of course at one time it made all the difference ... *some days I still miss Sarah.*"

The last two are the most important ones to me. Our lives didn't turn out how we'd planned, but it's where we are now. I remind myself that if any of us had had children, we'd have never met. I've made life long friends through MTL and that's one of my silver linings from the cloud of childlessness.

As you can tell, I found the book an easy read and identified with so many of the feelings and issues raised in the story. As you'd expect, it was sad in places, but I found it therapeutic. It reminded me how far I've travelled on my journey; that the sadness does recede; life can and does go on; and finally that while we have a different life from our hopes and dreams, life can be fulfilling and worthwhile without children.

Tom's side of the story is only seen through Kate's eye so while you chaps may find it a useful read, it is much more a book for the gals. If we could ask our family and friends to read this book, they would have a clear picture of why the road back to happiness is such a long, slow, but sure one! Happy 2010 to us all!

Melanie
MTL Member

Editors note: *this book has been added to the Lending Library should any member wish to borrow it. Please contact the office in the usual way when requesting a book from the Lending Library.*