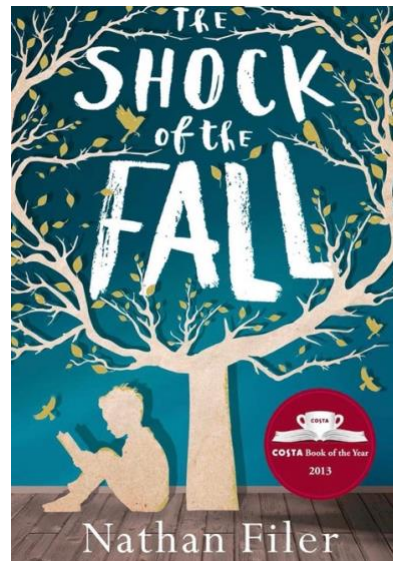


The Shock of the Fall

By Nathan Filer



“The Shock of the Fall” won the Costa Book of the Year award in 2013. It is a story of resilience in the face of mental illness, grief, guilt, loss and the power of love. It tells the story of Matthew Homes, an 18year old man from Bristol dealing with the death of his elder brother Simon 8 years earlier whilst on holiday with his parents in a caravan in Dorset. Simon had Down’s Syndrome and several other medical conditions. We do not find out until much later how Simon died. It takes place over 3 timelines, the present, the past when Simon was alive, and the decade after his death. Matthew is diagnosed with schizophrenia when he is 17, is sectioned for his own protection and in the present, is living in a faceless mental hospital.

During his therapy, Matthew writes about the night Simon died and we know then that it was as a result of a prank which went wrong. This book is his attempt to tell his story and make sense of the events in his life so far.

Comments from members of the Group:

“The dead Simon becomes more and more real to Matthew who becomes more and more erratic. The story feels quite authentic and insightful. The author worked as a mental health nurse and so detail within the story feels real. I was drawn into the story at the beginning and liked the opening chapter but then it didn’t really sustain my interest as it went between different timelines and I was a little bit confused. Although I found it a bit boring and melancholy, I do appreciate the depth and honesty of the main character and how his story reflects true life situations and how traumatic life can feel for people living with mental illness.”

“My experience of reading “The Shock of the Fall” was strangely disjointed. I was resistant to reading it at all due to my own son's mental health struggles and I realised as I went along that I had read it before but didn't quite remember

everything. Consequently, I kept starting and stopping and ended up skim reading to finish it.

Nevertheless, I do think it's a good book. The narrative voice is very powerful: desperately sad at times, sharp and funny at other times. The author's mental health background shows in the authentic scenes of the sheer boredom of institutional settings, the battles of the staff to keep providing the service and the resilience and dark humour that somehow enable patients and staff to keep going. “

“ I found the read finely written, however, very unsettling, exacerbated by my personal circumstances with a partner wife with progressive Alzheimers and diminished mental capacity. The story has a very explicit and real revelation concerning loss and guilt and caring.”

“I do not feel qualified to review this book as I have had no experience with people with severe mental disorders and no education in psychology ~ apart from what I have learnt through 90 years of life. I found the story confusing and disjointed, which I think it was meant to be, but I soon lost interest. The only reason I had for reading the rest of the book was to find out what had really happened to his brother and that I never found out.

This book is all about coping with grieving and living with Down's syndrome. Too depressing for me ~ give me a fairytale any day instead!”

“I found this book both interesting and disturbing. The author is a mental health nurse and it is written (I suppose) based on his experiences with schizophrenia. Written in the first person and in present time, it keeps going back not in chronological order which is confusing but creates an understanding of how confused he is as a young man with health problems. He is nine when we first meet him and he encounters a little girl whom we are told to remember as she is important later on in the story.

There are periods of time when he is quite rational, not mad but oversensitive. People know he's not quite right but not why. Is it in his genes? His mother suffers from depression, his brother had Down's Syndrome and his great uncle spent his life in a mental hospital. Or was it triggered by the death of his brother, an accident for which he blames himself.

It is a good observation of human behaviour, how people react to him, his family, his friends and the hospital staff. There are moments of humour – as a thesis on mental health it is very enlightening. As a story it is sad. I was surprised to find he is only 19 and believes his life will “move in circles” in and out of hospital forever.”

“ I found this book a very different and difficult read. Different because it highlighted so insistently how schizophrenia can develop and cause chaos in a person's life, difficult because I felt sad and bad about how many thousands of people must suffer with this condition whilst I enjoy a basically “happy, normal life”. Matthew and his brother go exploring when on holiday with their parents, Matthew slips over, is unable to walk home, and is somehow carried back to their caravan by his brother Simon who had Down's Syndrome. This shock results in both Simon dying soon afterwards, and Matt is consumed by so great a guilt that he cannot handle, creating

psychotic behaviour. Although school continues for Matt, the episodes worsen leading to home schooling and the inevitable decision to place him in a care home.

Matt's recording of life "inside" is both funny and distressing. He sees irony, exhaustion and institutionalisation everywhere. A perceptive nurse gets him a typewriter and Matt maintains a degree of sanity through his writing and art although he constantly talks to his dead brother. Initially I didn't understand the relevance of the opening scene when Matt watches a little girl burying her doll but when Matt returns to the cliff to commit suicide, he is interrupted by a girl, Annabelle, who, rather predictably is the girl who buried the doll 10 years earlier. She rescues him by talking and listening. Finally, Matt is determined to hold a Memorial Service for Simon which he organises himself with the delightful nanny Noo's help and the final chapter is humorous and positive."

Christine Wright