

## BOOK REVIEWS

### STILL WAVING

Laurene Kelly

Spinifex Press, 2005

As a social work educator and writer with a particular interest in the use of narrative in teaching and practice, I read Laurene Kelly's recent publication *Still Waving* with considerable interest. This Young Adult novel is the third in a series of three books that trace the life of Julie, a young woman whose life has been affected by family violence. Coming from a background in which she has had contact with children and young people disrupted by family violence, Laurene Kelly has brought to bear her experience of young people's needs to work through the issues such events present. The purpose of the novel, while not altogether explicit, is to provide insight into the thoughts and emotions of young women overcoming the trauma of family violence in a manner that can be shared and discussed with other young people. The book maintains a sense of hopefulness and reassurance that adjustment and recovery is possible even following the impacts of extreme violence.

Julie, the narrator of her story, is sixteen and is living with her Aunt Jean at Bondi in Sydney. Her younger brother, Toby, has been staying with a paternal uncle on the family farm, in spite of this being where their father murdered their mother, two younger siblings and the family dog. Julie has developed a love of surfing and an ambition to become a champion surfer, but the trauma of her family circumstances has left her with fears and doubts about many things. As her story unfolds, it becomes evident that she is suffering from post traumatic stress which affects relationships with friends and relatives, though she is fortunate in having people about her who have a fair understanding of her difficulties. In this novel Julie faces a number of challenges in a comparatively short space of time. These include reading a letter from her father who is in gaol, her aunt's need for further tests due to a lump in the breast, the easy manner in which friends consume alcohol, her unexpected 'blackout' which requires a CAT scan, and Toby's decision to remain on the farm in the care of Uncle Wayne.

One of the major difficulties faced by writers is finding and maintaining the 'voice' of their characters and in this book there are places where I felt that Julie's voice was, at times, subsumed by the words of the author. For instance, I found it hard to imagine her, even when conversing with herself, using words like 'synchronicity' and 'omnipresent'. This raises an issue for young readers who may not find lapses into such language altogether convincing. The use of young people's vernacular is also a potential problem, particularly

if it becomes quickly dated, and some additional editing would perhaps have been useful in order to resolve these issues.

A more pertinent point worth consideration is the number of young people who would identify with Julie and Toby's experiences. The prevalence of family violence is of considerable concern in contemporary society, but much of it is not the extreme violence, and ultimate homicide, depicted in this sequel to *I Started Crying on Monday* and *The Crowded Beach*. It may be easier for young people to identify with the more common experiences of emotional and physical violence if, indeed, they can be encouraged to read about traumatic events whilst still dealing with their own. An added dilemma is that many young people from disrupted homes are not keen readers having often 'accumulated' various other disadvantages as a result of their distressing circumstances, particularly in terms social and educational difficulties, and poverty. It seemed to me something of a 'big ask' for young folk to warm to Julie as a kind of ally, or to her lifestyle of holidaying and surfing at Bondi. However, as a sequel, this book may also come as something of a relief to those who have read the earlier ones and feel concerned that Julie's traumatic experiences needed resolution. Unfortunately, none of the three libraries to which I have ready access had copies of the earlier novels and I have been unable to investigate this issue further as yet.

Writing stories and novels for use in professional practice reflects our increasing understanding that a range of approaches are needed to meet the needs of those seeking our assistance. There is no doubt that we need a variety of narrative tools to assist in our work with young people and their families and *Still Waving* has a place in the toolkit. It provides a common starting point for discussion about traumatic events when working with young people who are able to use reading as a vehicle for reflection and development of insight, and we need much more resource material of this nature. The commitment to writing a novel that can be used in this manner is considerable and is to be commended. I, for one, welcome and support all such efforts.

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