

BLOG TOUR – OCTOBER 16th

THE MOUNTAIN IN MY SHOE by Louise Beech

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Writing this particular review has been an exciting experience for me. It is the first blog tour I have participated in and I would like to thank Karen Sullivan at Orenda Books for the chance to take part. Having thoroughly enjoyed Louise Beech's debut novel, *'How to be Brave'*, I could not wait to read and review her latest book *'The Mountain in my Shoe'*. Debut novels can sometimes be a tough act to follow but in this case I was definitely not disappointed.

Plot

Bernadette Shaw is extremely unhappy. Her deeply religious husband of ten years, Richard, is manipulative and, occasionally, physically abusive. Cruelly attributing Bernadette's earlier miscarriage as a sign from God, he refuses to try for another child. Yearning to be a mother, the only joy in Bernadette's life is Conor Jordan, a vulnerable young boy who, having spent his whole life to date in care, is now being fostered by Anne Williams. Secretly volunteering to befriend him, through the charity *Befriend For Life*, Bernadette has been visiting Conor for the last 5 years, meeting up with him every other Saturday at Anne's house.

To provide Conor with a record of his early years in care, Social Services have created a Lifebook, which will be given to him on his eighteenth birthday. The book charts his progress through the care system, detailing all of his placements. Intending to write an entry for him, Bernadette borrows the book and hides it on her bookshelf, a place Richard never goes near. However, after finally deciding to leave Richard, she now discovers the book is missing.

When Richard fails to come home that night, Bernadette realises she cannot leave without first finding the book... or knowing where her husband is. Then she receives a telephone call from Anne. It seems Conor is also missing.

As Anne and Bernadette search for Conor, Bernadette gradually discovers secrets about her husband's past that will have a devastating effect on both her and Conor, bringing them even closer together.

My Review

'The Mountain in my Shoe' is a deeply moving, psychological thriller about hope, trust, survival and self-discovery, not only for Conor – who, from a very young age, has to cope with the trauma of being passed from one stranger to the next – but also for Bernadette. Whereas Conor's problems are well documented by Social Services, Bernadette's emotional ordeals are private and internalised. As a result, she has suffered alone, believing she is entirely to blame for her husband's behaviour towards her. However, while they both deal separately with their own situations, their individual paths gradually begin to merge. For all the well-meaning and largely effective interventions of Social Services, it is this simple human friendship and love

that does the most to change the course of Conor's life. Ultimately, the close bond he and Bernadette have developed proves to be the salvation of them both.

The story, alternating from the viewpoint of both Conor and Bernadette, is cleverly interspersed with extracts from Conor's Lifebook. Through these extracts, the details of Conor's family circumstances, his difficult journey into adulthood, and his connection with Bernadette, gradually begin to unfold.

All of Conor's accounts are written in the language of a child. They express his anger and frustration with his birth mother, every time he is taken by his social worker to see her; his desire to know the identity of his father, and his growing attachment to Bernadette. While he describes his feelings towards the procession of adults he comes into contact with during his foster care, the reader also learns about his obsession with Mohammed Ali and his love of art – which he uses as a coping mechanism. Unable to stay with the same foster carer for long, it is hard for Conor to trust anybody. As he states later in the book: "*He let me go. Like everyone always does.*" Bernadette, however, is his one constant, and it is not until he comes to stay with Anne that he finally experiences stability in a loving home.

Conor's birth mother, Frances, has also led a hard life. As a result, she is unable to look after Conor or his brothers, George and Sam, due to bouts of depression. Not having been afforded the luxury of an education, all the letters she writes to Conor are full of grammatical and spelling errors... and written down as such in the novel. Unfortunately, whereas I had no trouble reading Conor's words, I did struggle a bit to read those of Frances. Although I understood the reason for the deliberate way the letters were written, I could not help feeling an overwhelming urge to reach for a red editing pen – though I have to admit, it did bring the character of Frances to life, allowing a better understanding of her personality.

Apart from the main characters, the novel is also populated with several minor ones along the way – from Conor's original social worker, Jim Rogers, to the caring taxi driver, Bob Fracklehurst, who has been driving Bernadette to see Conor over the last five years. However, whether major or minor, all the characters are well drawn and believable, making it difficult not to care about them. Even the unsympathetic character of Richard is not that clear cut, and some level of understanding is elicited as revelations about his past are revealed.

Although all the characters contribute to the story in their own way, my favourite is Bernadette. Despite the fear of Richard finding out about her deception – and possibly punishing her in his own inimitable way – she still manages to find the courage to go behind his back and reach out to a vulnerable child. By allowing Conor into her life she is then able to find the strength to leave Richard.

Domestic abuse, whether mental or physical, has come to the fore recently, as anyone who listens to Radio 4's *The Archers* will know. This story has added its own weight behind exposing the misery many women have to cope with alone.

As a story, "*The Mountain in my Shoe*" is well paced and totally absorbing. Once again, Louise has taken difficult human situations and skilfully used them to breathe life into her characters. The resulting emotional rollercoaster is likely to bring tears to

your eyes as, one by one, startling revelations are drip fed into the narrative, but at the same time its resolution is uplifting. I urge everyone to read it. Like me, I am sure you will not be disappointed.

The Author

Louise Beech is an exceptional literary talent, whose début novel '*How To Be Brave*' was a *Guardian* Readers' Choice for 2015. She regularly writes travel pieces for the *Hull Daily Mail*, where she was a columnist for ten years. Her short fiction has won the Glass Woman Prize, the Eric Hoffer Award for Prose, and the Aesthetica Creative Works competition, as well as being shortlisted for the Bridport Prize twice and published in a variety of UK magazines. Louise lives with her husband and children on the outskirts of Hull - the UK's 2017 City of Culture - and loves her job as a Front of House Usher at Hull Truck Theatre, where her first play was performed in 2012. She is also part of the Mums' Army on Lizzie and Carl's *BBC Radio Humberside Breakfast Show*.

'*The Mountain in My Shoe*' is published by Orenda Books and is available in eBook and paperback format. It can be purchased from Amazon.