



The Hidden Child; Family Secrets; Not Just Babysitting; The Shadow of August

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There are many pitfalls which books about family problems can fall foul of: not least the sugared trap of a conveniently happy ending. These four titles, all suitable for Year 9 and above, admirably avoid such lures.

In **The Hidden Child**, Lou and her mother Anna are always on the move: all Lou wants is to settle. This seems possible for the first time when Anna becomes the warden of a hostel for battered women. During yet another unpacking, Lou discovers newspaper cuttings which belie the stories Anna has always told her about her father.

The denouement is subtle and surprising: Anna was also the victim of a violent marriage and fled to protect herself and Lou. The sub-plot deals with parallel situations in the hostel women's lives, providing illuminating and sobering insights into this terrifying world of irrational violence.

Kate, too, knows nothing of her father in **Family Secrets**. However, on her first visit to Ireland, necessitated by her grandmother's stroke, she discovers a good deal about herself, the country of her birth and her musician father, Joe.

Although occasionally marred by rather dull dialogue, the story strenuously avoids the glibness of tying all ends neatly together but gives positive indications of a brighter future for all the protagonists. Spirited and successful attempts to prevent a greedy landowner from buying Kate's grandmother's farm reinforce the strength of feeling which Kate draws from her lineage and from her love of Ireland.

Not Just Babysitting sparks with wit. When Sandra and Meg's father loses his job the girls decide to start a nursery amidst the charm of Beznobar, their part-constructed summer home. Their father, an Eastern European with endearingly

fractured English, pride and principles wounded, cannot come to terms with this and family harmony teeters briefly on the edge of collapse.

Hilarity and philosophy save the day: the text is a heady brew of legends, human failings, cheerful chaos and contentment. This is one of the most original books I have read, from an author already the recipient of the Betty Trask Award.

Perhaps the least convincing of this quartet is **The Shadow of August**. The story of Mattie's attempt to unravel her mother's secrets after her death results in some unexpected discoveries and the eventual realisation that her mother abducted her as a baby from a couple whose images still appear before her in ghost-like form.

It is this somewhat bizarre link with a sensationalist past which detracts from the tense and tightly constructed narrative. The reconciliation at the end of the novel is well handled, with the characters ready to take the next step into newly painted lives.

Running Order:

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