



Running on Empty

Books Reviewed:

[Running on Empty](#) [1]

Issue:

[229](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

The thing that makes me different from other eleven-year-old boys, apart from my fantastic running ability, is my parents have learning difficulties. It's no big deal for me. Really it isn't. I don't look after them. We look after each other. There you have it the warm heart of this novel: the family relationships; the domestic horizons of the plot; the everyday voice of AJ, its narrator; and a couple of the most important features of his life, since he is indeed both an excellent runner and an intuitive carer for others.

That narrative voice is more complex than it seems. Certainly, AJ's language will be accessible to a wide range of readers, as will the setting of his story - his home, his street, his school and the local park, all close to the site of the London Olympics. But AJ is in a difficult place when we meet him. He's moving from primary to secondary and just at that challenging time he loses his Grandad, who has provided loving stability for AJ's parents, helping them negotiate the complexities of daily life. Grandad's also shared his love of running with AJ, as well as his capacity for happiness focussed on love of family and friends. Now Grandad's gone, AJ has to take responsibility for everything from bills from the Electricity Company (especially if they're printed in red) to dealing with the requirements of his new school which needs forms to be filled out, parents' evenings to be attended and so on. AJ fears that unless he keeps his home circumstances secret, including Grandad's death, he might end up being taken into Care. Then how would Mum and Dad cope?

Here's where that seemingly straightforward narrative voice makes demands upon readers. AJ himself can't read the pressures he's under and so, although he tells us honestly about his own sudden outbursts and admits he is sometimes selfish towards his friends, his Aunt, Uncle and his much-loved younger cousin, he cannot understand his own erratic behaviour. Because he won't talk about his worries at home, there are misunderstandings with his new PE teacher (who's in charge of Cross-Country). Worst of all, AJ's embarrassed about his Mum and Dad when they meet other parents or his teachers and then he's ashamed of his own embarrassment. If they pick up the clues, readers will make more sense of things than AJ can himself.

Sue Durrant tells her story without resort to the overused and even melodramatic features of too many urban fictions for young readers - bullying on screen and in person, the intrusions of social media, the pressures of fashion, image and popularity, who's in and who's out on the social stage. AJ's a bit young for that stuff anyway, though he's old enough

to be hopelessly tongue-tied every time he goes into the corner shop and sees the amazing girl behind the counter; and he does long for a new pair of trainers, but that's only so he can run well, not to be out in front in the fashion race. Readers' affection and concern for AJ will stem, I think, from Durrant's skilful invitation to read with a dual perspective, sharing AJ's difficulties while understanding his confusions as he struggles to overcome them.

Source URL (retrieved on Jun '19): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/229/childrens-books/reviews/running-on-empty>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/running-on-empty>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/229>

[3] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>