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FICTION BOOK REVIEW

Tell It To The Bees. Fiona Shaw. Birmingham, UK: Tindal Street Press, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-0-955647-66-6. Price: £9.99. Pages: 304 (paperback)

The book is set in the 1950s. Lydia works in the local factory but unlike most of her workmates loves to read. She is married to Robert, an attractive but self-centred man, who has started to stray since the arrival of their son Charlie, partly because of the insinuations of his elder sister who loves him possessively. This sister brought him up and her dislike of Lydia will make readers recollect many similar relationships.

Charlie, Lydia's son, is taunted at school by a group of girls, who know what his father is up to. Charlie's character and reactions are excellently drawn, so that you can imagine exactly how he feels, withdrawing into himself, wary at home, with only the one friend, Bobby, at school. Eventually, Charlie is goaded too far in the playground and goes whirling into action, fighting everyone in his way.

Charlie's cautious movements of his injured ribs cause his mother to worry. She persuades her husband to take him to see the local female GP, Jean. The readers have already had a picture drawn of this tall, intense woman, determined to make her way as a doctor in the 1950s, despite the antagonism of her family and the prejudices of the local population. The graphic description of her life gives a good sense of the isolation and difficulties in single-handed practice of that time, particularly for a woman. Jean's only consolation is her bees to whom she confides.

While in the consulting room, Charlie sees a wooden carving of a honeycomb. Jean notices his interest and suspecting that his injuries were not caused, as Charlie said, by falling over, offers to show him her bees. Charlie visits her and gradually becomes more involved in the care of the bees. Jean invites Lydia to visit and discovers her love of books – and Jean has a large library of books that she never has time to open. Jean is also excited to

have met this unusual, and attractive, woman. She lends books to her and a friendship develops.

Lydia's husband leaves to take up with another woman, encouraged by his sister. He ceases to pay the rent and despite working even longer hours at the factory, Lydia cannot keep up the payments and is about to be thrown out onto the street. Jean's housekeeper wants to leave and Jean asks Lydia and Charlie to live with her. The relationship between the two women develops into a passionate one – the connecting door between two bedrooms keeping the fiction of propriety. One night, during a thunderstorm, Charlie wakes and goes into his mother's bedroom to find her bed empty. Although she returns swiftly on hearing him, the damage is done. Charlie innocently tells his cousin about it and is overheard by his aunt, Robert's sister. She immediately understands the significance of the event and plots to shame and humiliate Lydia. Robert turns up at school and collects his son, taking him to his new partner. Charlie appears passive, unable to understand what these strange adults are doing, only knowing that he is unhappy and that his mother will be too.

Lydia retreats into blankness and Jean takes legal advice, but in the 1950s finds that a court would not allow a mother in a lesbian relationship to have custody of a child. The terrible longing, the grief and anger are heart-rending. The ending is a little contrived but the twist of circumstances will have you turning each page until the end.

What will health professionals in particular gain from this excellent page-turner? Insights into the mind of a child baffled and distressed by adult behaviour; the passionate nature of Lydia, leading her into unwise relationships; the emotional neediness of a single-handed, female GP in the 1950s; the antagonism towards lesbian love (which still exists but less overtly); the destructive possessiveness of, in this case, a sister; attitudes towards pregnancy out of wedlock in the 1950s; and many more. The author has been able to portray so many facets of human nature and relationships that every reader should gain in empathy.

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JOURNAL READER BOOK OFFER

Tindal Street Press has very kindly supplied the Journal with five copies of *Tell It To The Bees* to give away to its readers. To enter the prize draw e-mail your name, address (including postcode) and job title to sarah.monger@keywayspublishing.com with 'Tell It To The Bees' in the subject line of the e-mail. The first five names 'pulled out of the hat' on 31 July 2009 will each receive a complimentary copy of the book. For those readers unsuccessful in the prize draw, copies of *Tell It To The Bees* are available from all good bookshops and amazon.co.uk.

We hope that journal readers enjoyed reading *Tell It To The Bees*, and also discovering whether their opinion of the book matched that of our guest reviewer. In the October 2009 issue, the fiction book under scrutiny will be *Tomorrow* by Graham Swift (256 pages, Picador, 2008, ISBN-13: 978-0330450263).

We want to remind journal readers that if they would like to offer to review an appropriate fiction title of their own choosing then they should contact the Journal Editorial Office by e-mail (journal@fsrh.org) in the first instance with details of their nominated title.