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FICTION BOOK REVIEW

The Outcast. Sadie Jones. London, UK: Vintage Books, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0-099-51342-1. Price: £7.99. Pages: 444 (paperback)

Don't be put off by the cover, which makes it look like a romantic novel, or by the "Richard & Judy Summer Read" recommendation. This is no superficial poolside novel, but one that explores unhappiness and suffering, as well as emotional and physical abuse.

The book opens with 19-year-old Lewis as he leaves Brixton prison, buys some new clothes with a postal order from his father and travels to meet a chilly reception at his father's house in rural Surrey. The novel then goes back to 1945, when 7-year-old Lewis and his mother, Elizabeth, greet his father, Gilbert, who has just returned from the war. Cold and remote, Gilbert stifles any display of emotion, curiosity or playfulness in his son and wife. Gilbert goes back to his job, accepting humiliation uncomplainingly from his bullying boss, Mr Carmichael. The author describes well the yearning felt by Elizabeth for emotion and gaiety, her despair blotted out by recourse to alcohol. Elizabeth concentrates her love and attention on her young son. It would, perhaps, have made the book too unwieldy to look also at the reasons for the emotional

coldness exhibited by Gilbert – perhaps damaged by his experiences in the war? The author portrays his behaviour as normal in this middle-class environment of the stiff upper lip.

Taking a swim after a riverside picnic, Elizabeth drowns, and Lewis is the sole witness. At the inquest, Lewis just stutters when asked to testify. To Gilbert, Lewis's mouth becomes "a kind of wound", and he continues the pattern of repression. Gilbert seeks solace with a new wife, a selfish young woman who cannot cope with Lewis's grief. In fact, Lewis's unbearable grief is ignored by everyone as unacceptable, and he's left utterly bereft and alone. The enormous pressure on him to conform socially is too much, and he finds solace in hidden drinking and self-harm. The author's description of Lewis's feelings of elation after cutting himself and the relief it brings show real insight into self-harming behaviour. Misunderstood by his father and goaded by his father's boss, Mr Carmichael, Lewis's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic until, in desperation, he turns to arson and is sent to prison.

When he returns, only one person seems to (almost) understand him: Kit, the younger daughter of Mr Carmichael and also an outsider. From an early age, she has idolised Lewis, so

when he begins to self-destruct she blames others instead of the victim. The bullying Mr Carmichael turns from physically abusing his wife to beating Kit and the author describes well how Kit feels trapped into accepting his beatings. Kit's manipulative attractive sister toys with Lewis for the thrill of it, while her mother maintains a frigid air of disapproval. Lewis recognises the dysfunctions in the relationships of those around him and the way in which no one speaks of them. When he speaks out, the fury of those exposed is great.

The author evokes a small world of rigid social constraints. It's a world where, on the outside, everything looks conventional and safe. Look deeper and you find alcoholism, child abuse and domestic violence that destroy people's lives. Lewis is terribly damaged, but we can understand his violence and fury. As health professionals we can recognise and learn from the descriptions of the reactions to emotional and physical abuse occurring unseen by the outside world, compounded by the tight social hierarchy and constraints of the stifling 1950s environment.

Reviewed by Gill Wakley, MD, FFSRH
Advisory Editor, *Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care*

We hope that journal readers enjoyed reading *The Outcast*, and also discovering whether their opinion of the book matched that of our guest reviewer. In the April 2009 issue, the fiction book under scrutiny will be *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* by Kim Edwards (416 pages, Penguin Books, 2007, ISBN-13: 978-0-14103-014-2). 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.