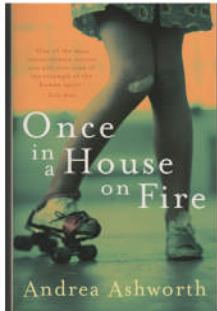


the one page book review



Title: Once in a House on Fire
Author: Andrea Ashworth
Publisher: Picador
Price: £7.99

Set in the 1970's this is Andrea Ashworth's account of her early childhood. Ashworth allows us to see the dilemmas faced by a loving family whose Mother makes choices which unwittingly continue the cycle of deprivation and abuse. An account of the struggle in bringing up three girls with the highs and lows of a changing father figure and the way the family adapted to each individual and situation.

Moving around and living with family and friends until an opportunity to start a 'new life' in Canada, the morning of departure allowing for a small moment of intimacy between mother and daughter before the rest of the family woke, *"then she slid her hands across the table and took up both of mine in her warm palms. Stoking my fists, she unfolded my long olive fingers against the laminated white of the table. We sat quietly together, my mother tracing around each of my fingers, pausing at the knuckles, until the milk van came rattling bottles outside the window to break the spell"*. The apparently small gestures that can mean so much, passed off as inconsequential, but to a child torn between secrecy and honesty they can be a lifeline to something better.

Breaking point brought return to the UK after another failed and abusive relationship. *"My stepfather was sitting on the kitchen floor, in all the exhausted chaos, holding his face in his hands and moaning. When the strange men came in from outside, he looked up and wiped his nose. Blood was beginning to crust in his hair. 'That's my Dad', I explained. My mother moved out of the corner where she had been sheltering Laurie and Sarah, braced behind a table for his next move. 'I'm sorry Officer, she said, I'm afraid we've wasted your time. We're working things out for ourselves"*.

This return only possible down to a pair of dangly diamond earrings and a ruby ring sent by Ashworth's Gran, *"from miles away in gorgeous loopy writing Gran was begging Mum to sell up and fly", "The heirlooms got us on to a Boeing 747 that seemed to hum in the sky for days, before it shuddered down in Manchester at the dead of night"*.

The book causes you to consider how many other families are experiencing the effects of poverty, abuse and depression while the world carries on unknowing within their own cocooned lives. Oddly Ashworth's memoir is uplifting, demonstrating love and continual forgiveness, it shows how her family looked out for one another and worked towards creating something better for themselves and their own families.

I hadn't realised until the end that I was suspended whilst I read, almost holding my breath with the tension and willing a positive end. It's a book that makes you grateful for what you have, more aware of those around you and what they may be experiencing behind closed doors and a good reminder to never make assumptions about others. A superb and disturbing read but one that is highly recommended.