

## Shuggie Bain: A novel of Child Abuse

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Rejected by almost thirty publishers in the United States and the United Kingdom, *Shuggie Bain* won the Booker Prize for 2020. From the opening chapter, the novel seizes the booklover by the throat and doesn't let go until it has wrung out all the crazily vacillating emotions — ecstasy, mourning, annoyance, disappointment, enthusiasm, longing, jealousy, abhorrence and a strange, gleaming love. In fact the novel brings forward a mother-child relationship and child abuse. These various emotions and feelings make the novel exhilarating experience of reading.

*Shuggie Bain* is not only Stuart's literary novel but also a social novel. It portrays the effect of alcoholism and maltreatment of life on the children and other members of the family. Child abuse because of mother's excessive love for drinking overpowers all the themes and subthemes of text. The novel is a story of survival of a child as well as a mother, story of mental and psychological trauma of a family living the untidy area of Glasgow.

The novel set in Glasgow in 1992 is much more than a filial love story. Crowded with a cast of characters of all sorts loveable as well as despicable, covering a period of a little over a decade, and set among several generations of the labouring poor of Glasgow, *Shuggie Bain* casts an unrelenting luminosity on those who exist on, or under, the periphery of society. But to imagine that a novel dealing with lives that are often lonely, inexorably poor, repeatedly spiteful, sporadically bestial, and all-too-often short, is bound to make for grim reading will be too much critical of the novel.

The phenomenal thing about Stuart is his knack to illustrate not just the humour that lies beneath the bleakness of subsistence, but also the benevolence, compassion, and elegance that light up lives lived on the periphery. He is full of humour and pathos simultaneously. His writing style comprises flexible, sudden, evocative prose, throwing up the contradictions of a city reeling under the onslaught of Margaret Thatcher's Tory desertion of the urban underclass "Thatcher didn't want honest workers anymore; her future was technology and nuclear power and private health.". As Big Shug Bain, Shuggie's taxi-driver father, strolls around the city at night, he realizes how

The closer you got to the river, the lowest part of the city, the more the real Glasgow opened up to you. There were hidden nightclubs tucked under shadowy railway arches, and blacked-out windowless pubs where old men and women sat on sunny days in a sweaty, pungent purgatory. It was down near the river that the skinny, nervous-faced women sold themselves to men in polished estate cars, and sometimes it

was here that the polis would later find chopped up bits of them in black bin bags. The north bank of the Clyde housed the city mortuary, and it seemed fitting that all the lost souls were floating in that direction, so as to be no trouble when their time blessedly came.

This may be a tale set in a strange city of Stuart Douglas, in times that are thinning from reminiscence, but in its humour, its pathos, its depiction of love in all its uncanny and magnificent avatars and, above all, in its declaration of the essential humanity that resides within every single citizen of the country. In spite of many similarities between Stuart and novel, *Shuggie Bain* is not a memoir. As **Dawn Harker** reviews:

It feels as though Douglas Stuart's life experience can be seen throughout the story, especially with the care he takes to tell his story. Through reading the book, it also becomes clear that *Shuggie Bain* serves not as a criticism or a solution to poverty and abuse. Instead, it is a fictional yet almost autobiographical retelling of someone's life. In writing this way, Stuart challenges individual readers' beliefs of both what they know of difficult life experiences and how much judgment we should afford others, especially when the shared outward persona is very different from what goes on beneath the surface.

At its center is Agnes Bain, the alter ego of Stuart's mother and to whom the novel is dedicated, an authoritative ex- beauty and a complete drunkard. The novelist observes affectionately but unsparingly her crumbling. *Shuggie* is her youngest, her ward, her guardian, and her objective. She has been deserted by her husband and her son takes the control and responsibility to take care her of. Stuart has taken a humanistic approach to telling Agnes Bain's story. On the one side we see the damage her behaviour and alcoholism cause; on the other side we see the warmth of her love for *Shuggie*. The poverty ridden situation of the family is delineated in the beginning of the novel. *Shuggie Bain* has, as a teen ager, been living unaccompanied in a grubby bedsit on the Southside of Glasgow and working on a supermarket where his superior overlooks lapses in hygiene because child labour is low-priced and despicable. Back to a decade earlier Agnes Bain along with her three children and second husband had been living in a small room of her mummy "all crammed together in her mammy's flat".

This is a story about paucity, addiction and cruelty and a child and mother's affection for each other. *Shuggie* and Agnes are bound with a thick thread. The former performs his duties unflinchingly and the latter reciprocates with her wild affection. Stuart illuminates the buoyancy and fortitude of each members of the family. In spite of all setbacks, Agnes has a pride and will power, in her manifestation and communication, in her self esteem amongst neighbor and ultimately in her love for her

children though a bit distorted.

*Shuggie Bain* analyses a deep understanding of the relationship between a child and a substance-abusing parent, showing a world rarely portrayed in literary fiction, and to that extent it's admirable and important.

Both Agnes and Shuggie are coping with being different in a Glasgow where any form of self-expression is outside the standard norms. Shuggie is different from other boys. He is 'precocious and effeminate' at a time when conforming meant being a hard-drinking, hard-working, hard-loving man. To the eight-year-old Shuggie, Agnes is his sun and moon; he 'orbits around' her.

Shuggie is not only a precocious child but in the age of homophobia and lack of understanding of gay lives, his identity is totally based on a degree of conviction. He establishes a comradeship with Leanne through his motherly attitude and she accepts him as he is. The friendship is a key to survival and existence. In spite of the adversity and traumatic childhood, it can be positively believed that Shuggie positive relationship will make his future illuminating.

#### References:

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