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My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Ten-year-old Jamie, the main character in this story, has a lot to cope with. His mother has quit the home, his father is a drunk and one of his two older sisters was blown up in the 7/7 London terrorist attack. Moving away to the Lake District improves the scenery but does nothing for his daily school experience, where he is routinely bullied. But he does find one new ally in Sunya, the only Muslim pupil in the school and also the object of regular playground harassment over her determination to keep wearing the hijab that conceals her long, black hair.

Jamie's only other reliable friend is his pet cat Roger, who eventually gets run over. But while all this sounds pretty depressing Jamie never gives up, buoyed by fantasy and his growing friendship with Sunya, where they giggle together happily whatever the opposition. And when Jamie and his older sister triumph in a talent competition, things at last start improving. Sunya's parents are then racially insulted by Jamie's father, which puts an understandable strain on their children's friendship. But despite a dreadfully disappointing reunion with his mother, Jamie remains optimistic and loving, even managing to steal a kiss from Sunya by the last page.

This is an encouraging debut novel from a new writer. Her adult characters tend to be stereotyped, with Jamie's middle aged teacher, where much is made of a mole on her face sprouting two hairs, particularly two dimensional. But the author writes well and compassionately about children and teenagers and should surely get even better as she continues to find her own voice while steering further away from familiar fictional set pieces. Her next novel, scheduled for 2012, should therefore be well worth waiting for.

Running Order:

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