



Live Life to the Fullest

Before I Die

Jenny Downham

First time author, 43 year old Jenny Downham has caused quite a stir with “Before I Die”, a novel targeted at teens with crossover appeal for adults in general. Jenny, a single Mum, left a touring improvised-theatre company in 1999 when her second son was born. She describes starting writing as a means of using up some of the “playful energy” she had expended as an actor. During the writing of the book, the July 2005 London bombings occurred and she was very aware of the effect this had on many people. She read memoirs written by adults with cancer, researched cancer and shared her manuscripts with nurses from London’s Great Ormond Street Hospital, which specializes in treating children’s cancer.

Her book, “Before I Die”, is the story of Tessa, a very normal 16 year old, who is dying of leukemia. She has spent the past four years having treatment, going in and out of hospital for test after test, dealing with hope and hope being dashed now that they can’t do any more. In order to cope with this she makes a list of 10 things she wants to do before she dies. The first one is sex.

Her dealings with members of the medical profession are sometimes difficult. During one encounter, while the doctor is explaining the very poor prognosis, Tessa shuts herself off from them and thinks of what she is going to miss out on. She decides that she has two choices – to curl up in a rug and wait to die or to get on with her list. She chooses the latter.

The author tells what it is like to be seriously ill from the patient’s perspective. Tessa is a normal teenager, with normal desires and needs and the longing to be independent. Her relationships with her parents and sibling are true to life and totally believable. She is not an easy person to care for and gives her father some real anguish while she carries out the items on her list. Her relationship with her best friend is extremely incisive, however the boy friend seemed a little convenient and unlikely at first. Later, the relationship develops rather beautifully.

Tessa is hard on the people closest to her and to those who want to care for her. She rejects the rules which others feel are important in society. In carrying out her list, she has disappointments, fun, excitement, and even a small sense of power. She has a great sense of the beauty which surrounds her and wanting to hold on to it for the after life. We learn how she and her family and friends think of her illness and what they all have to deal with as she gets closer to death. She thinks about what her family will experience when she dies and whether or not she’ll be able to haunt them! In her mind, or perhaps in reality she writes letters to them about what she wants them to do after her death.

When I first heard this book reviewed on National Radio, it was described as possibly the most important book to be published this year. Though, I’m not sure I could say that, the

book is a very moving and uplifting story and has something to say to all of us about the way we regard and cope with our own death.

The strength of this book, for me was in the development of the relationships, which were very honest. Though the subject matter is very distressing, the book is life affirming. We all must die. It might be tomorrow or not for years. Like Tessa, make a list, make plans, live life to the fullest, enjoy what you do, even if it turns out to be a mistake and there is nothing more important than the love which we have for our family and friends.

Liz Duncan, Nelson