

Elmet by Fiona Mozley

3 stars

A debut novel of promise

This bleak and violent story tells of a father and two children, Cathy and Daniel, and their fight for survival in a remote part of Yorkshire. It is the fourteen-year-old Daniel who provides the narrative.

They are a dysfunctional family, on the very edge of society. It is never quite clear whether they are Travellers, or Gypsies, or just plain outsiders who do not fit into a modern way of living. John, the father, is a big bruiser of a man, who has earned his living by being a fighter. Now retired from fighting, he has made a life for himself and his children and built them a house in an isolated spot. They have become self-sufficient, living off the land, eating their own vegetables, shooting what they need for meat. When money is needed John earns it by offering protection to those who need it. Everyone is fearful of him, but he is a good and protective father to his children. Cathy is like her father, tough, fearless and strong. Daniel by contrast is sensitive and nervous, preferring to stay at home, and there is a sub text of his sexuality which is never fully explained. From the outset I was worried by the children calling their father 'Daddy'. This is such a conventional term and it jarred when the author was so plainly telling us that these people were outsiders and their lives were unconventional. Pa, or Fa, would have been more fitting. Daddy smacks of 'The Railway Children'.

The real action of the story starts when the rich man about town, Mr Price, tries to take over the land and throw John and his family off it. This leads to John's confrontation with the bully and the shocking and violent climax.

I found this a difficult book to get into, particularly the first half. The second half was more compelling as it moved towards the predictable but grim ending. There wasn't much joy to be had and none of the characters was particularly likeable. The contrast between the rich and poor, the bullies and the underdogs was made clear, but it was difficult to feel empathy with any of them. Mr Price was the obvious villain with no redeeming features at all. The descriptive passages which made up most of the book, were poetic and detailed, but were so lengthy they held up the progress of the story, particularly at the beginning. I personally found the violence at the end almost too horrific to read.

At times this felt like a 'creative writing' exercise and I am surprised it was Booker Prize material. However, as a debut novel, it was promising and I'm sure this novelist will have great success in the future.

Jane

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review

