

Who could ignore a child in danger - SA Weekend (South Australia) - July 23, 2016 - page 36

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There's nothing quite like a premise that drags you into a moral quandary with no clear answer. *Promise*, Sarah Armstrong's follow-up to her Miles Franklin-shortlisted debut *Salt Rain*, explores how best to protect a child when her family and government services seem to have failed her. There are no easy solutions.

Anna lives in an attached house in Sydney's outer suburbs, and when the new family moves in next door she can't help but hear through the wall. They move in at night, which is odd enough, but she becomes aware that the parents are by turns aggressive and dopey, and their daughter, five-year-old Charlie, is left alone for long periods. Then Anna discovers an adult-sized bite mark on Charlie's thigh.

Anna calls family services and files a report, but nothing happens. When she witnesses more abuse, she tries the police, then family services again. Nothing happens. And then she witnesses Charlie's stepfather do something unspeakable, and she realises that she's going to have to go to extraordinary lengths if she is to protect this child.

The story of Charlie and her family is as chilling as it is commonplace, and the failure of government services will sound familiar to South Australian readers in the aftermath of the Chloe Valentine inquest earlier this year.

Beyond being a book about child abuse, though, *Promise* is also a lovely meditation on maternal love, its many shapes and forms.

Armstrong depicts the unfolding relationship between Charlie and Anna with a light touch, though Anna's unplanned wilfulness seems callous to the other adults around her at times. Still, *Promise* is more than just a premise: it's a satisfying read on a very difficult topic.

Taking a completely different perspective on child abuse, **Suzanne Leal's** *The Teacher's Secret* looks at the damage that can be caused by red tape intended to protect children.

This is a far cry from the World War II experiences at the heart of **Leal's** first novel, *Border Street*. Instead, we're in Brindle, a smallish Australian seaside town with a primary school that sits at its centre. When the school's principal takes leave for a year, she is replaced by Laurie: young, driven and fond of regulation (to a slightly absurd degree). Laurie's presence shakes up the town, where change is rare and slow.

Terry, the longest-serving teacher at Brindle Public, finds it particularly hard to adjust to this woman who seems to know nothing about what kids need. Around him, Brindle carries on as it always has. Sid, the caretaker, goes swimming with his brother every morning. Mel and her

raucous family are as chaotic as ever, and the shy Joan who lives down the street is still talking to her dead mother. Nina, a town away, is trying to understand her husband's increasing absences. And finally there's Rebecca, who lives half a world away, but who will soon find herself seeking asylum among strangers in this foreign land.

The Teacher's Secret is very much the story of a community, and it's hard to tell where all Leal's varied characters are going at times. As crisis strikes, though, everyone comes together – as do Leal's scattered storylines, in a conclusion that simply sings.

The cover makes it look like a gossipy kind of book, but if you manage to make it past that you'll be rewarded with a story and a town with a lot of heart.

FICTION PROMISE Sarah Armstrong Macmillan \$32.99 FICTION THE TEACHER'S SECRET
Suzanne Leal Allen & Unwin \$32.99

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