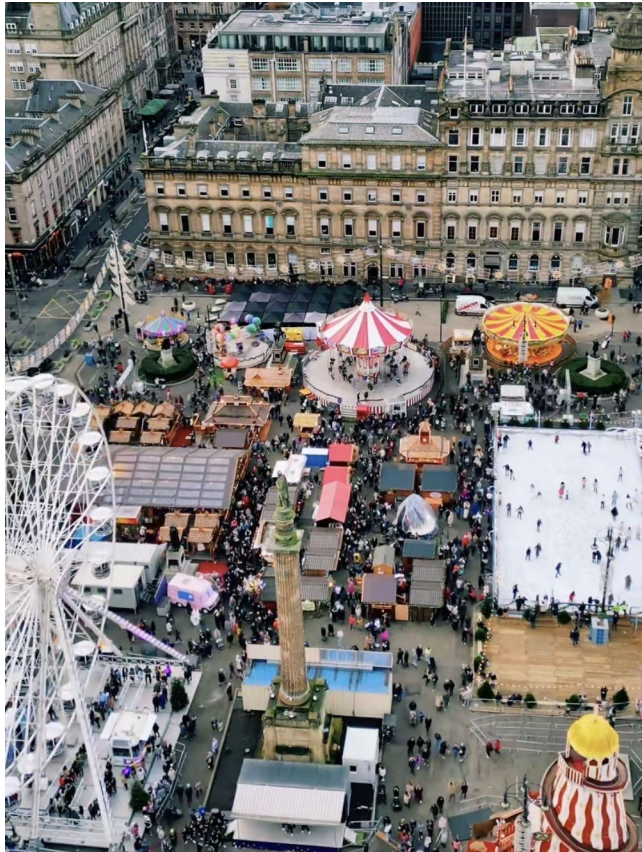


HE IS QUEER.

HE IS POWERLESS.

HE IS SHUGGIE BAIN.

Is this queer coming-of-age tale the next *David Copperfield*?



Modern-day Glasgow, St. George's Square, 2022 | © Leosbookerblog

He is queer. He is powerless. He is Shuggie Bain. We read in despair as our central character, Shuggie, is confined between the webs of socioeconomic inequality he faces growing

up in thatcher-era Glasgow. The story is raw, demonstrating the realities of a naive young boy who takes responsibility for a family struggling with addiction and abusive behaviours. The poverty-stricken, neo-Dickensian themes beg the question, is this the next *David Copperfield*?

Behind this creation is first-time novelist Douglas Stuart, who faced similar affairs growing up, causing him to create the “incredibly personal project” that is *Shuggie Bain*. He wrote secretly in solitude, spending years and years enhancing and chipping away at the masterpiece until finally, after 32 publisher rejections, he was able to publish the book. He then went on to win Britain’s most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize.

Perhaps the most enticing aspect of the story is how Stuart manipulates the existential bleakness dealt to the family through a child’s optimistic lens. Shuggie does not see Agnes, his mother, as an alcoholic, no matter how much he fears her unpredictable behaviour when he comes home from school. Instead, he is forgiving and remains loving. She is by no means illustrated as the best mother - “she was no use at maths homework, and some days you could starve rather than get a hot meal from her” - but we know that Shuggie still “looked at her.. and understood this was where she excelled.”

In our modern era of setting boundaries and putting oneself first, we wish nothing but independence for our young protagonist. Still, he places his parent at the centre of his life and only focuses on how, even after drinking, she gets up the next day to face the world. Agnes is not demonstrated to be the villain, as her strength

and humanity shine through past her illness. That is how alcoholism is presented - a disease that has taken his mother away from him against her will and want. The reader is therefore facing the same contradiction that those close to addicts may feel - we see the addiction's impact on the entire family, and we feel angry that a mother would put her children through this. Yet, we feel an undeniable air of sympathy for her and the person she could have been. We feel sympathy for Shuggie for being so painfully hopeful and frustrated for his older siblings, who wish nothing more than to escape.

These themes are close to the writer's heart, as he has seen them first-hand. Having little to no true agency when his mother passed away when he was just sixteen, it is clear why Stuart can depict such a profoundly dark and moving perspective so realistically. He describes the act of writing as a "catharsis" to memorialise his mother and help him to understand his complex and challenging past. Although "absolutely a work of fiction", the Glasgow vernacular and fragmented memories in the story appear nothing but accurate, making the novel so potent. Together with the time-shifting, episodic structure and varying pace of the text, the plot comes to life.

There is even speculation that the novel is being adapted into a TV series with the help of the BBC. Regardless, *Shuggie Bain* is a novel passionately constructed from the truths of alcoholism, abuse and, more than anything, hope, as he urges readers to know that "tomorrow is something to look forward to."