

## Reviewing Louise Nealon's *Snowflake*

The transition from adolescence into adulthood is challenging. It is marked by confounding emotions, the trauma of fleeing the nest to university, and having to be home from *Coppers* in time to milk the cattle. Okay, the latter may not apply to most Irish coming-of-age novels. However, it applies to Louise Nealon's aptly named *Snowflake*, a novel that, while exploring the conventional approach to 'finding oneself', simultaneously questions and challenges the dichotomy between two disparate worlds: a dairy farm and Trinity College.

*Snowflake* is narrated by the eighteen-year-old self-confessed 'country bumpkin', Debbie White, who is about to begin her third-level studies at Trinity College. Debbie has spent her life living at home on her family's dairy farm in Kildare with her mother, Maeve, and Uncle Billy. Maeve is fascinated with her and her daughter's 'dreams' and severely troubled by an undiagnosed mental illness. Billy is a functioning alcoholic who financially and emotionally supports Debbie but chooses to reside in a caravan at the back of Debbie's home, away from Maeve and her 'prophecies'. Although chaotic and unstable, Debbie's family life provides her rootedness in the world, unlike Trinity College, where for Debbie: "It doesn't matter who I am. Once I walk through that door I will be changed". We quickly become aware of Debbie's naivety on her first day of university, hilariously comparing veganism to Hitler and recognising that her eventual affluent best friend, Xanthe, "doesn't speak like Dublin kids in the Gaeltacht". Nealon's use of the present tense in Debbie's first present narration is paramount to her character development. As Debbie begins to formulate opinions outside of her family sphere, I found myself suddenly thrust back into Billy's caravan, where drinking oat milk is frowned upon, and "being fond of the drink is a form of survival".

At its heart, the novel is a coming-of-age tale, with Louise Nealon even stating that "she wrote *Snowflake* for her eighteen-year-old self, to reassure that there was nothing 'wrong' with her". Similarly to Debbie, Nealon also grew up on her family farm in Kildare, attended Trinity College, and has had struggles with mental health. Thus, although Nealon addresses the conventional coming-of-age themes such as sexuality, academia, and self-identity, her acute tackling of regressive Irish attitudes towards loneliness, mental illness, and alcoholism is where I sympathised with Debbie's character most. Nealon's dark comedic tone throughout *Snowflake* paralyses her characters by pawning off their problems as prevailing attitudes of Irish culture: It is socially acceptable to be an alcoholic in our parish as long as you don't get

treatment for it". Albeit humorous, I couldn't help but acknowledge these attitudes' effects on Debbie and her life in Trinity. Attending the college therapist, Debbie is 'expecting a warning not to put crayons up her nose' and welcomes binge drinking on college nights out as 'it is like taking a holiday from her head'. Nealon's honest and cut-throat portrayal may be interpreted as a sole critique of Irish culture. Still, I also found it the driving force that provides Debbie with her much-deserved rootedness in university life. As I journeyed with Debbie through significant plot points, I began to highlight that although Dublin and her hometown are worlds apart, her reality lies within accepting them both. So, whether Debbie is discussing Thomas Hardy with her professor or milking cattle with Billy is unimportant to the reader. Instead, her journey to understanding her mother's abstinence from reality while buying Tesco's finest hummus is where Nealon excels as an author, illustrating that coming of age is both a tempestuous experience and a unique one.

Throughout *Snowflake*, the emphasis on Irish rural life and an other-worldly reality is reminiscent of Patrick McCabe's writing, whereby mentally ill characters conjure up a dreamlike world to escape their rural milieu. Moreover, by pairing this setting with the halls of Trinity College, Nealon provides her reader with an experience distinct from Sally Rooney's critically acclaimed *Normal People*. Nealon swapping images of college dorm parties for midnight masses and student walkways for cattle grids represents the uniqueness surrounding Debbie's coming-of-age narrative, rebuking the term the novel is named after. I believe Nealon's *Snowflake* is placing itself in its own category on Irish bookshelves. It is a narrative consisting of all the melancholic motifs attributed to Irish literature (repression of emotions, miseries of rural life) whilst rethinking the contemporary Irish coming-of-age novel through its approach to tackling such motifs.

*Snowflake* may take a different approach to the coming-of-age narrative, switching Trinity's grandeur for the rawness of Debbie's family farm. Nonetheless, Nealon succeeds in dragging her reader through the muck and dirt. The constant use of first-person present tense narration symbolises Debbie's journey to selfhood, which is ever-changing yet rewarding. If you enjoy the Irish coming-of-age novel but are exhausted by its conventions, *Snowflake* is destined for your bookshelf.

