

## Book Review — *STILL LIFE WITH TORNADO*

Author: A.S. King

Reviewer: Belinda Hampton, Atherton State High School

‘Nothing ever really happens. Or, more accurately, nothing new every really happens.’ Sarah

And on that chipper note, we are into the chaos and the calm that is the current world of sixteen year old Sarah. Her existential crisis is expressed in a number of ways – a hand that can’t be drawn; a decision to rename herself ‘Umbrella’; the resolution to drop out from school and life to hang out in abandoned locations. And because nothing new ever really happens, Sarah is not that new or original either. She is the result of, and the future for, multiple Sarahs who all make their way into this world described in *Still Life with Tornado*. There is 10 year old Mexican-holiday-sunburnt Sarah who is able to recall a family crisis that current Sarah seems to have totally forgotten; 23 year old better-hair-cut-worse-attitude Sarah, and a 40 year old Sarah who seems to have her life (but not her underwear) under control that gives us hope this protagonist will make it through. A.S. King’s narrative is all happening and not, moving rapidly forward and standing still.

Hamlet and Bella Swan have some lessons to learn from Sarah when it comes to a crisis about family, abuse, abandonment and finding a way forward.

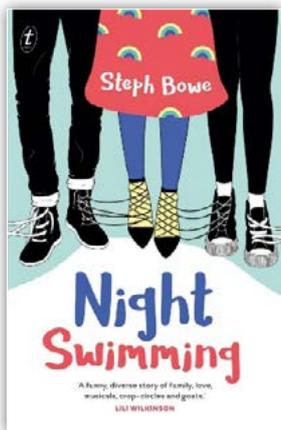
I was not won over by King’s novel in its initial chapters. This made me feel a bit bad, and unoriginally old, because there are armies of fans out there championing this novel. Many young adult reviewers identify strongly with Sarah’s issues, and her feelings about her family, social pressure to fit particular identities, and what can happen when the very things that hold you together in your identity seem to be unravelling, and fast. These are all important concepts for teenage readers, and especially well-crafted are some of the moral decisions Sarah has to make about what is important, what her role is in making decisions, and how women can be dismissed or diminished by various choices. But make no mistake – Sarah is a character with drama. As Hamlet would say, ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’ There are points in

the novel where I wanted to give 16-year-old Sarah a good talking to. I am glad, however, that I did go back because the second half did have something new to offer. Like the tornado, there was more going on in this novel than first appearances suggested.

The representation of Sarah’s mental health is an interesting aspect of the narrative that I did find engaging and sensitively portrayed. Like Hamlet, Sarah is mad north-north-west; and when the wind is southerly she seems to know stalking from unobtrusive shadowing. The alternative perspectives on events provided at various points from her mother, Helen, and brother, Bruce, provide a purposeful counterpoint to her perceptions.

Then there is the challenge of how to understand the multiple Sarahs that King introduces. I initially took them to represent Sarah’s fractured view on her own identity and ways of dealing with her family’s violent domestic past: a solid reading practice, except that other characters are represented as talking to, eating with, and having social outings with the multiple Sarahs. Some readers loved this, and applauded the ‘weird’; others saw it as an example of magic realism and went with the way the wind was blowing. But some, like me, found this a rather annoying element. Perhaps we weren’t being original enough, or didn’t recognise art when it was right in front of us. I am okay with that.

It is an unflinching portrayal of a life spiralling slowing but certainly out of its usual tract. Its narrative structure and character arcs are masterfully crafted. And since Sarah doesn’t wind up as a vampire, or in a poison sword fight to the death, her pain evokes our empathy. *Still Life with Tornado* will find an understanding audience as it will hold appeal to readers looking for something more than an uncomplicated representation of teenage life.



## Book Review — *NIGHT SWIMMING*

Author: Steph Bowe

Reviewed by Emma Monfries

Kirby Arrow is one of just two seventeen year olds living in Alberton, and she worries a lot. She worries about her mum working too hard; she worries that her granddad is getting more and more forgetful; and she worries that she is a big disappointment to everyone.

By day, Kirby works as an apprentice carpenter, and by night she reads. Kirby's family have a goat farm and their home is ramshackle and comfortable. Kirby lives with her stoic, hardworking single mum, her beloved and increasingly forgetful grandad, her soon-to-be-a-dad cousin, Maude the dog, Marianne the cat, and Stanley the goat. Kirby's love and affection for each member of her family makes her a very warm and empathetic character. She's goofy and sweet and loving, but she just wants everything to stay the same. You see, Kirby's dad isn't in her life, and has never been, until now. Kirby suddenly sees her dad's picture in the paper, and has to face the unanswered questions this raises, whether she likes it or not. In addition to Kirby's worries, her grandad is sliding toward dementia, and she just can't agree with her mum about how best to take care of him.

Clancy Lee, Kirby's best friend and Alberton's only other seventeen year old, is heir to the town's only Chinese restaurant and is a musical theatre enthusiast convinced of his own boundless talent. Clancy is a perfect antidote to Kirby's worrying; he is completely convinced that his future's so bright, he's got to wear shades. His character is laugh-out-loud hilarious. "I fear nothing! Other than spending my entire life in this town. And crocodiles. They're quite stealthy." Clancy is waiting to finish his Year 12 year by correspondence, to finish work at the restaurant and move to Sydney.

Enter Iris; beautiful, mysterious, magnetic. Her parents open a competing Indian restaurant, and Iris is unlike anyone they've ever met

before. When Clancy and Kirby both find themselves falling in love with the new girl, Kirby's worries increase exponentially.

What follows is a coming of age story, minus the clichés and boring bits. At no point did the characters become predictable or prosaic, and the story is immensely entertaining as well as insightful and beautiful.

The author's writing style is beautiful. The setting is vividly constructed, and I felt quite transported to Kirby's world. The point of view is whimsical and quirky, but the author does not shy away from the difficult issues faced by Kirby and her friends, such as depression, sexuality, absent fathers, gender, death and loss, and identity. I think that young readers would appreciate this honesty and frankness, and find it all very relatable. I was impressed by how the author so successfully avoided clichés and predictability, and how she crammed so much action into a story which is essentially about one girl finding her own way in the world.

Year Nine and Ten students would love this book. It is easy to read, but will also challenge young readers. The vocabulary and writing style will give a class a lot to talk about, as will the representations of what it is to be Australian. Questions of identity are raised in the story and would form the basis of many interesting class discussions. Most importantly, there is a lot of humour in the novel; a real treat for students to enjoy. This novel will allow students to love what they are reading, but also to deeply reflect on issues that affect their own lives.

Highly, highly recommend this little gem, it's just lovely.



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