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Finding the humour in loss and families

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WHEN her daughter rang last August with the news that Clare Morrall's first novel was on the long list for the Booker Prize, she told her not to be ridiculous. "I had no idea I was even in for it," she says. "I was down in Devon, visiting my mother, who doesn't have internet access; so we went over the road to a neighbour with a computer to check it was true."

Halfway through the sleepless night that followed, she remembered her mobile phone. She switched it on to find messages from her publisher (the tiny Birmingham firm of Tindal Street Press), The Times, and a host of others, all desperate to get hold of her. A month later, her novel was on the Booker short list, and, although it didn't win, the calls haven't stopped.

Part of the excitement is that Ms Morrall, like D. B. C. Pierre, the author who won, is a newcomer. Although she has been writing "ever since I was a child", she says, *Astonishing Splashes of Colour* was her first published book. (News of her success took Tindal Street Press by surprise, too, and it ran out of copies. It has since extended its print run to 75,000.)

Until now, she has always fitted her writing around her day job teaching music at a prep school — snatching an hour here and there in a kind friend's house near work. She has almost finished her next book, and there has been plenty of interest. There is no title yet, but the central theme is guilt. The Booker experience has given her the opportunity to take herself more seriously as a writer, she says, and to give up some of her teaching to allow more time for writing.

The central character in *Astonishing Splashes of Colour* is Kitty, a young woman who has grown up in a large family, with her father, a painter, and four older brothers. She has no real memory of her dead mother, or of her sister, who ran away from home as a teenager. The book opens with her standing at the school gates, waiting to collect her son. As the story unfolds, the cracks in the fragile structure of Kitty's life become increasingly visible, and she starts to fall apart.

The book's title comes from *Peter Pan*, and the thread of "lost boys" and loss in general runs powerfully through the narrative. "I was thinking about the bonds between mothers and their children; the importance of mothers in people's lives; and how people without mothers are affected," she says. The book is also an exploration of family dynamics, and how people communicate — or fail to communicate — with each other.

In the course of the book, the agony of loss propels Kitty into a kind of manic depression. One of the ways the author paints her deteriorating mental state is by giving her synaesthesia — the condition in which emotions are experienced as colours.

"I didn't know about synaesthesia when I started writing," she says. "The colours just presented themselves, and I read about it later." She doesn't experience the condition herself, although she says: "I attach a great deal of importance to colours, and they affect my mood." The colours explode in a blaze during a fire at the climax of the novel.

Central to the plot is the way we construct and use memories. "People genuinely do forget things," she says. She has had the common experience of finding she has remembered things differently from someone else, who is just as convinced of a contradictory version of events. "It's all very tenuous and unintentional. Things fall into lost memory. What people believe becomes a part of them."

Astonishing Splashes of Colour is painful, moving and utterly gripping: there is at least one episode in which you can hardly bear to read on, but you daren't stop. At the same time, there are moments that are acutely funny: a funeral tea is a high point.

"I didn't want it to be unrelenting," Ms Morrall says. "Humour and sadness are part of the same spectrum of emotions." She thinks the story ends on a realistic, if perhaps not optimistic, note. "You can't make everything all right, but I think people can go on and survive."

Astonishing Splashes of Colour by Clare Morrall is published by Tindal Street Press (£7.99 (CT Bookshop £7.20); 0-9541303-2-4).

What did you think of Astonishing Splashes of Colour? Send your comments to: reading@churchtimes.co.uk.