

Book review: Nathan Filer, *The Shock of The Fall* (London: HarperCollins, 2013), ISBN-13: 978-0007491452

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'I am writing myself into my own story, and I am telling it from within'.

As a registered psychiatric nurse, a poet and a writer at the same time, Nathan Filer sets an example of a brilliant combination of the medical knowledge and the art of writing by his debut novel *The Shock of the Fall* that won Costa Book of the Year award in 2013. Filer's medical training and his caring attitude resulted in a very detailed, personal and touching story told 'from within'. Written in the first person, the narrative does a great thing for both medicine and humanities—it gives voice to the often stigmatized group of people who do not seem to have a chance to speak for themselves and tell why they are as they are.

After Simon has died, Matthew keeps returning to the day of his brother's death. He is haunted by the memories that won't stop tormenting him: memories of telling Simon that it is childish to sleep with the baby blanket; memories of Simon wanting to build an ant farm and their parents not letting him do it; memories of going to the zoo and painting their faces; memories of showing Simon a buried doll that scared him to death—literally. Matthew starts writing his story while being in the mental asylum, diagnosed with schizophrenia and having to take injections.

Matthew's story is the account of an unsettled mind, obsessed with guilt and pain beyond all bearing. The boy mentions that he is 'trapped by the pain', thus implying that he is absorbed in the world of his own which in its turn revolves around one particular moment—the shock of the fall. He is doomed to live the moment over and over again, to face the guilt of letting his brother go and to blame himself for growing older, while Simon always appears 8-years-old. Matthew believes that it was he who killed Simon and by agreeing to take medicine, he seems to kill him once again. Schizophrenia makes Matthew move in circles: the memories and unfulfilled promises clash around him and he finds them materialized while talking to his late brother, seeing his face in the cigarette smoke, or listening to his voice in the bubbling water. As an expert, Filer skillfully demonstrates how deceiving schizophrenia can be: projecting his own thoughts, wishes and anxieties, Matthew is sure that it is Simon who wants to play and it is Simon who is dependent on him.

Conveying ultimate lived experience and emotions, the novel has a great potential for evoking empathy. Filer manages to illustrate the recurring feeling of the loss and guilt in a very intelligible way—it is not something off the scale, this could actually happen to anyone. This

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idea of generality is particularly emphasized, when the novel addresses the issue of labelling. There Filer's familiarity with medical issues makes itself evident once again: while speaking about labels, Matthew mentions an experiment one group of researchers conducted. Apparently, Filer refers to the David Rosenhan's study 'On being sane in insane places'. The researchers were voluntarily institutionalized pretending to hear voices. In the course of the so-called Rosenhan experiment, they took notes and after a while, nurses diagnosed them with excessive writing behaviour. Filer's reference, certainly, draws attention to the main principles of labelling, namely how labels can stick and serve the basis for making judgements. These ideas are of undeniable importance to the novel and its call for empathy.

The Shock of the Fall is a must-read not only for those who deal with disability studies, or face the hardships of coping with mental illness in their own families. The organization of the novel that consists of small chapters written in different fonts, the vigorous style of the language as well as the use of drawings make the thought-provoking story likewise intelligible to laypeople. Such novels as Nathan Filer's can truly challenge the conventional dichotomies such as us/them, norm/deviance, and, thus, show how one can empathize with someone who once seemed unapproachable and alien.