Review of **Hilary and David**

by Laura Solomon

One of the things I love about the ebook revolution is that things pop out of nowhere and turn out to be just what the doctor ordered. Some months ago I got given (electronically, from the other side of the world) a book by Laura Solomon called Vera Magpie, about a young woman who had murdered all three of her husbands. I loved it.

Now, because of that serendipity, I’m reviewing another book by Ms Solomon, called Hilary and David. Intriguingly, and to my delight, the male character in this novel is writing a book called Vera Magpie. Same book, same set up, same(almost) casual murdering of innocent (ish) better halves. What’s more, this male character is in his eighties, while Hilary lives in New Zealand, as does Ms Solomon. Hilary is a young woman who has had severe problems with the male of the species, and has two children as a result of one-night stands. One is on the autism spectrum, the other has Downs Syndrome.

Well, you might be thinking, what a jolly little set up! And I have to admit, that in parts the book is almost wonderfully bleak. In other parts, though, it is what you might call life enhancing (if you weren’t afraid of Pseuds Corner). And in all parts it is fascinating, gripping, thought provoking. Even the ending, indeed, is ‘something else.’

It starts off with an email, which Hilary receives out of the blue at the end of another hectic day of home

schooling, ‘with Wyatt uncontrollable and Harry struggling to learn anything at all.’

Hi Hilary,

I see you are a friend of John's, so I wondered if you would add me as a Facebook friend. I am a London-based writer, in my eighties, struggling with my sixth novel. Send me a message if you like. David.

To which she replies:

Hi David,

Sure, any friend of John's is a friend of mine. I was in London myself for a bit, but returned to New Zealand for the lifestyle. Solo mum; two kids. Both a handful. One has ADHD, or Attention Deficit

Hyperactivity Disorder if you prefer, the other Down's Syndrome. I live in Nelson, I don't know if you know it. Gorgeous scenery, great in summer, bit dull in winter. Enough about me.

Hilary.

Pretty soon they are swapping details of their lives, which the anonymity of the net means are immediately franker than you’d normally expect. Hilary is nearing the end of her rope in one way, and David in another. The end of his life, also. He is well aware of his age, his failure to have ever achieved the breakthrough as a novelist he has always hoped and struggled for, and his own difficult relationship with his two sons.

Hilary has a mother, who is a great help and comfort with the boys – and who leaves the area suddenly to pursue a new job opportunity. David is befriended by a succession of much younger women, one of them an artist who wants to paint him with no clothes on. Both of them lead humdrum lives, with only too believable tensions and pains. And the faceless world of cyber space leads them to explore each other in casual intimacy, which grows into understated but genuine affection.

Neither of them has any real interest in ‘going under’ – although there is a suicide attempt which ends, for Hilary, in awful guilt and a reassessment of her love for her suffering boys – and David even tries a spot of speed dating, although not for reasons of sex! Hilary finally forms a relationship which is better than her awful one night stands, and Vera Magpie is very well received and leads to more work and projects for David.

Finally, they decide to collect and publish their emails in a book called Hilary and David. As he puts it: With the removal of the boring messages I think it will make an interesting read – the way that we've egged each other on, helped each other through. Two socially inept humans corresponding via a series of electronic messages.

Which conjures up more fascinating possibilities in terms of fiction and reality. Two socially inept humans and a series of electronic messages. Possible true, possibly false – but the book is a great deal more than that, and I found it utterly compulsive. And then there is the ending…

Jan Needle 23 June 2012