**Recommended reading…**

**INSTANT MESSAGES**

By Laura Solomon

Proverse, Hong Kong

Joint Winner of the Proverse Prize

Kindle edition (2010)

**A teen read full of insight and humour**

Fifteen year old Olivia (Livvy) Best has problems. On Christmas Day her Mum walks out on the family to live with her lesbian lover; her twin sister Mel, though a talented musician, is thieving, drinking and self-harming; her Dad is jobless, wrapped up in his first novel, and there is a gang of school thugs who are determined to make her life a misery.

Is Livvy downhearted; in despair? Is Laura Solomon’s book about to pitch the reader into a pit full of teenage angst? Mercifully not, for it soon turns out that Livvy is the only really grown-up person in her household, honest about her feelings, but in charge of them. Throughout this highly readable, first-person narrative, Olivia remains cheerful, optimistic, witty and unfazed.

**GF (Green Frog)**

Okay, she is upset by her Mum’s abandonment of the family and unimpressed by her then taking up with a teenage lover. Livvy is also deeply concerned about her sister’s manic behaviour. Yet she opts for tolerance, understanding and support, with the aid of her soft-toy pal, GF (Green Frog) who ‘has thoughts and feelings’: ‘Would you,’ she asks the reader, ‘think I was crazy if I told you we held conversations?’ admitting that she can see how such interaction ‘between a stuffed animal and adolescent girl might be construed as insane’.

As GF shows perception and good sense throughout the novel we accept him rather as an exemplar of sanity; until, that is, Livvy’s own maturation frees her from such dependency.

**Bevan: no picture book**

Set in London in quite clearly a period earlier than the current recession, Instant Messages throughout portrays a life that brings its problems but at the same time never shrinks from opportunities. It’s also a tale about how people shift over time and through experience from antipathy to tolerance, to affection. Livvy’s fellow pupil Bevan is initially in the story unwashed, uncared for and violently bullied by his brother. Worse, he smells. He’s impossible.

Gradually, an appealing human emerges from the stereotype and Livvy is instrumental in bringing about that change; a change that culminates in love. Such a story could have submerged itself in dark shadows. Instead it is funny and optimistic, a reminder to the young reader that parents rarely make convincing role-models and occasionally let their own interests and passions come in the way of their responsibilities.

That, Livvy Best would argue, is not a reason for rejecting or disowning them. Laura Solomon has produced here a lively, funny, touching and engrossing novel about a time not so long ago when the life of a teenager probably held more promise than it does today.