

Book Review: The Garbage King

Author: Elizabeth Laird

This is an engrossing story of interweaving lives and of the capacity of children to help each other when adults fail them. Mamo's older sister Tiggist has previously cared for him while their mother visits bars in their Addis Ababa slum. After their mother's death (one surmises from Aids), and with Tiggist desperately seeking work, Mamo is abducted by an 'uncle' who sells him to a farmer in the remote Ethiopian countryside.

Adrift and desolate, city boy Mamo has to learn quickly how to avoid beatings. The children from a neighbouring farm teach him their skills. When Mamo manages to escape back to Addis, he finds that Tiggist's employer has taken her to a far away town. Once again it is children who provide a lifeline in the form of a gang. Under their *joviro*, Million, they scour the streets and other people's garbage for scraps. Running alongside Mamo's story is that of Dani, a rich boy pampered by his sick mother with a forbidding autocratic father who does not appreciate Dani's love of writing stories. Dani's father intends to 'make a man' of his son by sending him away to his formidable Somali batman.

Instead the frightened Dani runs away and meets Mamo. An unusual relationship develops between these two very different boys and there are inevitable tensions as the children in Million's gang struggle to survive. While Laird offers the storyteller's gift of hope through her plot and resolutions, readers are not spared the grinding reality of poverty. Who will forget little Karate's shrunken body cradled in Million's arms? Who can ignore Dani's cry? 'It's not right! He was only a baby! No one should have to die like that!'

This memorable novel is touched with the humanity of a real street child who told Laird his story and whom she quotes in her Afterword: '... and what I want to say to you is, don't be tempted to kill yourself. Don't try to die.'

This book does cover some mature and sensitive issues, so is only recommended for year 6 children, with adult permission.

Reviewed by: Mr. Newell