Death or Glory Boys

Theresa Breslin

Teen fiction

23 March 2011

When a terrorist bomb shatters an afternoon for four teenagers, Phil, Sarah, David and Maggie, their lives will never be the same again. Theresa Breslin’s gripping novel, Death or Glory Boys allows the audience to question their own beliefs regarding pacifism and gender role stereotyping.

The novel begins with the use of en media res, with Cal setting a bomb and talking to herself in incomplete sentences to settle her nerves: “Very smoothly,” The immediacy immediately engages and misleads the audience who automatically assume that the bomber working with adrenalin is a male. Cal’s sentences are reported without the pronoun ‘he’ or ‘she’, forcing the audience to jump to the misguided assumption that this “master of disguise” is male as is so often the case in literature. This refreshing approach leads the audience to be surprised by the epiphany where Cal’s gender is revealed at the end of the novel.

I find it interesting that the assumption most readers made that the anatagonist would be a male was interesting and revealing. We think that we have changed as a society as a result of the feminist movement of the 1960s and the “Girls Can Do Anything” campaign of the1970s and 80s. Perhaps we have not made as much progress as we think as we give the role of power so freely to a male rather than to a female. Breslin herself seems to question our assumptions, when Ben proclaims, “Women terrorists are the most feared. They are the least likely to surrender…The unwritten rule of the anti-terrorist units during a rescue mission is to shoot the women first.” Breslin’s book forced me to think about the automatic assumptions we make when gender role stereotyping.

On the converse, Phil’s character is filled with self doubt that would normally characterise a feminine role in most stereotypical novels and movies. Phil struggles with the moral implications of killing in the name of active duty. He begins the novel a very two-dimensional character, one who is described as “mulish,” believing in pacifism at any price. As the novel- and theme- develop, we see Phil struggle with his earlier defiant and definite views, saying to Sarah that she might just convince him “There is some merit in the modern army after all.” Sarah understands the role of the army in active peacekeeping and this discussion parallels the action of the novel, where Gavin is forced to eliminate the target and shoot Cal before she could continue to cause the loss of human life.

Breslin’s deft characterisation of Phil Jarvis allows us to seem him as deeply credible. He changes and develops in the novel, struggling with his inner conflict: he is officer material but feels uncomfortable with the moral decision making required of the role. It is important that we see ourselves as works in progress too; not so stubborn that we are unwilling to change our views; not so inflexible as to not regard others’ opinions yet flexible enough change our attitudes as a result. If more people in the world were able to listen to others before proclaiming their own judgements, then conflicts might be resolved at the outset. Breslin ends her novel on this point, ensuring we are uplifted with the message, “Look around the world…people are making the attempt.”

From start to finish, Breslin’s gripping novel has something to challenge each and every one of us.