

Finding Lauren

By Felicity McCall

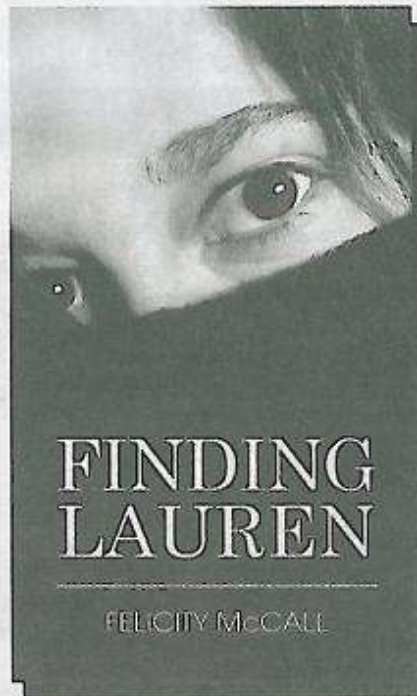
(Guildhall Press)

Nature and nurture are two factors that feature prominently in the formation of human behaviour in its entire ramification. But can their influence on our world-view be shed?

The matriarch of the Monteith family, Regina, is 79 and dying from cancer, but all her life she hated everything and everybody around her. Because of this, she persuades her son William to swear never to marry or have children. But at the age of 23, he fathers Lauren.

Set in 2005 in Northern Ireland, *Finding Lauren* centres on a quest by Cordelia Harcourt to locate the titular child, supposedly born to her uncle William when she was growing up, but whose existence has never been acknowledged. This simple gesture immerses the reader into a pool of betrayal, blackmail, secrecy and family intrigue, all on a milieu of indelible trauma suffered by Regina when she herself was a child.

As the book progresses, it becomes clearer why Regina's pores radiate so much hatred: she fell in love with Charles, and became pregnant at 14. Charles left for Britain to join the war, and Regina's father discovered the pregnancy. He secreted her away to Belfast for an abortion,



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after which Regina was made to carry the child back in a suitcase to bury him in the dead of night. Meanwhile, Charles died in action. And so at 14, the music of Regina's life was muted. She becomes hard, narrow minded, prejudiced and terrified of letting go of the beliefs she was indoctrinated with.

Living in Ireland for some time now, I have come across such colloquial terms as 'Irish guilt,' a concept that may be confusing for outsiders. But *Finding Lauren* will aid your understanding. The book also provides a glimpse into the effect of extreme religious bigotry on everyday realities in Ireland's troubled, divided social history, when the fragile facade of oneness is disavowed.

Beneath the surface, *Finding Lauren* lays bare the damage caused by holding onto past hurts. Lauren, when found, says: "I could bury myself in the hurt but I don't; let it go and live." I believe this is a lesson for all us who thrive in conflict.

Structurally, the story is told in flashbacks to the late '60s. The language is descriptive and flows easily, robustly laced with typical Irish speak. The wordings are skilfully applied for maximum clarity of imagery, and McCall's characters come alive as you read.

And even with the oppressive atmosphere of anger and hatred, and when the mystery of Regina's misery is no longer a surprise, *Finding Lauren* is engaging and a delight to read.



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