TLC Showcase

CAROLINE CHISHOLM

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Introduction to Swimming Pool Hill

Swimming Pool Hill tells the story of Adeela, a teacher from Afghanistan, who escapes the brutality of the Taliban in the hope of starting a new life in England. The novel explores the tragic consequences of her relationship with Ghulam, a fellow Afghan she meets on the journey, when the past they've left behind inevitably catches up with them.

Leaving Kabul after the violent death of her mother, Adeela is smuggled across Asia to the migrant camps of Calais. During the journey she meets and falls in love with the enigmatic Ghulam, a Christian convert. Arriving in Sangatte, they are witness to a Channel Swim, which Ghulam believes is a miracle. After several weeks of waiting they make an attempt to board a lorry in the ferry port, but are caught and imprisoned. Released first, Adeela is left on her own in the camp and is raped by a young man who holds a grudge against Ghulam. Learning of her rape, Ghulam disappears, leading to the revelation of a shocking secret behind his past. Seeded by the vision-like image of the Channel swimmer, Adeela believes there is now only one way out of Sangatte: she begins preparations for the test of her life.

Swimming Pool Hill is named after a site of torture and execution used by the Taliban during its occupation of Kabul. The novel is constructed around two interweaving narratives. The first, covering a period of four months in 2004, recounts Adeela's life in the migrant camps of Calais and her attempts to enter the UK. The second follows Adeela's past life in Kabul, from her birth in 1979 to the events which led her to flee her homeland.

The novel is inspired by the true story of a migrant woman who attempted to swim the Channel unassisted in 2012 – a story that struck me deeply, having trained for the Channel two years before.

Swimming Pool Hill won the Bridport Prize's inaugural Peggy Chapman-Andrews first novel award in 2014. I'm delighted that my Prize includes up to a year's mentoring with The Literary Consultancy as this will be invaluable to shaping and developing the novel. It really is a dream come true to have this kind of opportunity to bring out the best in me and my writing.

Swimming Pool Hill, by Caroline Chisholm

Afghanistan, 1979

My birth was hailed not by a single star, but by many bright lights that burned briefly in the night sky before falling to earth. The invasion of the Russian troops - the Suvari as we called them - heralded a new era for Kabul, and I was to grow up not knowing our land under its own rule. The Suvari paved their way into Afghanistan; they built the airports where their planes would land, they laid the roads that led their troops through Kabul. They say that minutes after birth, a baby is colonized by millions of bacteria. That's how it was for me. I took a breath of freedom, before surrendering to occupation.

My father Ahmed was a tall and broad man, with a beard so unruly it was difficult to tell if he was smiling or about to break into a rage. Instead, I learned to gauge his temper by the way his brow contracted into folds, like the furrows of a walnut shell. He used to say I looked like my mother Amina and it wasn't meant as a compliment. My mother was slim and small; too small to bear another child safely. Hers was a lithe beauty so at odds with the homely plumpness of a typical Afghan wife. For my father, I was merely a bad omen. He would sit outside the teahouses he owned and tell any passer-by how his daughter's birth had opened the gateway to the Suvari and closed the door to a son.

Our house was quite grand, on the third floor of an apartment block in the Wazir Akbar Khan district. In those early days we still had running water and electricity. Not for us, one of the simple mud brick dwellings in the outskirts of the city, where my mother grew up, that still bore the fingerprints of its builders. My father furnished the apartment in the style of his teahouses, or perhaps it was the other way round, with rich red Bukhara print rugs and the finest kelim cushions. The best of these were kept for the hujra, where my father entertained the businessmen and government officials who frequented his teahouses. I was only permitted to go into the hujra once a week to clean it.

On the eastern wall, hung a huge map of Kabul, with our apartment and his two teahouses marked out; the three points forming an almost perfect haft, the number seven in Dari, which was very good luck. My father liked to point this out to all his visitors, as if luck, like a mantra, could be embedded the more times it was repeated.

When I was five, my father took another wife. Publicly my mother bore this shame with dignity, and threw her energies into giving me the kind of education poverty had denied her. 'You won't have to use your looks to get what you want in life,' she'd say, for which I was secretly glad because I didn't feel they were mine to trade. As my father's only daughter, I could cook and clean long before I could write. Each day I would wake next to my mother and we would rise with the dawn to prepare food and wash clothes as he slept in the other bedroom with his young wife, Laila, and my two little brothers Nadir and Mateen. 'One on the stage and one waiting in the wings,' my father would say. Later I learned that my parents came to a pact about my education. My father would wash his hands of me until I was old enough to marry, and until then my mother was free to indulge me at her will. My education was to be her project: one that had no discernible plan but a predetermined end.

'It will not help her to marry any better,' my father said. 'You don't need to go to school to learn to run a house.'

'They'll be time for marriage later,' my mother replied.

'Look what happened to Fara,' he'd warn. 'You can't say *that* was visited on her for no reason.'

Fara was my father's sister. She'd trained in medicine and worked as a doctor at the Charsad Bestar Hospital. It was difficult to know what *that* applied to – the fact that Fara never married, or that she died young, of breast cancer. For my father who was always in robust health, disease was a personal slight by Allah himself, a punishment for flouting the natural order of things. A lingering death, like cancer, was most shameful of all. 'Allah will take you when you've breathed enough air,' he would say. As I was never sure how much 'enough' was, I would often practise holding my breath for a minute or longer, in the hope I might preserve some air for when it was really needed.

Fara died when I was three – at the very age when I might have hoped to remember her. She exists in my mind devoid of colour or smell or movement; a black and white photograph taken at my parent's wedding. A memory that is and isn't mine. Her pink silk dress bleached white by the film, she stands like a defiant bride in waiting, as if it is she, not my mother, who will follow her vows to the grave. After my prayers each night I would often think of Fara and ask her things that puzzled me, such as why caterpillars don't need to eat after they've changed into moths and how many times I would need to hold my breath to make sure

Allah didn't take me before I was ready. I would imagine that I could hear her voice in reply, but it never formed itself into words, just a distant note that faded the longer I listened for it.

At school I made friends easily, after I learned that the feeding habits of moths was not a subject the other girls held in much regard, whereas my mother's gossip from the hammam, which never much interested me, was highly prized. The latest scandal, or at least the kind of scandal that my mother considered suitable for my ears, almost always revolved around dissecting the fallout from a marriage proposal. Even at that age, I knew that a proposal was thinly gift-wrapped; a rehearsal of all the jealousy, shame and betrayal you might experience in the duration of a marriage itself. It was an arrangement to be made in the best interests of both families, its occasion declared to the bride-to-be like an announcement in the newspaper, with silence being the terms of acceptance. But that was not the case with Fara, my mother told me, though she received many proposals. Fara wouldn't stay quiet to please a husband; Fara, who could only be silenced by cancer. 'If you make an enemy of your allies, you'll be alone in battle,' my father liked to say, as if revelling in the memory of her struggle. And after Fara died, he took her dowry and poured it into his teahouses, and he watched it stew along with leaves of green tea, which he served to the soldiers he cursed her for helping.

When I began my first English lessons, my mother took me to an old bookshop in Kabul where I was to choose three books to last me until the next school year. It was cool and dark inside the shop, a fan in the corner of the room whipped up the dust from the counter. There were more books than I'd ever seen; row upon row of brown and green leather spines ascended out of reach, their pages turned to the wall.

'We have some good books for children,' the bookseller turned and lifted a couple of titles from the dusty shelves.

'No thank you, they're not the ones I want.' In much the same way my mother bought clothes for me, I would chose books that I could grow into. 'Can I look myself?'

The bookseller eyed me for a minute. 'I think I might still be of some assistance.' He reached behind the counter and produced a wooden stool.

I worked my way along each shelf until I found the books that piqued my interest: an Afghan-English dictionary and a world Encyclopedia.

My mother picked up an extravagantly bound book with gold tinted pages, ‘How much is this one?’

The bookseller whispered to her under his breath.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Is it real gold?’

‘No, but there’s treasure inside,’ he said, ’some of the greatest words ever written.’

‘Can I see?’ I asked.

My mother handed the book to me. ‘The collected works of William Shakespeare,’ I read it out loud, ‘Can I have it too Mama?

‘It’s very expensive,’ she turned to the bookseller with the same pleading look she used on my father.

So it was thanks to my mother’s Magpie vision that I found Shakespeare and because she was easy on the eye, that I took his plays home. From that day, it was always England that held me in its spell; the tales of kings and queens, poets and paupers, called to me like the light of a fading star. And it seemed that I could no more reach out to it, than I could step into the past, but in my dreams I painted England’s green and pleasant land over the canvas of our desert landscape.

After my chores each day, I would wait for my cousin Raouf to arrive to escort me to school. Raouf was many things to me in those days: a companion, a chaperone, a captive audience. He was wiry and full of nervous energy like a street dog, always roaming, always dirty. Raouf was a year younger, but he looked up to me as perhaps a brother might. Not my own brothers, who would quickly learn their place in the family usurped my own standing regardless of age. What I remember most about Raouf as a child was that he seemed to have no concept of boundaries - though a swift clip around the ear meant he was never in doubt when he stepped outside them. Perhaps I’m being unkind to Raouf and maybe it was as much my influence as his youth, but I wonder if I was responsible for breaking down his inhibitions in much the same way that alcohol is used to loosen the tongue.

There was much to be discovered around the city, though we were careful to front each of our missions with its own cover story. Sometimes we would take a

longer route through the dusty streets on the way home from school. But it was better to explore on the days when we ran errands for our Nana, Bushra. She still lived in the single story house where she'd been born and my mother and her sisters had grown up; where the sweet smell of Roht bread seemed to ooze through the walls. I sometimes imagined the whole family living in just those two rooms, huddled together to sleep in the small living room, its floor cushions doubling as pillows until the muezzin's call for namaz ushered in the day.

Nana was small and slightly hunched over and she always dressed in black linen, as a mark of respect to her dead husband, the grandfather I'd never met. She became a little more hunched with each year, 'Allah is drawing me closer to the grave,' she would say without a hint of melancholy. Nana was unmoved by the Russian occupation because she'd lived through six regimes. Born at the cusp between independence and civil war, she'd known Kabul as a monarchy, a democracy and a republic. Her fondest memories were for the early years of Zahir Shah's reign, who kept the Soviets at arm's length and Afghanistan neutral during the Second World War. 'We were at peace, when the rest of the world was at war,' she used to tell me with pride, and her eyes would dim and lose focus, as if she was gazing into her own mind to recall the memory.

Even Zahir Shah drew Nana's ire when he invited the worst kind of bad luck on the country by putting his image on a coin, when it should have been reserved for the words of Allah alone. To Nana it was no surprise that Shah's blasphemy resulted in the Russian invasion, only that it took them a full 18 years to get round to it. But the main reason Nana wasn't fazed by the Russians was because she'd ceased really living in the present, something I'm ashamed that Raouf and I exploited. For Nana, time was speeding up as she was slowing down; the spaces between the routines in her day grew narrower, so that it seemed to her that she was always busy cleaning, praying or eating. So Raouf and I were free to fill her empty spaces with our expeditions, as long as we made sure to steer clear of my father's teahouses and remembered to bring something back for Nana.

Once, when we'd been stalking leopard geckos at Babur's Gardens near the old city walls, we forgot to buy anything on our return.

'Let's see what you've got for me,' she insisted.

I elbowed Raouf in the ribs and he emptied his pockets which contained only a stone he'd saved for throwing at the crows along the river bank.

‘A rock?’ she frowned.

‘It’s not just any rock Nana,’ Raouf said. He paused, ‘It’s a meteorite that fell from the sky. It was once a bright burning star, flying through space. We got it from the market. They said it would bring good luck.’

Nana was as superstitious as she was religious. She eyed the sandy coloured stone, which couldn’t be told apart from any other stone you could pick up off the street.

‘Was it expensive?’ she asked.

‘We got a good price for it,’ I said, and handed back three of the four afghanis she’d given me.

On our way home I gave the other coin to Raouf. He smiled and tossed it high into the air and it dazzled in the sun as it span. He caught it on the way down, and flipped it onto the back of his hand. It was the obverse side, the afghan coat of arms. ‘That’s means I’ll have good fortune,’ Raouf said. But I sensed Raouf had already used up his luck, because it was the only time his storytelling saved us from trouble, rather than digging us deeper into it.

About the Writer

Caroline Chisholm studied English at Queen's University in Belfast and worked for several years in communications for high profile NGOs, including Greenpeace International in Amsterdam. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Manchester, where she developed the early drafts of Swimming Pool Hill. Caroline is currently studying for a PhD at the University's Centre for New Writing and has previously been longlisted for the Mslexia first novel award. Her non-fiction publications have been endorsed by leading public figures and include a patient information award from the BMA.

In her spare time, Caroline volunteers for the UK's oldest lifeboat station in Southport, where she is based. In 2013, Caroline was diagnosed with a primary brain tumour during a research visit to Calais, but following treatment is now in remission. She qualified to swim the Channel in 2010 - which involves a six hour swim in sub 16C open water - but was thwarted due to an inclement British summer. As a novice swimmer and environmentalist, Caroline has blogged about her challenge for Treehugger magazine.

Caroline is on Twitter: @channelblogger