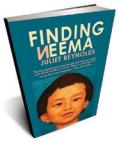
Annexure To Normality



FINDING NEEMA
by Juliet Reynolds
Hachette | 340 pages | ₹399

by **Shefalee Vasudev**

IN ways both visible and veiled, autism, like other similar disorders, begins to reveal its uniqueness and its tarnish from the moment of birth, even if participants to such a life may get jolted to the truth later. Clarities collide with indefinite confusions, say experts, opening up anxiety-filled fields of the mind. It's tough for parents and guardians, especially in the absence of professional help, to translate the language of disability for daily interpretations. One way or the other, a point is reached when the disability shines as the very meaning of existence.

Art critic Juliet Reynolds's memoir *Finding Neema*, the story of an autistic Nepalese boy, courses through all these and many more realisations. Set against the art scene of the '90s when her husband, the late artist Anil Karanjai, struggled to nourish his artistic individuality without slipping into populist traps, as well as the context of their own marriage, the book takes many turns and U-turns. The dominant motif is Neema, the son of their domestic help Poonam, the commitment they feel for him, the fondness for him in their hearts, homes and plans that makes of him the child they never intended to have. The musically inclined Neema is not adopted but is raised by this unusual couple, buffered by their friends and pets. From his late diagnosis (despite living in the Delhi of the '80s and '90s) to the callous disregard of his vulnerabilities by his rioting and incestuous Nepalese family; from a self-seeking and self-destructive mother to the realities of special schooling in India; from health problems to the dungeons of autistic minds; from financial challenges that force the couple's commitment towards Neema into dark tunnels to the yearning for a larger artistic quest, the book draws in many strands of the human condition.

The story starts sluggishly, with over 80 pages going by before Neema begins to take hold as its raison d'etre. Much goes into defining characters instead of developing them, especially the many relatives of Poonam—her husbands, boyfriends, warring siblings—and assorted characters of a neurotic family. Neema has Sherpa genes, but finds karmic recognition as a Tibetan, which is bestowed upon him by Rinpoche, a former secretary to the Dalai Lama.

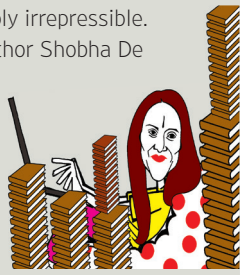
The extreme and repeated absorption of Karanjai and Reynolds with a quagmire of house helps and the extent to which the author explores its impact on her life left me perplexed. The story is held hostage by this parallel plot often enough to make sections of it tedious. Even the context of Neema's overall dependence on Karanjai and Reynolds doesn't explain it fully.

Yet, the memoir is meaningful, if not extraordinarily written. Unlike autism memoirs like *Raising Blaze* by Debra Ginsberg and *Pretending to be Normal* by Liane Willey Holliday, where the quality of writing elevates readers to insightful realisation, *Finding Neema* works because of its information about autism, especially in the Indian context, from Ayurvedic options for recurrent physical problems to Indian institutions for the autistic, even dealing with closeted issues of sexuality, all recounted in an easy tone. Reynolds's candidness about her own limitations (though she is rather forgiving of her late husband) dusts the memoir with admirable objectivity. *Finding Neema* raises existential questions: who is normal? Or is normality (like abnormality) just one of the many incidences on a spectrum?

I found an 'a-ha moment' when Delhi's Small Cause Court grants the author and her husband the guardianship of Neema in 1993. Small cause, this? ◘

BIBLIOFILE

Dull Days with Mum



THE lady is simply irrepressible. Socialite and author Shobha De already has an entire imprint in her name with Penguin, which brings out books on lifestyle and fashion (*My Yummy Mummy Guide* by Karisma Kapoor, *Breaking Up: Your Guide to Getting Divorced* by Mrunalini Deshmukh etc). She, of course, is one of Penguin's star authors. Now, Hay House, her other publisher, released her book *Never A Dull De* with them. There is buzz that De is already writing another book for Hay House, which will come out in mid-July. With age, Ms De is only getting more and more busy.

Picturebook Heroes

ROLI Books has come out with an interesting comics series, the *Param Vir Chakra*, featuring stories on recipients of the highest gallantry award. The first two are *Maj Somnath Sharma*, hero of the battle of Badgam in 1947 in Srinagar, the first PVC recipient, and *Lt Manoj Pandey*, who was 24 when he was killed in Kargil. The books are written by Maj Gen Ian Cardozo and, though aimed at the young adults, are detailed enough to hold anyone's attention.

Open Lives

WHAT'S common between Virat Kohli, Saina Nehwal, Sania Mirza, Unmukt Chand, M.S. Dhoni, Pappu Yadav, Mary Kom, Bina Ramani, and Yash Birla? All of them have written their autobiographies in recent months. How much do they sell? Who reads them? Isn't it too early for some of them to be writing biographies? Read all about it in *Outlook* next week.

Illustrations by SORIT