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## Sally Nicholls: Looking death in the eye

14.02.08 Joel Rickett

It's easy to see why the judges of the Waterstone's Children's Book Prize 2008 were hooked by Sally Nicholls' debut novel. *Ways to Live Forever*

(Scholastic/Marion Lloyd Books, £7.99) is a deceptively simple yet heart-wrenching story of a young boy dying of leukaemia, handled with grace and rare humour. In the Guardian, Mal Peet hailed it as a "hugely impressive achievement . . . an elegant, intelligent, moving and sometimes even funny book".

The author, aged just 24, is thrilled but undaunted by these accolades. Bubbling with self-confidence, she happily admits to living a "dream" since her manuscript was first spotted by agent Rosemary Canter while she was on a Bath Spa writing MA, then snapped up by Marion Lloyd for her eponymous imprint at Scholastic. "It's been surreal," she laughs. "Wonderful but weird."

She's already adept at handling awkward questions from interviewers—as well she might be, since even bigger posers are the speciality of her protagonist, 11-year-old Sam ("Why does God make kids get ill?", "Does it hurt to die?", "Will the world still be there when I am gone?"). Addressing these "questions that nobody answers" head on was the impetus for the book, she says. "Death is the great mystery that no one really talks about. A lot of children's books deal with grief but none are about mortality. I wanted to look death straight in the eye."

Drawing on her non-dogmatic Quaker upbringing and her philosophy degree, she wanted to avoid easy answers—religious or atheistic—and didactic endings. "Sam is allowed to explore and make his own mind up, rather than being told what to believe," she says. At the Royal United Hospital in Bath, specialist nurses told her that most terminally ill children aren't scared of their fate—except those who haven't been given the truth ("Not knowing is much more frightening," Nicholls says). She recalls being diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 11: "The adults saw it as a big thing, but my experience was of getting on with it."

Sam, with his love of lists and facts, is an ideal narrator to weigh up the competing claims of science, morality, myths and religion. "He's got a logical approach. That's not to deny he can be unhappy and scared, but he doesn't have a girly, moany tone." This extends to impatience with the endless visits from relatives as he tries to complete a wish list of experiences against the clock ("I want to do my things . . . I don't have any time to do my things!").

Nicholls, whose own father died when she was two, largely avoids mawkishness or sentimental set pieces. Yet readers can't help but fill in the blanks and despair. "I was trying to manipulate people to laugh," she says. "But the funny scenes seem to make people cry even more." Unusually, Sam's father remains in denial about his son's condition until towards the end of the book—another reversal of convention.

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Having deftly dodged the pitfalls of carrying such a weighty story, Nicholls is poised to follow in the footsteps of her favourite authors Hilary McKay, Frank Cottrell Boyce and Philip Pullman. "There's lots I still want to write," she enthuses. "I'd like to live in a little castle full of books, writing stories all day long."

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