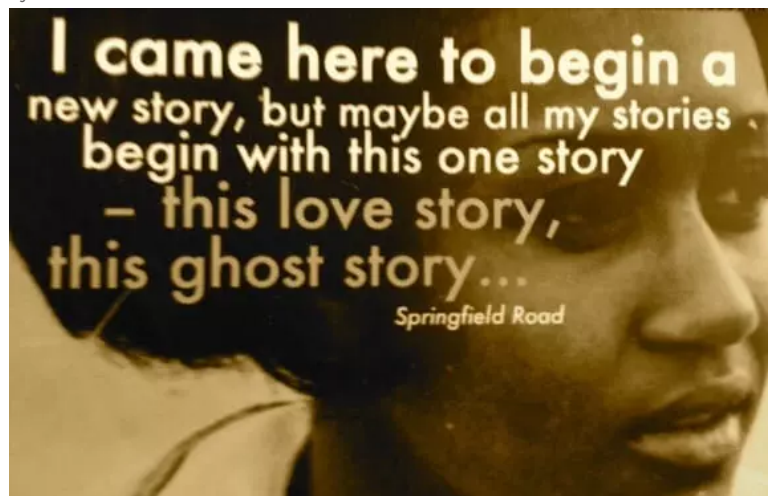


REVIEW: SALENA GODDEN'S SPRINGFIELD ROAD – MEMORY AND TRADITION, PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

by Noel Maurice



The memoir of a 1970s childhood, the dust jacket of which markets the book as “a salute to every curly-top, scabby-knee’d, mixed-up, half-crazy kid in the playground with NHS glasses, free school dinners and hand-me-downs”. Therefore, I who am writing this was definitely not in the target audience, but I enjoyed this book so much.

First of all, because the author has a dream-like dexterity with words, reading this (pleasingly thick) book full events from the past and the dotted lines between them is just quality time. Reading it, I felt like someone was leading me by a velvet gloved hand through an overgrown movie set full of rusty magic that still works. Second, being a memoir rather than an autobiography, it has a generalist interest that transcends the personal perspective from which it is told.

The voice in the book is Salena and the author I'll refer to as Godden. We don't want to mix up the child and the woman. So: Little Salena, her brother and mother separate from the dad, a free-spirited musician, and stay with relatives, go through a few setups, then settle in with mum's new husband, who turns around and reveals the ugly face of a nasty stepfather.

The story winds its way along a sub-ideal family life, exciting adventures with friends, the permanent hope that the real dad will be there some day, until one sad day Salena learns he killed himself. There are many milestones, good and bad, that Salena will overcome in this tale.

Although the adults are now much older, and the children strong and mature, Godden's memoir brings to the table, with a few decades delay, the voice of the little girl who was never allowed much say. She offers a scathing critique of the psychology of the unloving step-parent, which is painful reading, because one assumes that the story is true. Godden tells more than a personal story, she describes a pattern played out in many families.

The tale is rich with reflections on memory and tradition, presence and absence, relatives and the past. We're let in on a burning fascination for her mother's big red suitcase full of glamorous and impenetrable things from mum's life before Salena—a fascination I've certainly also had with some of my own mother's old stuff. I don't know why, but I sometimes felt like I was prying on Salena, but it's a book, a published book, and I was offered it.

As I hope my review conveys, this is a really delicate and sensitively crafted work with many different facets, some of which I haven't gone into at all. See for yourself...