

One Whole and Perfect Day by Judith Clarke

What a wonderful read! If you don't mind sitting on the bus having tears roll down your cheeks, laughing and crying at the same time, then this is for you. The novel has a dysfunctional family at its heart, but not one that is racked with drugs and lots of angst – they're a family like anyone's, with a single mum, rushed off her feet caring for the elderly at an old age facility, a daughter, Lily, who takes on lots of extra responsibility as mum is often late home, and the son, Lonnie, who has not yet gone anywhere with his post school education. Add to the mix a grandfather who has

lost his patience with Lonnie and has threatened him with an axe, and his wife who desperately wants the family together again, and you have a story which pulls you along, making you laugh at such recognisable events and cry at times where the heart just aches at what is happening.

Lily has to get her brother to speak again to his grandfather, to heal the chasm that has developed between them, and in going to Lonnie's room, finds the word Clara written over and over on a piece of paper. Lonnie has met a girl at his tutorial, who has given him fresh confidence to continue his English studies. He even cleans his room, although he rings Lily to come and help. Lily is worried that grandfather, who often tells racist jokes, will sneer at Clara when he meets her, but grandfather has met Clara's mother, and met a young girl begging on the train, so his views of the world are changing. He has found his mother's wedding dress, and when his wife announces that she will hold a party, all the stories collide into one. And it rolls along so easily, with each character beautifully defined, the setting clear and the descriptions just wonderful.

Fran Knight, William Light R-12 School, SA

Confusion was my first impression. I was expecting to read another straightforward "chick" story and I'd just settled down, getting to know Lily, the main character, when I was whizzed away to meet someone else. Each chapter introduced someone new which at first I found irritating, but which I began to enjoy as I met the diverse members of Lily's family and friends.

It's a story about a regular family with all its quirks and eccentricities: Lily who sees herself as the "sensible" one; her single mother, the social worker, who brings home "lame ducks"; Nan with her imaginary friend; Pop who scares away his grandson with an axe. All Lily wants is to be a normal teenager and possibly fall in love, but as we explore each character we learn about their dreams and hopes and realize that no matter what age you might be, everyone aspires to something special.

The characters are real people and can be read separately to promote discussion: Lonnie, Jessaline and Clara trying to find their own way and live up to family expectations; Pop trying to remember his dead mother; parents balancing their lives after the children have left home; Rose and Pop and the meeting of different cultures; and Lily and her friends discussing the best way to meet boys.

An engaging read, which, as it draws to a close, you know will end as a perfect day.

Lynne Moller, College Library Coordinator, Eumemmerring College

"People were the mystery of the universe", muses Lily, as she dwells on the peculiarity of people in her own family, longing for a 'proper' family and a life made up of more than the ordinary days she now passes. She is the sensible member of the Samson family, only sixteen, but old for her years, managing the household as a middle aged person would. Crushes and the girly "stuff" of *Bestie* magazine may not be for her, but perhaps, just perhaps, if she fell in love (enter Daniel Steadman), it would stop her feeling middle aged, being the mother not the daughter.

Lily is the central character in this wonderfully warm and refreshing story of family ties and the bonds of friendship which are never broken, of love, of dreams, of the hope and the joy which can come from loss and hollowness when people follow their heart, and experience 'one whole and perfect day'. Universal themes in a novel of universal appeal, cleverly crafted, spanning three generations of the 'different, not dysfunctional' Samson family, linking them with a diversity of

other characters and other cultures in shared situations, in shared experiences and in shared emotions.

There is a message for us all as we read of the Samsons, of the Lee family and of Jessaline O'Harris and Mrs. Nightingale. We meet Lily's 'softie' mother, Marigold, who works at a day care centre for the elderly, where she often befriends 'lame ducks', as Lily would call the people who attend the centre. We also meet Lily's older brother, Lonnie, another idealist and dreamer, 'an angel fallen down from Heaven', in his Nan's eyes, a gentle and somewhat misdirected soul, drifting, searching perhaps for something and someone to fill his life to replace the father who deserted the family when Lonnie was only six. That father, Oliver de Zoto, is now just 'an awkward voice on the telephone', ringing from his native USA at birthday time – always missing the right date and even calling his daughter Lolly at one stage, not Lily. But then for Stan, Lily's Pop, de Zoto always was a 'shifty hippy bugger'.

Stan is loud, angry, stubborn and 'an old bigot, backward in his opinions'. He 'roars and stomps', having disowned grandson Lonnie, yet May, Lily's Nan, dreams that Stan will make it up with Lonnie before the 80th Birthday party she is holding for Stan. Indeed, she wants it to be that "one whole and perfect day" which every family deserves, as does Lily, who only remembers celebrations ruined, ending in fights and tears in her 'freakish family'.

May feels such a wave of happiness planning the party – May, who lives with her memories ("memories are the good thing about growing old") and her imaginary friend, Sef. May, who is good-hearted, hankering after the simple pleasures of life.

The Samsons are all searching - be it for an identity, for a sense of belonging, for contentment, for love. When fellow university student, Clara Lee, crosses Lonnie's path, he does find love and he also finds his place in life. Yet Clara, too, in her quest for independence, has somewhat selfishly unsettled her parents and that particular family relationship is also called in to question – issues of anguish, emotional abuse, loneliness, abandonment. More for the reader to ponder.

As the story concludes, the journey to Katoomba for Stan's party becomes more than just a train trip up to the mountains. It is a symbolic journey for everyone concerned, the Samsons and the Lees. It represents a "softening of the heart" for Stan, and a journey to a change of heart, of reconciliation and forgiveness, where parents and children alike prove that different generations and different cultures share common hopes and dreams.

Lily's family is set to grow, to change. Life may soon be "saner or more crazy", but it will certainly be richer. There will be magic from the mundane. Coincidences will rekindle care and compassion, through the inter-connectedness of the families. Wrongs will be righted. Life is too short to hold grudges and to not make amends. As May says, "Too many people have been lost". This, then, is the message from award-winning author, Judith Clarke, whose simple, yet endearing story, echoes an intermingling of simple truths and much wisdom. Clarke's gentle blending of characters and families, a mix of generations, of individual memories and common yearnings, the mixed emotions of daily life, is skilfully interwoven to a rich tapestry of human nature, reflecting something of us all in this "slice of life".

Beautifully written from the heart, with a richness of language, a touch of humour and a depth of understanding, *One Whole and Perfect Day* is highly recommended for inclusion in the English curriculum as a shared class reader. This heart-warming novel also has a place on school library shelves, as recreational reading for staff and students alike, who will certainly be touched by the story.

"Why did people have to come in families?" Lily asked, in her struggle to come to terms with her life and her seemingly "weird" family. She now has the answers, has clarity and acceptance. Family ties, and the bonds of friendship, indeed human life itself, must be treasured and differences accepted, both within families, and for racial harmony as well. Why? As Lily wisely declares, "Anything could happen to anybody, if there was nobody around to catch you when you fell". If we don't make room for our hearts, then who are we, at whatever age, from whatever family, from whatever race?

One Whole and Perfect Day is truly a pleasure to read, as one warm and uplifting “whole and perfect” novel.

Alison Cassell

Lily dreams about having a normal family. A mother who doesn't take home every lame duck, a father who she has actually met, a brother who isn't a loser, a grandfather who isn't racist and a grandmother who doesn't have an imaginary friend. A family of freaks!

All except Lily, who is known as the sensible one in the family. Maybe she should be like other girls her age and fall in love or something.

For just once in the life she would like a whole day to be perfect.

All this sounds over the top, can such a family really exist? Could it be possible for such a thing as a perfect day to ever happen?

Judith Clarke has used a number of seemingly over the top characters and combined them into an interesting story. It is easy to read, and with a few surprises on the way. She has combined the thoughts and feelings of the different generations with skill and humour and has used scenarios which relate to every day life and has brought them together in an entertaining story right to the end.

Karen Groenewold, Deloraine High School