



The M Word

Books Reviewed:

[The M Word](#) [1]

Issue:

[239](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Clive Barnes](#) [3]

Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

[Conaghan](#) [4] takes us to dark places in seventeen year-old Maggie's life. It starts with a bit of teaser in the first page or so, when we are invited to wonder what an unknown man is jabbing into Maggie that is not producing the expected ecstasy and which she would rather he gets over with quickly. Actually it's a tattoo drill but you could be excused for thinking that it is something else that girls are not expected to enjoy on the first time. And this kind of knowing black humour from narrator Maggie turns out to be necessary in a story that gets to grips both with suicide and self-harm. It's Maggie that's cutting herself and there are some scenes that, while they may make you squirm, will certainly cause you to grieve at the mutilation, even as you understand the temporary relief that it gives her. Maggie herself is grieving for the suicide of her best friend and failing to cope with her mum's spiralling depression. She is also facing up to a new turn in her life as she starts Art School and has to find her place there, as well as struggling with the usual relationship and sexual anxieties. Conaghan convincingly sets the self-harming in the context of this perfect stress storm and introduces us to a young woman who is certainly a victim but with whose vulnerability, guilt and anger we can empathise. She is also someone who, in her wit, self-awareness and creativity, has the growing strength to make her way steadily out of the dark. I was not equally convinced by the turn in the plot that sees Maggie and her boyfriend setting her mum up for a date and it all working out swimmingly. Yet this is a quibble to set against the novel's achievement of dealing so approachably with such a difficult subject.

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[1] <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-m-word>

[2] <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/239>

[3] <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>

[4] <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/230/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-230-brian-conaghan>