

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

*Teresa Murphy*  
**The Clever Boy**

**CAL WAS TEN YEARS OLD WHEN HE REALIZED** his remarkable aptitude for learning foreign languages. Without studying them at school he found he was able to learn French, Spanish and Cantonese. Now at age twelve, he realised that no matter how clever he was, he would never learn to please his mother.

There was always something that seemed to upset her. If it wasn't his table manners it was his untidiness. If she wasn't irritated by his over-active imagination it was his lack of affection. Then there was his forgetfulness, but he generally felt his mother was overreacting there. Many kids forget stuff, forget to feed the goldfish, forget to brush their teeth before school, but his mother nearly had a fit when he forgot to go to school?

About ten one morning, his mother had been particularly upset with him when she'd seen him talking with two elderly Asian people outside the tube station. He was telling them where they could catch the best tour buses. His mother arrived just as the couple were leaving.

After waving goodbye to them, Cal explained to his exasperated mother. "I was helping the couple find their way about, they don't speak any English you see."

His mother was upset, and irrationally so, in Cal's opinion. "...and I suppose you were speaking to them in Chinese were you Cal?"

"Well Cantonese actually." Cal remembered he was supposed to be in school and he rushed off in the direction of the school gates. It wasn't far and he would only have missed about an hour or so, no big deal.

"Cal wait!" she called after him hopelessly, "it's Saturday..."

It was such a shame that Cal's parents didn't appreciate the depths of his intellect. They expected him to be the same as any other twelve-year-old boy. His father was worse than his mother; he had left them after the car accident. Cal had heard people say that some marriages don't cope well after a big crisis. But surely this crisis had ended well? No one had died after all, and his baby sister had come out of the accident unscathed.

Although Cal was the only one seriously injured, he was the most optimistic of them all. He had been given all the resources he needed to keep up with his schoolwork during the long period of recovery. In fact, he was able to learn so much and to develop all sorts of talents and abilities he hadn't been aware of, with only his laptop and the hospital Wi-Fi.

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Not long after the incident with the Asian couple, a conference was arranged at Cal's school. His father wasn't around, so it was up to his mother to face the mental health team alone. Cal sat calmly outside the headmaster's office, not in the least concerned with what decisions might be made about his future.

"We understand how you feel, really we do, Mrs--" the educational psychologist was interrupted by Cal's distraught mother.

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"I will make sure he gets to school every day ... you see, it's just that I have to work now that Cal's dad has left ..." she trailed off.

"We do understand, and you have the little one to take care of too," the social worker sympathized. "But as we explained before, if you can't manage at home, then the residential --" the psychologist tried to resume his point.

"I promise it will be different..." Cal's mother said, wiping her eyes.

"You can visit Cal whenever you want." The psychologist was unperturbed by the emotional mother who looked at him as though he was speaking a foreign language.

"It's in Leeds!" said Cal's mother "How the fuck am I supposed to get up to Leeds 'whenever I want'?" She knew she had lost the argument so she stopped trying to hide her anger. She left them to make the final decree on her son's life in her absence and marched out of the school, pulling Cal along behind her.

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The following week, Cal sat waiting with his packed suitcase at his feet. Taking his mother's hand, he said "It's going to be okay, Mum."

Such a clever boy, he knew exactly what was going on and didn't need to be told where he was being taken or why. "Don't cry Mum, I shall enjoy myself at the boarding school and the children will benefit greatly from my language expertise."

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Cal unpacks his laptop in his new room and continues his research into foreign language acquisition. At home, his mother cries as she rereads the NHS leaflets on acquired brain injury.