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Wally Lamb
Lamb review
By Julie Wheelwright
The Independent (2008)

Wally Lamb, *The Hour I First Believed*, (HarperCollins, 740 pages, hardback £20.00)

In his long-awaited third novel, *The Hour I First Believed*, best-selling American novelist Wally Lamb delivers a whopping doorstopper of a book, weighing in at almost 800 pages. Those who love a good plot won't be disappointed. Lamb opens his story at Blackjack Pizza where local high school teacher Caelum Quirk is getting a take away, served by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold just days before they gun down 13 students and teachers at Columbine High School in Colorado. And that's just the beginning.

The massacre triggers a series of unforeseen consequences that will shape the lives of Caelum and his wife Maureen, a nurse at Columbine who escapes the slaughter but is deeply traumatized by it. Two days earlier, Caelum is flying back to Connecticut to a visit a dying relative when he sits next to Mickey, an expert on chaos theory. Like a prophet from the underworld Mickey tells him: '... that there's a self-organising principle at the edge of chaos. Order breeds habit, okay? But chaos breeds life.'

From this point onwards Caelum and Maureen's lives are thrown into a maelstrom as the story snakes its way through a maze of plot lines that deal with everything from the Iraq war to infanticide, adultery, sexual abuse, prison and mental illness. Oh and there is also a women's studies thesis on Caelum's ancestors, nineteenth century Quaker reformers who founded the prison where Maureen serves a sentence for manslaughter.

Lamb obviously adores his characters and this is one of his strengths as a storyteller. His characters, like Caelum the English teacher who has 'anger-management issues' and is a wannabe novelist, are engaging and fully fleshed. He avoids any maudlin sentiment or clichés over Maureen's trauma and constantly surprises so that the chaos does bring transformation in their lives. They often have a wry humour and a jaundiced view of the world that saves them from the excess of detail that Lamb lavishes upon them.

But this is an over-egged pudding. The Women's Studies thesis on nineteenth century reformer Elizabeth Popper by Caelum's tenant Janis Mick, (a refugee from Hurricane Katrina), is just one example. The thesis, written from a cache of papers found in Caelum's Connecticut farmhouse, has no argument but operates simply as a device to deliver the historical background to a revelation about various illegitimate births in the Quirk family. It's not convincing as an academic piece nor is it a gripping read.

There is also far too much going on in this novel so that its genuine moments of drama and revelation are rather lost in the swamp of events and characters. Jerry, a local cop comforts Caelum after discovering a suitcase with two dead infants on his farm and after one of his students has gone on a rampage and shot his estranged wife before committing suicide. 'You've had a hell of a couple of days, haven't you?' says Jerry. Indeed.

Clearly Lamb who has written only two previous novels, both of which were picked for Oprah Winfrey's book club and sold into their millions, has taken his time over *The Hour I First Believed*. He delivers on his message of redemption and when he finally ties up all the threads that lead to Caelum assuming the role of grandfather to a former student, it is genuinely moving. It's a pity then that Lamb's editor wasn't more stringent in paring down this bloated manuscript.

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