

The Label

A story for families

by Caroline White



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Having a baby brings a number of changes to families. Pregnant women, especially those expecting their first child, tend to seek as much information as possible about pregnancy, birth and becoming a parent. Alongside talking to health professionals, most women look to additional sources—downloading apps, joining online discussion forums, or turning to the more traditional medium of books.

The Label is no ordinary parenting book. For one thing, it's a story. It is essentially fiction, but is clearly based on the experience of author Caroline White. Put simply, this is a book about a woman whose baby has a disability. In reality, White's eldest son, Seb, has Down syndrome, but in the book the infant's disability is not specified. The story is told in the first- and second-person; a direct message from mother to child. It begins with the narrator's experience of bringing her new baby home and trying to come to terms with the fact that he is not the baby she wanted. Immediately poignant, the narrator confesses to feelings that many new parents might consider unthinkable: 'You weren't what we were expecting... This was supposed to be the happiest time of my life, but it was the worst.'

She describes a desperate search through books and leaflets to find out as much as she can about her baby's condition. Referring to such books as 'manuals for you', the narrator soon discovers that this quest for knowledge may be doing more harm than good: 'With every new piece of information, the enormity of what our lives would be like sunk deeper into my heart, the burden growing heavier and heavier.'

One day, a package is delivered to the narrator which loses its label in the wind, so she doesn't know who it is from. The package contains a book with blank pages. Having pinned her hopes on finally finding the textbook she has been searching for, she is horrified to receive this seemingly useless

notebook, and she disconsolately shelves it.

Ultimately, the narrator begins to care less about the books and enjoy spending time with her son. Every day, she learns new things about him and watches him develop. The story quickly moves through his childhood and adolescence, right up until he is finally ready to leave home and find his own place in the world. The book with the blank pages is, of course, a metaphor for the boy's life. The significance of losing its label is notable; only once we can see past the 'label' of a disability or condition can we know someone as a person.

The review copy of *The Label* that was sent to *BJM* was accompanied by a statement from the author explaining that she had wanted to 'create the exact book I wish I could have read when Seb was born.' Just like her book's protagonist, she spent the early weeks of her son's life poring over every book she could get her hands on, finding only warnings and negative stereotypes about what life with a disabled child might entail. Her own book is the antithesis of those parenting 'manuals'. The beauty of *The Label* is that it answers its own question—'What happens when life doesn't deliver quite what you were expecting?'—precisely by not answering it. Because, of course, there are no definitive answers about what life will be like for a family with a disabled child (or, indeed, any child). This was the knowledge that Caroline White sought when her son was born, and which she now hopes will reassure and encourage other expectant parents who are given unexpected news.

The Label is a heartfelt tale that may offer hope to parents who are scared when they find out that their infant has a disability or health condition. Sandra Isaksson's charming illustrations beautifully enhance the book, with a tone that complements the story perfectly. Fittingly, the book has been endorsed by learning disability charity Mencap, and 10% of proceeds from its sales will be donated to the charity. **BJM**