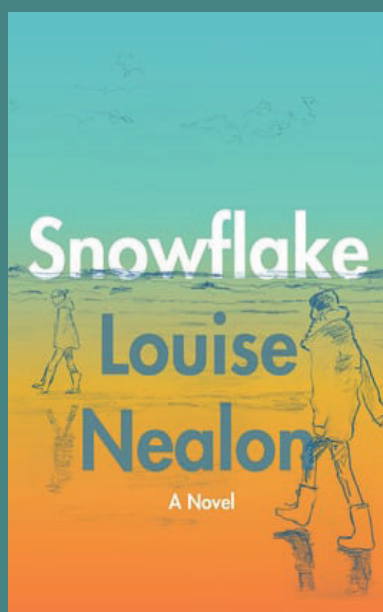


Reader's Guide

English literature

Snowflake

Louise Nealon





# Reader's Guide

## *Snowflake*

**Louise Nealon**

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## A Reader's guide to *Snowflake* – Louise Nealon

Please note that this guide contains plot spoilers!

### **SUMMARY**

Debbie goes to start university. She has previously rarely travelled from her country farm into town and has never travelled alone before. During the introductory week, she meets Xanthe, who becomes her only friend. She feels she will never fit in and finds it hard to combine farm life with her studies. Her uncle Billy, who is like a father to her, whereas her mother is not really a responsible adult, cares for her and encourages her to continue her efforts.

When Debbie was young, she used to dream about a boy who died in a car crash in front of their house. Billy tells her not to believe in dreams, and definitely not to listen to her 'mad' mother Maeve, who writes down all her dreams, but also balances on the edge of sanity. Maeve had read *Alice in Wonderland* to Debbie as a child, has a tabernacle in her room and shares Debbie's love for sea shells. But when Debbie had wanted to help her mother to make reed crosses to protect houses from harm, Maeve had slammed the door on her, crushing Debbie's fingers.

Debbie's friendship with Xanthe helps her to feel like a normal student, but she sometimes drinks too much and ends up in bed with total strangers. She also makes a habit of kissing boys she does not even like. When a boy gets aggressive, it is Xanthe who comes to the rescue. When Debbie gets a bad result for her first test, she decides to go to a therapist. There, however, she is told she only has anxiety issues, and then feels even worse than before.

Debbie dreams about the accident in which James, a young man with whom Maeve had been having a relationship, was killed by the PTO shaft on a tractor. Maeve had been devastated, throwing herself onto the body of her young lover when he was displayed in his coffin in his mother's pub. She then spiralled into a deep depression, leaving Debbie more and more helpless. When Debbie finds her mother banging her head and teeth on the stairs, it is clear Maeve needs help. Billy finds her a place in a hospital, although she is soon discharged, still not well. Finally she is admitted to St Pats, a psychiatric ward, but is released on 8 December, the traditional day of Billy's annual visit to Dublin. Maeve then demands that they go on a manic shoe-shopping trip, during which she manages to escape. Two hours later she is found "spooning a teenage homeless boy".

As Debbie does not remember her sexual interactions at all, her friends urge her to check whether she has an STD. She goes to a clinic and asks for a test to prove she is still a virgin. When this turns out to be impossible, she abandons any further action in this respect.

It is now December and heavy snow has fallen in the village, making travel to university impossible. Xanthe manages, however, to visit and

	<p>starts a relationship with a boy who used to go to school with Debbie and whom she had always admired from afar, but had never even spoken to. Xanthe finds Maeve interesting, and her writing extraordinary. This annoys Debbie. When Xanthe also starts flirting with Billy, Debbie asks her about the boyfriend, to whom Debbie thinks Xanthe should be faithful. Xanthe, however, laughs it all off. Finally Debbie gets to speak to the boy and he turns out to be utterly disappointing, a bore. Debbie cannot take it anymore, insults Xanthe and runs off.</p> <p>Debbie ends up on Billy's caravan roof, gazing at the stars and nearly freezing to death. She senses somehow that something is not right. She looks into the caravan and discovers Billy is about to hang himself. She panics when she cannot break open the windows, but then all of a sudden Maeve appears with a hammer. Together, they rescue Billy, who isn't in the least pleased that they interfered. Maeve tells Debbie about when she had dreamed about young Billy making a sleeping draught for his mother. Since she needed it so much, he made an extra effort, resulting in her being given an overdose. When Debbie tries to talk about this with Billy, he denies it all, gets angry, not least with what he sees as the 'dream madness'.</p> <p>Debbie has a therapy session with Audrey and cleans Audrey's bathroom in return. Audrey hadn't heard yet about Billy's accident. When Debbie finally gets round to telling Audrey, she collapses into Audrey's arms. She then spends the night on Audrey's couch and is urged to talk to Billy. She tells Billy about the microscopic images of snowflakes she has seen and somehow that enables her to ask him about his youth and his mother's death.</p> <p>After their row, Debbie and Xanthe soon become friends again and Debbie moves into Xanthe's flat. They have lunch with Xanthe's mother, but Debbie doesn't like her and wonders how Xanthe can be the daughter of such an awful person. Xanthe, however, argues that she and her mother are alike, denying any claim of being a better person.</p> <p>An outing to a small family house on an island binds all the ties together: the relationships between Maeve and Billy, between Debbie and Audrey, and between Debbie and Xanthe. Debbie goes swimming with her mother, and she and Billy gaze at the stars. Tell me a story, he says. In this way, the story comes full circle.</p> <p><b>CHARACTERS</b></p> <p><b>Debbie</b> She is the main character, 18 years old and starting university. She is not prepared for life in the big city at all as she had previously only visited Dublin once a year, and is now plunged into university life, where she struggles to fit in. We find out more about what she learned from Uncle Billy: gazing at the stars from the top of his caravan, where he told her mythological stories. But as the story unfolds, she has to deal with all sorts of issues from her past and is heading for depression, which the student counsellor prefers to call anxiety.</p>
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<b>Mam/Maeve</b>	Maeve has raised Debbie without a father, whose identity is unknown. She attaches great importance to her dreams and sees them as connected to other people. In her words, one can dream other people's lives. She pays little attention to her daughter's fragile state. She had found a young lover, only 6 years older than her own daughter, but when he was killed in an accident, she plunged into a deep depression, although later seems to recover quite well after therapy sessions with Audrey.
<b>Billy</b>	He is Debbie's uncle and cares a great deal for her. His life is all about the farm and he is the person keeping it running. He is helped by Debbie, but most of all by James and, after James' death, by his younger brother, Mark. Billy played an important role in supporting Debbie in her youth, but he himself has his own troubles. Seeing that he cannot prevent Debbie's pain makes him feel he lacks the spirit to live. Later, however, he decides to embrace his special gift, as a kind of healer.
<b>James</b>	Little is known of James, apart from his love for Maeve. He remains in the shadows of the story, although his death is the catalyst for Maeve's deep depression.
<b>Xanthe</b>	She meets Debbie during the introductory week at university. She is beautiful and smart, and has rich parents. But she struggles because her parents do not seem interested in a loving and caring relationship. This makes her feel depressed, even when on a yoga course in Tibet, and she also has anorexia.
<b>Audrey</b>	Debbie's former piano teacher who is now a therapist. She has overcome her alcohol addiction, knows how people can struggle in life and shows she is well able to handle therapy sessions with Maeve and Debbie. She was in the same school class as Billy, and at the end of the story they start to connect.
<b><i>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NOVEL</i></b>	
<b>Point of view</b>	The story is told in the first person from the perspective of the main character Debbie, who narrates her story in the present tense.
<b>Time and setting</b>	The story is told more or less in 'real time'. It starts with Debbie going to university after the summer holidays and takes places over a period of a few months, with the main anchor point being Christmas. The plot slows down in time after James dies, and makes time more a part of the story.  The story is set in modern-day Ireland. Debbie goes to university in Dublin and lives about 45 minutes by train from the city.
<b>Structure</b>	The story is more or less linear in time, with some flashbacks to explain the history of Debbie's family. It describes how Debbie does not fit in at university, being from a rural background and a farmer's family. The main issue, however, is how Debbie has to adapt at a personal level, coming from a background with a strange mother and an uncle who tries to protect her. She looks for people outside her family to help her. The book consists of 55 mostly short chapters describing scenes that are full of action and developments. Each chapter has a title, ranging

<p><b>Language and style</b></p>	<p>from an obvious title such as ‘Cover girl’ (about Xanthe) to more poetic titles such as ‘Where water dreams’.</p> <p>Both the language and style can be described as very direct and straightforward. They amplify Debbie’s growing anxiety and her struggle to cope with the life that lies ahead of her. This can be seen in some quotations that demonstrate the author’s individual and often witty style:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Don’t come crying to me if you end up clinging to a capsized mind like your mother.” (Billy to Debbie when she lets Mam interfere with her dream);</li> <li>• “If you set out to look for dicks everywhere you’re going to find a lot of them.” (Debbie in her literature class);</li> <li>• “Nights out mean drinking and drinking is like taking a holiday from my head.” (Debbie explains why she drinks so much on a night out);</li> <li>• “I find it comforting to wear clothes that already have a history of their own. I’m really fucking happy.” (Debbie to herself after she moved in with Xanthe).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Title and motto</b></p>	<p>Debbie is called ‘snowflake’ by Billy. This nickname is obviously from her childhood as Debbie replies “Don’t call me like that... I have grown up”. There are many more references to snowflakes, including a chapter entitled ‘Snowflakes’. The snowflakes referred to are microscope photographs of the structure of snowflakes. The beauty of these images helps Billy to open up to Debbie after his attempted suicide, with the fact that it is not known how snowflakes get their unique crystal structure being mentioned. There is also the bedtime story Maeve told about a speck of dust that turned into a snowflake every night when she fell asleep.</p> <p>The act of sleep can be seen as a motto carrying the book and connecting it to the theme of depression. When Debbie or Maeve fall asleep, they start dreaming, not dreams of their own, but dreams in which they enter into someone else’s head, and dreams of impossible realities. Sleep is one of main mottos in the book; sleep is when Debbie gets into other people’s heads and starts dreaming about, for example, the accident in which James got killed. She has inherited this tendency from her mother, Maeve, who keeps a diary of her dreams. The act of sleep shows Debbie’s mind becoming crushed under the weight of depression.</p>
<p><b>Symbols</b></p>	<p>The book starts and ends with Debbie and Billy telling each other stories about <i>stars</i>, based on Greek mythology. These symbols are connected to ancient stories, and Billy has a great interest in them. He wants to help Debbie in life, and the oral tradition of storytelling is one of his ways of doing so. The ‘wishes’ (daisies) that Debbie brings when she goes to see Billy in the evening and they lie on top of his caravan are connected to this storytelling.</p> <p><i>Dreams</i> undoubtedly have a symbolic function by connecting the real and conscious world to the world of dreams and the unconscious, with the unconscious being so important in this deeply depressed family.</p> <p><i>The ‘gift’ of Billy</i> when he acts as ‘the man with the stick’ is another example of ‘more than meets the eye’ and ties in with the story’s rural background. Other examples – not specifically referring to a unique</p>

## Themes

incident or situation, but merely describing the impact on day-to-day life – include the references to the ancient burial mound (where Debbie was conceived) and sea shells.

The main theme is *depression*. Debbie is told that “Anxiety is a fancy word for worrying and worrying is not a medical condition”. Nearly all the characters suffer from this. Everyone has to fight her or his own battle, and all of them are shown to be vulnerable. While other people’s help can be welcomed and allowed, some relationships are restrictive, such as the relationship between Maeve and Debbie, both of whom need external help from Audrey.

Since Debbie’s depression is at the heart of the novel, it is also a *coming-of-age* story. Debbie needs to find a place away from the madness of her mother and her dreams. Her wish to become part of a student community is reflected in various ways, including in the fact that she sometimes drinks too much and, as a result, is not even aware of having had sex.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Nealon is a young Irish writer and studied English literature at Trinity College Dublin. Before writing *Snowflake*, her debut novel, she wrote several short stories. She lives on the family farm.



She has won the following prizes:

- 2021: Winner of Sunday Independent’s ‘Newcomer of the Year’ award;
- 2017: Winner of the prestigious Sean O’Faolain International Short Story Competition.

The film and television rights to *Snowflake* were sold when the book was first published, but nothing is yet known about the planned production.

## REVIEWS

“She elegantly critiques modern-day sexual mores in the novel, taking in everything from virginity to one-night stands and the paradoxical elements of her generation’s attitudes to sex.”

Edel Coffey, *The Irish Times*, 8 May 2021

“I very much enjoyed the time I spent in Debbie’s world. Nealon’s developed complex yet relatable characters and tackles very real issues but balances any rawness with an element of whimsy.”

*Debbish.com*, blog of 17 June 2021

“Debbie is a very likeable character. Her innocence is endearing - she

makes so many mistakes as she comes out of her rural shell but you're rooting for her all the way. She's also quite funny - her witty repartee with Billy and self-deprecating observations made me laugh: '*Anyone else from the country is my competition. There's only room for one gobshite from the back-arse of nowhere.*'"

Peter Boyle, *Goodreads*, 12 September 2021

"*Snowflake* is much stronger in its study of mental health, particularly the way the novel addresses the silence and shame around depression, addiction and suicide in Irish culture. As Debbie puts it: 'It is socially acceptable to be an alcoholic in our parish as long as you don't get treatment for it.'" Meadhbh McGrath, *Independent.ie*, 14 May 2021

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In an interview (Shondaland) Louise Nealon explains the importance of dreams "that didn't belong to me". This is described by the interviewer as a mystical concept. How do you feel about this theme. Is it fantasy? Does it strengthen the story or unsettle the reader?
2. That same Shondaland interview mentions the theme of generational trauma. How childhood defines the older adult, who then interacts with the next generation. Do you agree with the author that it is indeed an important theme, or can we look at this subject from a different angle (such as the fact that such experiences are inevitable in a story where several generations are present).
3. Debbie thinks Xanthe is perfect. And when Xanthe visits Debbie's village, she starts seeing things in other people (like Maeve) that Debbie cannot acknowledge. But when Xanthe starts flirting with Billy, Debbie becomes angry and behaves destructively towards Xanthe. This may seem like normal behaviour, but is in reality extreme. The two of them make up again very soon afterwards. How would you compare Xanthe to Debbie? And is their relationship sufficiently realistic in this novel.
4. The majority of reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Is this because it is a debut and critics love the simple theme of the characters' struggle and the 'honesty' of the rural background? Or because the novel radiates a simple structure, elevating the darkness of the subject of depression into a bearable lightness? Can you think of any flaws in this novel?
5. Debut authors such as Louise Nealon and Sally Rooney (*Normal People*) definitely have a positive vibe. A lot of details in these books coincide: young students, coming-of-age, a horrible mother and a rural Irish background.  
Do you see the connecting of such authors in reviews or comments as helping you to appreciate the book, or is it more a case of clever public relations?
6. Debbie has no awareness of her sexual relations as they are drowned in a mist of alcohol. Where do you think this behaviour comes from?

7. The book has a simple structure, with extremely short chapters and sometimes even a 'telegraphic' style. The frequent references to 'snowflake' give the book a light touch. However the themes are very confrontational and at times even destructive for the characters. How does Nealon's style influence the reading experience?
8. Debbie gets drinking lessons from Billy. What brings Billy to this point? Is her drinking habit worse than his? Maybe there is a generational difference in their alcohol problem? Or does some difference in their characters lie beneath this?

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

Another young female author's debut about a vulnerable young woman: Kirsty Cape, *Careless* (2021)

A young girl placed in care falls in love with a boy who does not really care about her. And her foster parents are more interested in the financial benefits they receive for taking care of her.

Another story about a young Irish woman: Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn* (2009)

A young woman leaves her home in Ireland and emigrates to New York. There she struggles to make a life on her own, falling in love and making plans for the future. Then all of a sudden her sister dies, and her mother needs her back home again.

Another great Irish writer: John Boyne, *The Absolutist* (2011)

A young man does not want to continue serving in the madness of the trenches in the First World War and faces the ultimate penalty.

### **SOURCES**

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Accessed: 16 May 2022

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Senia's Department of English Literature will be happy to receive any comments you may have regarding this reader's guide.

If you are particularly enthusiastic about a specific book you have read recently, let us know because we can then consider including it in next year's literature list.

Please forward any recommendations you may have to [engels@senia.nl](mailto:engels@senia.nl)

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