

# Elaine Feeney

'A gorgeous gift of a novel,  
hopeful and full of humanity'

DOUGLAS STUART,  
AUTHOR OF *SHUGGIE BAIN*



HOW TO  
BUILD A BOAT

**VINTAGE**



## About the Author

**Elaine Feeney** is a writer from the west of Ireland. Her 2020 debut novel, *As You Were*, was shortlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize and the Irish Novel of the Year Award, and won the Kate O'Brien Award, the McKitterick Prize, and the Dalkey Festival Emerging Writer Award. Feeney has published three collections of poetry including *The Radio Was Gospel* and *Rise*, and her short story *Sojourn* was included in *The Art of The Glimpse: 100 Irish Short Stories*, edited by Sinéad Gleeson. Feeney lectures at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

ALSO BY ELAINE FEENEY

Poetry

*Where's Katie?*

*The Radio Was Gospel*

*Rise*

Fiction

*As You Were*

Elaine Feeney

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HOW TO BUILD A BOAT

VINTAGE

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*There are some times when I'm in a big forest and I don't know where I'm going. But then somehow I come to the top of a hill and I can see everything more clearly. When that happens it is really exciting.*

Maryam Mirzakhani

# Prologue

Jamie said: When I grow up I will be as tall as these trees and he sprawled fast like a salamander along a trunk. He climbed to the first branch when Eoin said: Whoa, Jamie, careful, and lifted the boy back to the ground.

Eoin, Jamie said, did you know that resin from trees makes arrow tops and they are so hard they can go right through you?

No, I didn't know that, Eoin said.

Jamie nodded furiously then dragged his damp nose along the red sleeve of his anorak, saying: Did you know that trees turn into all the things?

Tall trees were Jamie's current favourite: the Scots pine matured fast, lived for centuries and housed red squirrels. Jamie loved the colour red. He also loved patterns, books with dust jackets, cats, rain that came with wind, the curvature of objects, Edgar Allan Poe and rivers.

Jamie hated sunny days and the red sky that slung about the trees today was a good sign that a shower threatened. He liked rain pelting his face, soaking the layers of his clothes until they were sopping and heavy on his skin. Winter was Jamie's favourite season, November his favourite month, for November was predictable: nothing happened but a heavy darkness covering the town like a weighted blanket, and the sideways rain was ferocious. Winter was bare and unburdened, leaves disappeared from the big oaks and the River Brú, an unspectacular river, grey on a grey day, blue when the sun shone, became so white on a day of blanket fog, you could not see the opposite bank, an infinite and uninhabitable space.

The white fog excited Jamie, like an infinity of ghosts

(though he did not believe in ghosts)

infinity excited him (he believed in infinity)

and ferocious things terrified him, setting alerts flashing in the crevasses of his busy brain.

Soon Jamie and Eoin passed the stone-corballed ice-house. Its earthen domed roof was overgrown with tufts of grass and knotweed. Here, the river bends and carves into the horizon and Jamie liked to walk this far to get close to the estuary. And though he had never been on a boat to feel its energy beneath him, suddenly he was filled with an urge to do so.

They watched a man sail past in a currach and wave at them. Jamie considered whether the boat looked more like a black slug or an upside-down sea monster. He settled on likening it to a pirate hat he had to wear last year at Terry's sixth birthday party, just shortly after Terry arrived in Emory. The party hat's thin elastic pinched Jamie under his chin until it burned his skin. He ran outside screaming and eventually sat in silence at the end of their garden, watching rumbling cement trucks roll past to new estates until Eoin came and rescued him. And in turn, rescued the party. Terry's mam was saying: I am so sorry, and trying desperately to hug Jamie, his face mashed up against her.

He spun on the heels of his wellies and said: Can we come back tomorrow and go swimming in the river, Eoin? I think if we swim out far, he said, busy waving his arms behind his head, we can get to America. I'll wear armbands ... Then suddenly he grabbed Eoin by the back pocket of his denims: Watch out, Eoin, your laces are open, and he thought about kids in school who called them lacers.

Thanks, Eoin said, now *ssshhh* or you'll wake the river, and he put his finger to his lips and felt a sudden tightness across his chest. He unzipped his jacket and bent down to tie up his runners.

Jamie said: Rivers do not sleep, not the River Brú anyways and he blew his lips out and said *Brú* again. He liked the way it vibrated. It bursts sometimes, did you know that? My teacher said when that happens it makes a mess. And did you know that Brú means crushing? Jamie said, slamming the heels of his hands together. Did you know that? My teacher said that is what it means and that it is good because rivers are important, but also bad, because if it is strong, he dragged the nose again, it might crush fish and rocks and boats and that's not good, way way not good if everyone is gobbled up. He looked at the river and said: Or crushed.

Eoin was distracted by the band of pressure across his chest.

And I looked up *Brú* in the irishenglishenglishirish dictionary and it means hostel too, Jamie said, stopping abruptly and pulling at some eyelashes catching his eye. We have never been to a hostel, Eoin.

Jamie spoke to Eoin at length about various scenarios in any given moment, yet for a chatty child, his teacher said he did not like being among other children for sustained periods of time. She also said that when he had something to say, it was important he spoke fast in that very moment. Eoin argued that this is the way of all children, but nevertheless monthly targets were drawn up: Turn-Taking. Wait and Listen Time. Develop and Maintain Peer Relationships. Still, Jamie was often captured by something and blown off-guard and there were numerous events in his life that while often beautiful and spontaneous, were intense.

Eoin said: We've never been to a hostel because there's many people crammed together in dorms. You'd hate it.

How would you know if I have never been? Jamie replied.

Good question. But I've been, Eoin said. And they're very packed.

Like when you were a boy stuffed up with other boys in school?

Yes, Eoin said, like dorms and too much noise for a busy boy like you to sleep. Besides, you love tents. Now how about I bring you to the swimming pool tomorrow?

But unlike rainwater – Jamie hated the public swimming pool.

When Jamie began to speak in his third year, after making hardly a sound at all until then, he spoke in full and elaborate sentences, mostly poetry, and mostly the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe. He had found Poe in the library and was drawn to a bird perched on a blood-red cover. Jamie loved the library, the hum of the lights, the red carpet, the plastic yellow furniture. It was warm and smelled of feet. He gobbled up books and so his grandmother Marie took him every week, and afterwards for tea in the hotel on the Square with biscuits wrapped in tartan plastic. Marie was drawn to books with women on the cover and sometimes they were accompanied by men with loose ties around their shirtless necks and Jamie could never figure out how she read so many pages in one week and managed to clean every house in Emory. Walking home, he'd sing out: *Whether tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore, Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted* – until Marie banned Poe.

On the day of Jamie's birth, Marie rushed to Christ's College to alert her son that his girlfriend had gone into early labour. It was an oddly sunny day for February and Eoin was bored in a final-year Latin class. All spring everyone was saying: *Oh, your exams are just around the corner.*

But for Noelle Doyle and Eoin O'Neill this turned out to be untrue.

Noelle deferred her exams at the request of the girls' school, who insisted pregnant students did not attend class due to the message it gave to others. Her promising swimming career was paused.

When Marie banged at the class door, Eoin legged it, leaving his school bag and a lunch box full of chicken sandwiches behind. He never returned. For in the hectic moments after giving birth, Noelle Doyle's blood pressure rose. Machines beeped and the baby, swaddled like a warm shoulder of pork, was handed to Eoin as Noelle was taken to the Intensive Care Unit, where, fifty-five minutes later, surrounded by her large family, she died. Her family tumbled out through the doors in blind anger, and screamed at Eoin who held the baby tightly in his arms. One of Noelle's older sisters, the one with corkscrew curls, spat at him, then lunged at him in a half-hug, half-punch, common with grief until security guards separated them and he was still holding the baby when the family walked out of the hospital without looking back or noticing that underneath the small hat on his head, Jamie O'Neill had a mass of auburn hair and furrowed brow, just like his mother.

One New Year's Eve, close to the countdown, Eoin was sat by Jamie on the sofa. He muted the telly and watched an old clip of Noelle competing in a swimming gala. There had been hundreds of clips. Noelle laughing after school. Noelle walking in the woods. Noelle soaked to the skin on a picnic. Noelle pulling faces outside the cinema. Noelle painted like a Dalmatian at Halloween with a black-and-white hair wig. But after a rare night out with the soccer club, Eoin, angry and lonely and drunk in his small, dark living room, deleted the phone's contents. After which, he placed his phone on the laminate floor of the two-up-two-down and smashed it hard under the heel of his foot. After which, he vomited. After which, he passed out until morning when he woke frantic and pacing about with a dry mouth and a pounding headache, and in a lather of sweat and overwhelmed with the desire to disappear. But Jamie woke, crept downstairs and began asking so many questions that Eoin had no choice but to recover and get on with the getting on a young boy requires. And for years after, Eoin replayed each deleted clip in his mind before he'd fall into a fretful sleep, until the clips grew so hazy and faint and there came a time when Eoin couldn't visualise Noelle's face at all,

and though he tried to (re)build it:

smile, red hair, eyes, freckled nose, wide shoulders  
parts of her vanished until it was finally impossible to recreate her.

The swimming-gala clip had survived as it had been uploaded to her school's website.

So Jamie, watching his father's face change, grabbed the phone to look for himself. And as 2013 arrived, the year when he would turn seven, he met his mother, all two minutes and eight seconds of her, for the very first time.

*Noelle warms up by the side of the pool, whirls her arms and stretches her shoulders back, lifts dark bug goggles onto her broad face, fixes her hair under a red swimming hat, plucks her red Speedo costume from her thighs, does it once more, hops three times on the balls of her feet, finally moves her head side to side. The spectators are filled to the roof in the stands, mostly in school uniform, screaming her name, as though their lives depended on this one mad brief moment, and she dives, and moves quick like a red admiral in the summer sky.*

Jamie watches it every day and just before the end where she punches the air, he pauses the clip, then he plays it, and she turns to Jamie and smiles.

Eoin said: Careful running, not too fast, Jamie.

The early life of the boy had perplexed Eoin. His own boyhood experiences revealed a crude blueprint and soon Marie gathered books in the library for him, too,

but nothing felt right. The closest he'd come to a book making sense was *Unconditional Parenting* by Alfie Kohn. The synopsis was agreeable: you're a parent, deal with it, love unconditionally. No star charts. No nonsense rewards. The tall trees closed in and Eoin had a sudden urge to leave the woods, filling with intrusive thoughts about catastrophic moments –

as was his habit,

which meant he went out of his way to protect Jamie from accidents and accidentally from the world.

They walked along the yellowing path

quicker now

the boy bouncing and he ran ahead and hugged a tree tightly and this gave Eoin time to catch his breath.

Jamie said: Eoin, on the law of averages, boys break fewer bones than you think.

Not sure that's a true statistic, Jamie, Eoin replied. And let's not chance it.

I am not sure of the statistics on this per se, Jamie said.

Per se?

Yes, Latin, by or in itself or themselves; intrinsically, *it is not these facts per se that are important*. But it might be nice to climb a tree and look out across Emory, it is a myth what you always say ...

What? Eoin asked.

The young lose their lives in strange and unimaginable ways.

Eoin said: Another mouthful. But slightly more accurate.

Jamie scanned Eoin's face for clues. This was a finite sentence. He learned this about human beings early in life: sometimes people just stopped talking.

Soon Jamie grew tall and into the triangular shape of his mother, unusually broad for a young teenager. He had no desire to jump into the river or climb a tree. His mind wandered into other spaces. They did not go to the woods so much now as it was hard to get Jamie off screens and away from the large board in his room where he worked out the interconnection between much of what the day had given to him, including delights and problems.

But there remained one developing obsession together – watching films late into the night. And on nights when Eoin falls asleep, Jamie lifts his dad's arm up and escaping from his clutch, he throws an old blanket over him, before creeping upstairs to bed.

Jamie's school uniform hung on his bedroom door and the plastic covering was pinned with a small tag that read: For Collection: Jamie O'Neill. No Charge. Best of Luck, Jamie x

All of Jamie's clothes were laundered before first wear.

Vest. Jocks. Red. Good. Socks. Red. First sock. Second. Doctor Seuss. Cat. Hat. Elastic tight. Wait. Turn on Maryam Mirzakhani first. Wait. Think ... Think first, James ... If you are to ever whip up. Laugh at yourself for saying 'whip up'. Note the sound of the word, ship, cool whip, Family Guy, repeat it. Cool Whip. Rhymes with ship up. Good. Favourite colour? Red. Cats also. The colours of them. Fur. All of them. Marmalade ones. Hairless ones. Trousers. Yes. Yes. Good pleat. Good. Belt. Tight. Tighter. New hole, not great. Eoin insisted on doing with a fork. Level of exasperation with Eoin: Ten. Breathe. Shirt. White. Good. Tie. Red. Horrible. I do not like green eggs and ham ... ham ... I do not like. I do not. Make your bed. I do not LIKE ... Get up. Check the sky. Get up, put your feet on the ground like Eoin says. Circadian rhythm. Ground yourself. Good. Get up. Leg hairs. Count. Do that first, settle yourself. Body in space. Don't sing. Oh, sing. Get up then. Make it all even. All of it. Must be even or threes, even or threes. Good man. Don't wear the red socks, do not violate College rules on the first day. I wish ... I wish ... I wish I could complain to a manager, tell him I don't want to go to school ... what is the point?

Jamie played the day out in his mind,

and as his bedroom filled with rain sounds from a sensory machine Eoin picked up in Argos, the walls lifted to pink, reddened and reassured him that he was floating inside a lava lamp.

He wished the day

Monday

being an even date

twenty-six



in the year, however, of an odd number  
nineteen  
and an odd age, perhaps the oddest and most unlucky age of all  
thirteen  
the day would go according to plan.

Since he was born at three p.m., three was his lucky number, and he  
whispered *Good Morning* three times, stretched, then ran his hand along his  
leg and counted new hairs: Five. Six. Seven. Seven.

An odd number was no cause for celebration (unless it was three)  
so

he traced along a warm purple vein and pinched a hair between his finger  
and thumb and plucked it out of his body – a body which was dangerously  
volcanic like Kīlauea in Hawaii, a body that was erupting. He climbed out of  
bed with his arms stretched backwards, gripping the ladder like a gymnast  
before dismount. Jamie then ran his hand on neat piles of books on his  
bottom bunk.

When he started primary school, a slew of birthday invites arrived – polite  
pattern of parents, but soon they trickled to single figures. And by year two  
all the colourful invites stuffed in his school bag with monkeys or clowns and  
elastic writing in different-coloured inks, stopped altogether, aside from new  
boy Terry's outlier – and that had proved another disaster. At which time, the  
bottom bunk of Jamie's bed, once considered for sleepovers, was relegated /  
elevated for Jamie's Books of Great Importance. The books were left in piles  
along the bare mattress like tortoises with meticulous handwritten notes  
pressed on their immaculate covers: Date and Place of Publication. Date  
Started. Date Completed, Initial Reaction and most pressing – Jamie  
O'Neill's Star Ratings.

The Star Ratings were harsh and among the piles, only one book received  
five hand-drawn Jamie O'Neill Stars: *The Complete Tales and Poems of  
Edgar Allan Poe*.

From his bedroom window, he scanned the morning's sky over the  
identical tiled roofs. Marie's car was gone from next door and he stared at the  
sky ablaze with red;

Shepherd's warning.  
Shepherd's warning.  
Red sky at night  
delight.

Jamie switched on his computer and sat in his pyjamas, plucking the remaining hairs from his warm leg. Leg hair perplexed him. Eyebrows stopped sweat and Marie explained how pubic hair safeguards against infection, but he could not understand why he had to grow leg hairs. They were a nuisance, much like hairs on his top lip.

Maryam Mirzakhani's lecture on *Dynamics Moduli Spaces of Curves* opened on YouTube. She appeared, smiling. *These chalks are great*, she said, and Jamie smiled back at the woman with the pixie haircut and green jumper who made him feel safe as she scribbled on the board and spoke in an inspired flurry about flows of defined bundles while drawing beautiful shapes. She was the first woman Fields Medallist, a mathematician who wanted to be a writer, and when she worked, her daughter said, it was as though she were painting.

On Jamie's bedroom whiteboard were lists and extensive drawings of trees and bees and mad shapes of wheels crudely shaded in with black labelled 'mercury' ... and one list in tiny writing which read:

**Perpetual Motion Machines** – Design Notes (Binder under desk)  
Construction Notes (to be completed). Perhaps will have to consider downgrade to a motion machine that relies on a tiny amount of outside pressure to start motion

**Riemann** surfaces

Noelle swimming: Kinetic-energy created by a swimmer??

Billiards' Tables: Never ending ball motion (Avoid the pockets? Stuff the pockets. Create a table without holes?)

Various shades of red – Jamie-red (inspired by Yves Klein Blue and Vantablack)

Shakespearean insults (add to list daily)

Pine Cones as predictors of rain (Put more on windowsill. Give some to Marie)

Cynipid Wasps and Galls on Oak Trees

Puberty and volcanos and hairs

Three-dimensional jigsaws (Eiffel Tower next)

Where the energy of a dead person is stored??? Recreating energy ...

Footnote:

Colours and originality of colour invention is including, but not limited to, the intersection between art, design, science, nature and physics

Next door, Eoin was restless having spent the night tossing about the bed's flat sheet which ended up on the floor. The fibre pinheads of the bare mattress scratched and inflamed his skin. He picked up his phone and dropped it so many times throughout the night that he couldn't recall, and he was good at keeping count: his whole life had turned into measurements and timings. And while Sundaynightitis was a fever he was used to, this was different. Jamie was about to begin secondary school and Eoin was filled with whirling moments of the boy at different stages of life. He tried for hours to remember the first day he'd lost a tooth or his first step. He thought of the days that the boy never stopped chatting, and the times he had not listened back, or was short-tempered. And his regrets, coupled with anxiety, had kept him awake until he settled on a memory of Jamie making a daisy chain one June evening out on the green and gifting it to the scrawny neck of a stray cat.

Jamie! Lad ... you OK? Eoin said, sticking his head around his son's door. Heard you rummaging. What're you up to at this hour?

The uniform's grey material pooled on the carpet. The oversized blazer with its motto belonged to a different era. Eoin wanted to return it to the shop and say there was some mistake. He pulled the pin from the plastic and retrieved the note.

Jamie said: Yes, Eoin, I'm OK.

Big day, eh? Eoin said, folding the pink laundry tag over. He regretted his words. A build-up was the worst thing that could happen, birthday, Christmas, a trip – anything that incurred a countdown.

Eoin? Jamie said.

Yes?

I've been thinking about the route.

Want us to take the van? Eoin said. We can.

No, Jamie said, but the streets raced in my mind, and I notice that Marie is gone out cleaning already.

Did you want to say goodbye?

No, she said *Good Luck Jamie* yesterday ... Jamie stopped dead.

Eoin rubbed his eyes again. You'll be OK. I promise.

You can't make that promise, Eoin.

Maybe we should just take the van? I can drop you.

No, Jamie said.

Fair enough, Eoin said.

Eoin?

Yes?

I'm glad there's no women in the College.

Eoin laughed and said: You'll regret saying that.

I will not, Jamie said.

What are you watching? Eoin said.

I'm trying to figure out if Mirzakhani can help me apply the laws of surface geodynamics to build my machine and to get—

I thought you decided to let this go, Eoin said.

No, you decided I should let it go. If I can get to the stage in the swimming pool when Noelle was going at such ... at such speed ... then I'll figure out how to replicate her energy output. Or just create a machine that moves at the same speed in a continual motion, then maybe ...

Maybe what?

Jamie stopped again and grabbed a clump of his hair in a tight fist. Eoin lifted his son's hand from his hair and circled the boy's palm with his index finger. She's not coming back, Jamie, maths or machines won't bring her back.

Jamie tugged his hand free and he banged the space bar and Mirzakhani moved and drew a kind of lotus flower. Then she smiled. Jamie paused the screen again, and shouted: Of course she's not coming back, Eoin. I am not a fool. This is not some irrationality.

I know it's not an irrationality, just don't want you to get your hopes up.

My hopes? Jamie said.

Whatever you're trying to do, perpetual motion machines, your mam. Energy. Eoin yawned and squeezed the little ball he had made of the laundry tag.

Jamie hit the space bar a third time and Mirzakhani continued talking.

Fine, be like this, but for fuck's sake, Jamie, you can't meet her. The blood rushed from Eoin's head and the room spun. I know you miss her, he said, softer now.

How can I miss someone I have never met? Jamie said.

Grief was profoundly different for both humans. One felt an intense anger he had never recovered from, the other knew something was missing, a vacuum to where a mother should fit, and he had a fixed determination to fill it.