

An evening of Mongolian meanings



Looking Glass Books recently hosted an evening to launch Uuganaa Ramsay's book, 'Mongol' and to celebrate World Down's Syndrome Day on 21 March.

We've all heard the saying 'I might as well be in Outer Mongolia', and we've probably all heard people with Down's Syndrome referred to as 'Mongols' – in my far off childhood, this was the usual way to refer to someone with Down's; now it has become a term of abuse, 'hate speech' bandied about like 'gay', 'spastic' or 'lezzie'. Uuganaa Ramsay is in a unique position to talk about both aspects of the word, and this has inspired her to write 'Mongol.'

Looking Glass Books, surely the cosiest bookshop in Edinburgh, was packed with an enthusiastic audience for this event– from members of the Mongolian community in Edinburgh (some in national costume) to representatives of Down's Syndrome Scotland, whose CEO, Pandora Summerfield, introduced the evening. Mongolian vodka and a very beautiful cake were served, and added still more to the happy atmosphere.

Uuganaa grew up in a yurt in Mongolia – but not any old yurt; her parents were professionals (her father a vet), and their home was a cut above the rest, with elaborate decoration and many comforts. Nevertheless, they lived the traditional nomadic lifestyle, herding their cattle as generations before them had done. Uuganaa came to the UK on a teacher training scholarship, where she met and married her Scottish husband and had three children – the third was Billy, a child with Down's.

Uuganaa knew little about Down's before Billy arrived; within

three days he was diagnosed, and she and her family's lives changed forever. Uuganaa and her husband were devastated by the news. Help came in the form of Down's Syndrome Scotland, who put Uuganaa in touch with Jackie, a mother who had experienced her situation – this led to a friendship that is still strong today.

Tragically, Billy died after only three months. Uuganaa wanted to keep his memory alive, and also to investigate the use of the 'mongol' term, in the hope of raising awareness and acceptance of people with the condition. She also realised that there were few books written from the 'inside' of modern Mongolian society, or about Mongolian history. She decided to put this right.

As well as telling the story of Billy's short life and her subsequent work to educate people about Downs, Uuganaa read some very funny anecdotes from her book. Her parents, visiting the family to offer support in the days after Billy's birth, disappeared upstairs and were found in bed -they had no idea that it was ill-mannered in the UK to leave the room without saying goodnight. The first time that Uuganaa's husband complimented her on her tanned skin, she was affronted – in Mongolia a pale skin is a sign of affluence, and as a child she was not allowed to go out into the sunshine when her parents were tending to their animals – she was even given powder to keep her face white.

Uuganaa's book has been hugely successful, winning her the Scottish Association of Writers Non-Fiction Janetta Bowie Chalice and the Scottish Asian Women's 'Achievement Against All Odds' award. She has appeared on Good Morning Scotland. She speaks from the heart, and her natural warmth and charm ensure that anyone who hears her will not only never use the term 'mongol' in a derogatory way, but will also remember the short but precious life of her little boy Billy.

Submitted by [Rosemary Kaye](#)

