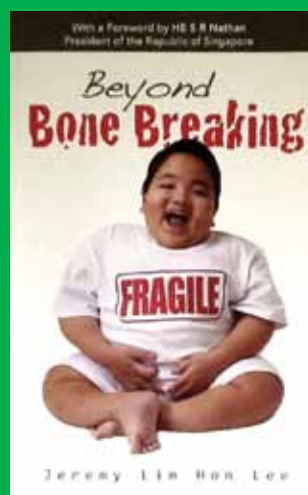


A Life Less Ordinary

By A/Prof Daniel Fung, Editorial Board Member



I always enjoy books written by Singaporeans simply because of the local context with events close to my heart. So when I was asked to review *Beyond Bone Breaking*, Jeremy Lim's autobiography of his 21 years of handling life in the shadow of osteogenesis imperfecta (OI) thus far, I took to it with little hesitation. That was after his namesake on our Editorial Board turned it down.

OI is a genetic condition with many names, medical types and a long history. First described in medical literature as far back as 1895, it has an even longer lineage in folk legend. It was rumoured that the Norse king Ivar the Boneless had a variation of this illness. Occurring in one of 20,000 births, it is not a common disease. This makes Jeremy's story unique, his adventures worth retelling, and his book the only one in Singapore chronicling the life of this "mindchamp". What Jeremy lacks in physical attributes, he more than makes up in mental strength. His writing betrays a hint of the pride he carries for having overcome his adversity and moving forward with his own catchphrase, "we cannot determine what life will bring but we can determine our life's journey".

The book is eminently readable and something that can be covered in a few days depending on how fast you want to plough through it. Parts of it were inspiring, other sections tedious, but mostly, it reflected the charm and wit of a person who had to endure much but also gained much in terms of experiences.

Jeremy opens his book by focusing on his OI in an experiential rather than clinical perspective, which serves to give some background to his difficulties and inabilities. He then describes his early education, which was fraught with difficulties in finding a suitable preschool and primary school that could accept him. This sets the stage for many of his subsequent achievements, and also some of the more unpleasant episodes in his life.

Jeremy speaks frankly about his experiences and relationships. In school, he is bullied (he also includes a section on how to deal with bullies). He also struggles with schoolwork and the possible impact of obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA). This was interesting for me as we often pick up children with

OSA who have attentional difficulties in school. Jeremy's junior college experience is also described, and he lets on that adolescents are much more understanding and supportive of the physically challenged compared to younger children.

He later realises that he is in charge of his own life – "if it is to be, it is up to me". He handles many disappointments and was encouraged by the people in his life. A stranger gives him an *angbao*, and teachers and principals support him. His academic skills and other talents are honed in a series of trainings, and this is telling of how his parents did not give up on him, but kept letting him try the things he enjoyed and excelled in.

He also devotes a chapter to the voluntary work he has done, including his work with National Kidney Foundation (NKF). This particular chapter said nothing of the controversy around NKF's fundraising, which was the biggest disappointment of the book. But perhaps he wanted to place the focus on the importance of volunteerism instead. He also recounts his writing stint for *Today* newspaper, and his never say die attitude is reflected in his striving to attain the National Youth Achievement Award.

He concludes his book by detailing his travels, and coming to the realisation that Singapore did not pay as much attention to the physically disabled as many other developed countries.

The practice of Medicine is not just about the treatment of medical illness, but about recognising the needs of individuals in living lives with dignity and advocating for the less fortunate. We can learn much from Jeremy's story in being more humane doctors.

I met Jeremy in person briefly at a Singapore Children's Society event several years ago, but did not get a chance to speak with him or give him an *angbao*. I wished that I had, for his story makes me recognise that the fragility of our lives, whether physical or emotional lies in whether we believe in ourselves and how our families can support us. Jeremy is the living epitome of the idiom, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me". In fact, words are the source of his strength and passion. Don't take my word for it, read the book yourself. **SMA**