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Book Review

Free Loaves on Fridays: The care system as told by people who actually get it

By Rebekah Pierre (editor)

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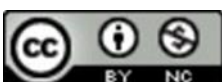
Reviewed by: Jim Goddard

Chair, The Care Leavers Association,
jim.goddard@careleavers.com

One sees content warnings everywhere. This book is no exception. Such a warning is probably more necessary for those who weren't brought up in the UK child care system than for those of us who were. The latter will be familiar with experiences which the former might find shocking. Indeed, reading of the inner lives of those raised in care can be startling. Their frequent invisibility in their own homes and in the wider world is often only altered when their behaviour raises problems for adults. One calls to mind George Eliot's words in *Middlemarch*: 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence' (Eliot, 1999, pp. 216-217). Hence the content warning.

Overall, the experience of reading this book is that of riding a rollercoaster of emotions. The wide range of experiences it encompasses, from joy and exhilaration to fear and isolation, reflects the subject matter and the method of the book's compilation. As Rebekah Pierre notes in her introduction, the usual process of being an editor involves difficult decisions as to what to exclude. Being familiar with the experience of rejection, she chose to exclude nothing. This could have been an editorial nightmare, but turned out to be inspired, since it produced a book with such a diversity of written experiences and formats that it's possibly the closest thing we'll ever have to an encyclopaedia of the care experience.

Nor is this simply a compendium on the current care system. The age range of the authors is wide, the youngest being 13 and the oldest 68, such that the care system described therein stretches back to the 1960s. The accounts capture



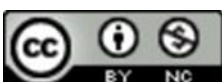
some of the commonalities across these decades and some of the major changes. The biggest change is the modern dominance of foster care, and we get multiple accounts of the foster care experience. This is particularly welcome because older accounts of the care system have – understandably, due to the dominance of residential care before the 1980s – tended to focus on children’s homes.

Importantly, the money raised from the sale of the book goes to two charities who work closely with children in care and care leavers, Article 39 and the Together Trust. Carlyne Willow and Lucy Croxton, representing each organisation respectively, write a well-informed scene-setting foreword on the past and present of the current care system. They make explicit the implicit message of this book, which is that society needs to do better by its most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Following Rebekah Pierre’s introduction, the book is divided into three main sections. The first features stories and essays of various lengths by a range of authors; some well-known, such as Lemn Sissay and Sally Bayley. One benefit of this diversity is that it renders comparisons meaningless. What comes across most in these accounts is their individuality. Even the styles differ hugely, ranging from the deeply personal (Lisa Luxx) to the more analytical (Kirsty Capes; Ben Perks). There is also a piece by the editor, Rebekah Pierre, using her teenage diary as the entry point for a discussion of her experiences of her family, her life in care, and leaving care. It is a good example of the contrast between the bland bureaucratic labelling common within the care system and the complex reality of individual human lives.

The next section contains poems and reflections on different themes, such as care and connection, loss and success. The range of experiences stretches from the negative and damaging to the soothing and life-affirming. If one wants a quick pick-me-up one should head for the section on ‘Celebrating Care, Love and Connection’. It is impossible not to be moved by these examples of what the care system for children feels like when it’s done right. It also suggests that children in care are more likely to remember acts of kindness than those who can afford the delicious luxury of taking such things for granted. Children in care remember goodness acutely, partly, of course, because they often have much experience of its opposite. If there is a single lesson here it is that details matter, that small things you did for a child which you may have forgotten can light up a life for years.

Often with writing, a few paragraphs can have more meaningful content than entire novels. Even short pieces in this collection – poems or letters – contain lines of truth that leap off the page. Sometimes these truths are half-hidden, and you don’t need to know the details. This applies to HG’s account of finding a grey hair at the age of 35 and feeling gloriously happy at the discovery. As all the best writers know, less is more.



The third main section contains letters to various audiences: to oneself, family and friends, professionals, politicians, and the public. These, too, contain much gratitude, along with revelations of horrifically poor care. They are perhaps the part of the book that offers the most educative value to foster carers, social workers, schoolteachers, and others who engage directly with looked after children.

The final part of the book contains a variety of useful resources and signposts. This adds to its quality of feeling like a miniature guide, something to carry around if one wants a useful primer on what's been going on in the care system.

For those of us with a spirit of adventure, the usual reaction to being on a rollercoaster is to want another go straight away. That was my response to this book. So, if you feel similarly adventurous, buckle up safely and enjoy the ride.

References

Eliot, G. (1999). *Middlemarch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

About the reviewer

Now retired, Dr Jim Goddard was a senior lecturer in social policy at the University of Bradford and has been chair of the board of trustees of The Care Leavers Association since 2010. www.careleavers.com

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book

