

book reviews

"They..." Challenging Australian Lifestyle Myths...

Burnside Child and Family Welfare Services

North Parramatta, NSW, 1998

'I only know my background from my files...'

'Everybody was watching to see what I was doing, not watching what was going on to make me that way...'

'The sad thing is when you come into care, you need love and you need someone to care about you but that doesn't happen...'

'It's a bit like them and us... instead of us all being the one people. You feel like a second class citizen, you really do...'

'Hope. We had big hope that we can go back to our family...'

The first thing to hit you is the grief and friendless isolation. The second is the courage; these two are intertwined. Contrary to popular myths, courage is not embodied in some tough guy who performs some feat or other and gets media acclaim for it. Courage is much quieter; it is the sheer thankless task of just getting through adversities and sitting down with a cup of tea afterwards. Courage is also exposing your insides, and in this case, not only to someone else, but also to the whole world. Such offerings are to be respected as gifts.

This book consists of a compilation of selected in-depth interviews with people whose lives have finally been assisted in some way by workers at Burnside, as well as other services, after long journeys in their lives of hardship, privation, trauma, abuse and profound losses.

On opening this book, the authors are looking at you. On reading it you are privileged to be looking back, face to face, in a kind of conversation, interacting with those to whom you are listening. The integrity of the people interviewed has been tastefully well-preserved, with minimal changes in the editing to syntax or expression. The immediacy of the content is all the more powerful because, when speaking about their experiences, the authors are frequently re-living them, as evidenced in the retention of the present tense in the text. The well-chosen, sometimes startling, photography does not let you avert your gaze.

We are given Margaret's story, in which she describes how her sheltered life as a child did not prepare her for the death of her mother, or the long, harsh years of living with confused, violent husbands, whose alcoholic manipulations utterly determined her life and seeped into her own sense of self blame and inability to cope. She describes how she lost her first children and felt that as a mother she had failed them. Still bound up in self-punishment, her next life situation was no better. Her second husband ended his life in an alcoholic stupor with a cerebral haemorrhage while her little boys were in his house, on a court-ordered access visit.

With her boys and nothing but a bunch of green garbage bags, she asked for help in Care Force: 'The Catholic nuns made you feel good. They told us that we were all special and important. I have never forgotten that.' With some support, counselling, personal validation for her strengths and meeting many other women in similar situations, she became 'strong.' 'I stand up now, I don't quiver in a corner anymore... I have got my own person... you can't hurt other people just to help yourself, you just can't.' Margaret now sees her eldest children again and has three other children in addition to her boys. She has finally attained acceptance and love for herself in a good marriage.

Sally tells us how she lived in full-time out of home care for ten years, moving from place to place since her father left his wife and five children and her mother 'just went down hill and screwed us up'. Sally believed that her mother's erratic, violent behaviour was normal – she had never seen anything else. When her mother was eventually admitted to hospital, Sally went into a children's home. 'We had thirty two staff members in eighteen months there. We were supposed to have the same house parents for two years but they ended up staying only two months. We'd been in heaps of foster families before that – about twenty, probably more. So there was never any stability – people just kept coming in and coming in, wanting you to open up and talk.'

Sally shares her experiences of a string of placements and detention centres, the importance of one or two attachments she formed along the way, and how she now feels about herself. 'But I don't know what love is and like the concept is really hard for me to grab.' One gets the feeling that she will find it, though, because she's now giving it out in working with other young people, with insights and understandings from her own experiences.

Heang talks of life in Australia as her second life. She lost her first in Cambodia, fleeing from Phnom Penh where she once worked a high school teacher, driven by the army of the Pol Pot regime, watching her children die of starvation and leaving family behind, never to see them again. Heang tells of the death all around, everywhere, and how 'you have to hide your identity all the time, the authorities trying to trick you' – watching every move as with thousands of others from the cities, they were herded like cattle, forced to continually move along the roads, often with no food and little water. Heang describes how she had to hide her literacy, her education, pretending to be unable to read, for if this was discovered, 'then your name goes on the list to be killed.' She was forced into many hours of manual labour each day, digging trenches, doing men's jobs, not only women's work.

In three years Heang lost her father, mother and two sons, who died of starvation. 'We all so weak from no food... when my husband try to bury his son, he couldn't stand up to support his weight.' At one time, Heang was too ill to move and had to lie by the side of the road, for one month, while her daughter scrounged for scraps of food to keep them alive. We learn of how, after the Vietnamese took over, trust and hope for life in Cambodia were already too shattered to put any faith in governments of any sort. Heang, her husband and now two daughters barely managed to escape at night across the border into a Thai refugee camp. Life in a refugee camp is very hard and overcrowded, but eventually they were sponsored out to Australia.

Frequently for refugees, resettlement in Australia represents yet another life of hardship, as alienation and acclimatization to a strange country requires many years of adjustment. Heang responds to the common criticisms directed at migrants who share a language and choose to live in the same areas, explaining that they live close together because they have no other choice, relying on friends for information, assistance, and simply communication for survival.

But Heang worries about 'nothing' now. 'I've gone past everything... I have been through all the hard things, many kinds of experience in suffering, even from different political parties, different governments. Anything that might happen here, I can consider just a small thing. I have been through much harder than this.'

These are just three examples of glimpses into ten authors' lives. Far too often, we tend to be busily concerned with policies, programs, implementations, evaluations and tight budgets. We risk overlooking the fundamental reasons for our work in the first place – the meanings of lived human experiences.

It is important too, not to romanticize tragedy, hardships and others' struggles, for in doing so, we may just as firmly place them out of focus, on the margins, as if we had disregarded them.

This book neither romanticizes nor underplays people's lives. Its poignancy is distilled in its presentation, which, except for a brief preface, consists entirely of the authors' own words, their own depictions. 'They...' are the authors, unadulterated and (thankfully) uninterpreted.

This book offers a broad scope for public and professional readership alike. Its stated purpose is to offer insights which may help to counteract popularly held misunderstandings about disadvantage and its causes in our society. (From the Preface by Rhonda Stein, Chief Executive Officer, Burnside.) It is all too easy to skim surfaces and make snap judgements about hardships with a narrow focus on an individual. Myopic views need to be both deepened and broadened. Deepened, to discover what it's like to 'walk a mile in someone else's shoes', and broadened to keep in mind the bigger picture, of how human suffering of all kinds can be structurally sanctioned by societal and cultural forces, through omission, commission, avoidance, or vested interests. This book achieves its purpose.

Use of story and narrative is a powerful tool for the act of telling and listening, but there should not be an end to it. This is not simply a book of stories about courage and the tenacity of the human spirit for its own sake, although that is inherent in its production. 'They...' the open phrase of the title is apt, for it begs our reflection, suggestive of a loop in which we are brought back to look at the relations of 'They...' to whom? To us, *others* ... but are we? No, there is no opposition implied here, but a conjunction. Rather, it is 'They...' *and*...

Now, how are we going to realize these conjunctions? What are we going to do with such gifts?

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Signs of safety

A solution and safety oriented approach to child protection casework

Andrew Turnell & Steve Edwards

A Norton Professional Book. John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd. 216 pp.

This book, written by two very experienced Western Australian child protection practitioners, should have wide international appeal for professional workers in systems dealing with reports of child abuse and neglect. For them it is a must read. Workers in other systems and others affected by child protection practice will also find it a useful guide to the elements of intervention. Anyone interested in the solution focused brief therapy work developed by de Shazer, Berg and others over the last fifteen years or so, will find it a book of very interesting and useful applications of the approach.

The signs of safety approach to practice tackles the difficult area of meeting legislated requirements, and the potential coercive power this entails, and engaging reporters and the reported, parents and children, in constructive action to achieve safety while setting the stage for positive outcomes. This often entails seeing and doing things differently which the solution focused approach with its particular approach to questions – exception questions, miracle questions, etc – assists greatly. The approach is also developed around the idea of partnerships between the professionals involved and