

## Book Review

**Darren McGarvey, (2017) *Poverty Safari: Understanding the anger of Britain's Underclass*, Edinburgh: Luath Press, Paperback, pp 224, £7.99, ISBN 1912147033**

In *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* Darren McGarvey (aka Loki) sets out to give voice to the feelings, concerns and anger of people from deprived communities all around Britain. McGarvey uses the book to explore his current truths, refreshingly not by attempting to present definitive answers, but instead by offering observations and understandings based on his own experiences with what feels like an invitation to explore and discuss what he airs. An immense power of the book for me is in McGarvey naming and articulating a long rumbling sense of things not being as polar as they are regularly presented; where a desire to make the complex simple often means our human messiness goes unacknowledged, with packaged 'solutions' based on a particular ideological viewpoint touted as the answer before question framing is ever adequately considered. This polar thinking is compounded by people's truths so often going unarticulated due to the weighted assumptions of deemed experts being prioritised and/or for fear or experience of folk being 'unheard', 'ridiculed' or having perceived or real negative consequences for themselves, communities or organisations they might be associated with.

Throughout the book, McGarvey demonstrates a powerful level of humanness; a vulnerability which I believe we all need to be willing to engage with if we are to move on from current cultural expectations of having to always appear in the 'right', to have answers, and to be busy 'fixing' or, alternatively, cynically criticising.

In *Poverty Safari* McGarvey embraces our messiness, alerts us to the dangers of 'othering' and talks to a number of themes which are very relevant to Community Education, and which reflect much of the work I've been involved with at The Junction [www.the-junction.org](http://www.the-junction.org)

Developing our own potential alongside working for systemic change

Too often, these are seen as separate, exclusive ideological approaches rather than intertwined. At The Junction we endeavour to explore with young people the linkages between their personal experiences and systemic factors which influence these. However these linkages aren't always welcomed by other partners. For example, we were recently involved in a Sleep Research project but were unable to complete because, for many of the young people we work with, the issue wasn't only about 'caffeinated drinks', good food choices or screen time but also about overcrowding, homelessness and safety, which were deemed to be beyond the scope of the project, whose focus was *only* on individual choices and behaviours. McGarvey heads into this arena and challenges an either/or approach, encouraging us instead to consider what could be within our sphere of influence, while also recognising what is structural and therefore needs collective effort.

*The use of people's stories*

McGarvey's use of his own story is a clear example of just how powerful individual stories can be, but he also warns of how people and their stories can be used and abused, noting the parameters of what they may be permitted to comment on and what they are not. In our work at The Junction, I've been aware of an ongoing tension in how we support folk to share their stories if they choose to in a way which is helpful to them, but which doesn't make them media fodder and avoids their use through the traditional media narrative lens as 'examples of folk who have made it despite X, Y or Z.....so why can't others?'.

*Placing relationships at the heart of all we do*

McGarvey describes the concept of 'centre' as a verb rather than a noun, and this provoked a sense in me of another way of considering how we relate to each other. At The Junction, young people consistently tell us it is their experience of being at the centre of activities, valued as contributors rather than consumers, that works for them. Similar relationship-based experiences look to have benefited McGarvey too, though I am conscious of the fact that this is not necessarily a usual experience for people and

that it is much harder for young people now to have access to the services and benefits McGarvey was able to access as a young person.

Finally, I very much recommend *Poverty Safari* as a book worth exploring. I found it honest, deep and, despite the intensely graphic descriptions of tough experiences, an immensely accessible read. I hope it encourages more of us to allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to regularly speak our evolving truths, and I welcome McGarvey's continuing contribution to encouraging this deeper exploration.

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*Sam is Co-Author of a new manual; PEERworks: A Guide to Collaborative Working. PEERworks is a practical and informative guide to new ways of working that help distribute power and share decision making. Click on the link below to find out more, download your free copy or to order a hard copy.*

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