

Review

Edinburgh Recovery Activities, (2020) *Letters from Lockdown*, pdf available from Concept website

A lot has been written about the impact of Covid19 but much of it relies on a ‘stock of ready narratives’ (Kehily, 1995 p. 28) that we draw on when we are telling stories about our lives. We both forge our individual narratives and take part in public narratives where the themes to be drawn on, the facts and circumstances that are considered important and the information that advances the story, can form an ideological straitjacket within which we conform. This means that the majority of narratives about the impact of the Covid19 pandemic emphasise the individual and not the structures within which we are embedded. The stories told are about how individual behaviour - mixing in crowds, not wearing masks, failing to socially distance - causes the spread of the virus but the alternative narrative - that living in poverty in poor housing increases the likelihood of catching the virus - is suppressed. In my view, the great strength of this short collection is that the authors have broken out of this straitjacket and told stories that create new narratives about the experiences of lockdown that are not focused on individual behaviour alone.

These six stories are all unique but there are connections within and between each one. *Judgement Bingo* (Ruby Tuesday) pokes fun at self-righteous anger directed at others and awards ‘smug points’ to those who look down on their neighbours. This story makes you laugh whilst at the same time making the serious point that when judgements are made at the micro level, we let the Government off the hook for its poor handling of the pandemic.

Shielding (Stephen Christopher) tells the story of a man who has fallen apart during the lockdown, but it narrates all of his life instead of just his current state. This focus shows how he can still assert his agency even in the face of the visiting social worker’s poor assessment of him.

Dear Manic Pandemic 2020 (Jeanette Cousland) is a wonderful rant about all the things we are expected to do to keep safe, and the anxiety this causes. It also illustrates the

impact of the strange tales circulating about where Covid19 came from and asks: ‘was it a plan-demic or a revolution?’ Jeanette has a great way with words.

Some Birds are Real (The White Rabbit) starts out as an everyday story of the tackling of an overgrown garden but quickly takes you down the equivalent of Alice’s rabbit hole into a world that seems to be a simulation of the 41st version of an old civilisation – good fun but with a serious purpose to remind us that time is running out if humans keep on neglecting the planet.

Lockdown - In History and Present Day (Karen M) is a good narrative that compares the Covid19 Lockdown with the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918 and shows how many supports we have currently, compared with what our grandparents had to put up with. Karen is optimistic about the ‘new normal’ following this pandemic, especially in terms of valuing mental well-being above keeping up with the Joneses, and reminds us that we are stronger together.

The final story *Your time is running out* (Annabel Crimson) is different both in its form (a prose-poem) and in its focus on the personified virus. The narrative links the spread of Covid19 to the way that humans have exploited the planet, pointing out that the non-human world will last even when humans are gone.

My thanks to the writers for creating such interesting and varied narratives that not only emphasise the social and political issues that shape our experiences of Covid19, but also link these themes into the wider issues of climate change and the survival of the planet.

Reference

Kehily Mary Jane (1995) Self-narration, Autobiography and Identity Construction, *Gender and Education*, 7:1, 23-32

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