

Review:

Sara Ahmed (2017), *Living A Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, paperback, pp 312, ISBN 0822363194, £20.99

Sara Ahmed describes herself as a 'a feminist writer and independent scholar' (<https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv/>). She resigned from Goldsmiths University in protest over the University's failure to deal with sexual harassment. Hence the 'independent scholar'. She is a lesbian and a woman of colour, and this book is intersectional in both what she writes about and how she writes. *Living A Feminist Life* is largely based on her blog Feminist Killjoy <https://feministkilljoys.com/> .

Ahmed describes *Living a Feminist Life* as a book 'which draws on everyday experiences of being a feminist to re-think some key aspects of feminist theory'. She writes from her position as an academic, a woman of colour and a lesbian, about feminism.

The book focuses on the figure of the Killjoy. Ahmed describes how at the family dinner table:

We are having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider problematic. At first you try not to say anything. But they keep saying something. So maybe you respond, carefully, perhaps. You say why you think what they have said is problematic. You might be speaking quietly, but you are beginning to feel wound up, recognizing with frustration that you are being wound up by someone who is winding you up. The feminist killjoy appears here: when she speaks, she seems wound up. I appear here. This is my history: wound up.

However she speaks, the one who speaks as a feminist is usually heard as the cause of the argument. (37)

This is what I think her central argument is: by naming the problem, we become the problem. We are Killjoys. Everything would be fine if only we didn't speak up. Think about how organisations spend more time and energy silencing whistleblowers than they do addressing the reason why someone needed to blow the whistle in the first place. Killjoys get in the way of business as usual. I wonder how much being a Killjoy is freely chosen or imposed upon individuals?

In adulthood, Ahmed is a killjoy in the university by bringing up racism and sexism. She draws on her research on diversity work in universities, which want the image of being diverse and multicultural, but do not want to change in any real way. Employing a diversity officer is being diverse enough, but at the same time seeing the presence of such a person as a problem.

This reminds me so much of service user involvement and community engagement, where my experience is that we are invited into the spaces of power¹ but our presence and our input is a problem. And how much energy goes into denying that the structures that want to involve us, actually don't. Try getting paid for involvement work at the same rates as professionals.

This is a quirky book and it's not the easiest to read, at least at first. Ahmed plays with language - words like hap/happy/happenstance and will/wilful are poked at and pulled and turned in a very poetic way. It's not a straightforward linear argument, but twists and turns. You will have to relax and go with it, if you can. When you do, you will find that Ahmed's writing is very grounded in the struggles we all face, whether in academia or in community work.

This isn't the feminism of individual empowerment, but a feminism of struggle, frustration, unhappiness at times. Once we notice injustice, we cannot *not* notice it. As a result, 'Becoming a killjoy can feel, sometimes, like making your life harder than it needs to be'. (p235)

¹ <http://www.powercube.net/>

Ahmed cites Audre Lorde:

Her work explores how caring for oneself can become a technique of governance: the duty to care for one's self is often written as a duty to care for one's own happiness. In *The Cancer Journals* she shows how making our own happiness our first responsibility can be how we turn away from injustice. (p239)

This is a much-needed counter to the neoliberal demands to strive to be happy consumers and 'the way in which we are asked to become resilient so we can take more (more oppression, more pressure, more work)'

Hence the need for the Killjoy Survival Kit, which is one of the two conclusions to the book. She shares the resources that she includes in her own kit - the books, items, tools, other killjoys The second conclusion is the Killjoy Manifesto - ten principles Killjoys can live by. By the end of the book, I could quite happily sign up to all of them. As a feminist, an activist and a community educator, this book is now part of my own survival kit. When I lose hope, or want to be nice, to fit in, I remember the idea of the Killjoy. It helps me be a little bit more brave. I can speak up and bear the disapproval of those who would prefer we didn't name the problem, let alone do anything to solve it.

Being a killjoy is not just a way of resisting the pressure on us to fit in with the agendas from above and the neoliberal demands to be happy, it is also a way forward.

Anne O'Donnell

Feminist, activist and community educator