

All Our Sisters – Stories of Homeless Women in Canada

A Garamond book – Broadview press

Dr. Johnson once said a society could be judged by how it treated its outcast.

Living with the Cyrenians (we recently buried a shellshock case) and having experienced psychiatric hospital I often mull over that opinion. For me to read this book is rather like ‘coals to Newcastle’. The multiplicity of cases accumulates and hurts. **Susan Scott’s** *All Our Sisters* is a study in social science and oral history. [I would like it on reading lists that include Harry Williams’s book of sermons, *The True Wilderness* – and works that probe the social psyche, jointly and severally.] Perhaps some prescient European publisher will not only publish this but commission books on homelessness elsewhere. [(A recent London festival revealed the initiative and creativity being shown worldwide - above all in working on confidence.] *Willow Walker* readers will know what is being done in Cambridge: we are far from alone.) Even if only *implicitly* Ms Scott does concede a harsh truth: homelessness is a problem that will always be with us. One interviewee – a woman with the wit to style herself ‘Pandora’ – reckons that 30% is the *maximum* of street kids who will ‘make a go’ of life and that, of those, only 20% could be “truly successful”. This is sober – and salutary as such. (How often is a cure of any kind final and stable?)

This book gives homeless women in Canada their voice – directly and in précis. [(Fans of the still active ‘Studs’ Terkel or those who remember a ‘60s BBC executive will know how good that is.)] Why quote? This book speaks – succinctly - for itself. (The chapter – “Prostitutes Are People Too” – is classic. It should feature in anthologies.) Ms Scott herself gives the female perspective on ‘home’ and ‘homelessness’ throughout. (‘Home’ becomes a self-renewing quasi-womb – the original support system – *not* a harbour.) Much you would anticipate is here: drugs, childhood abuse both at home and in care, neglect, fear of loneliness, male orientation... Generosity and heroism in unlikely places are sadly more rare. Less expected is the pervasive fear – from within and without - of being condemned as an ‘inadequate mother’. (The system can be implacable.) Loss of children seems the biggest knock back. As with men *vis-à-vis* careers or the display of emotion, institutionalised and idealised notions of womanhood (the Madonna!) pressurise women. (A priest counselled one woman to be like Nancy Sikes in *Oliver Twist*. It took 77 assaults to persuade her otherwise. NS syndrome in all its variety should be medically recognised.) Role models come across as one of the great needs.

As the curtain falls on Ibsen’s play, *Ghosts*, a son has persuaded his mother to help him in an assisted suicide – it has the status of euthanasia. Asked what she would do, Ibsen opined that her mother’s capacity for hope would make her hold back. Hope – left in the bottom of the box when Pandora opened it – stays strong here. The suicidal seems intrusive not intrinsic. [(In our stressful times self-cutting has become common among the young.)] For these women, resilience is always a prodigious human resource – though, as ever, time makes it harder. Caught in some half-dozen cases the whole range of faith in God appears here. For the aboriginal, evangelical religion comes across as a major culprit. (Dr. Johnson did not “wish well to new discoveries”: they would end in “conquest and robbery”.) The last set of case histories cover those who fall between the cracks – the pure exceptions and the crepuscular spectrum of trans-sexuality.

[So this is not a book is just for the specialist and the professional.] We are all 'walking wounded'. Various events keep reminding me of the *fragility* of security. It is a matter of *degree* – albeit vastly wide! Adjacent empty lift shafts really *haunt* the social climber. 'Privileged' Victorian lives [– Gosse, Mill, Matthew Smith, for example -] record not just authoritarianism but cases of lacunae: the neglect that fails to develop fundamental sources of life, above all of feeling, affection and confidence. [(Jane Austen – farmed out to a wet nurse - suffered from it.)] We get lacunae here. The stigma of the workhouse is another legacy: poverty is a crime!

[The ancient funeral poem, *The Lyke-Wake Dirge*, tells us to heed the needs of others –to ameliorate this vale of tears as well as for our own peace.] These women want autonomy with their own family. The buck must stop here: and these women want to 'pick up the tab'. (One alone has political ambitions.)

So what are 'the comfortable' to do? Policewomen tell me there is nothing better than a *good* social worker: the women here complain of their scarcity. (One does ask for father figures like the one the Prodigal Son had!) Social workers say 'It is not easy to be God'. Religion itself provides pitfalls: God *can* work miracles – but they are *not* probable. [Are there Road-to-Damascus events here? (Only once is childbirth such – *in itself*. Even then the potential is thwarted. Only one man here embodied love.)] The worst kind of volunteer workers are in flight from themselves. Volunteers and professionals must give because of an overabundance – *because the cup is running over*: guilt is self-hatred, which always does harm. One must be tough and tender: 'the weak devour the strong.'

Such is my final - psychological - thought: Ms Scott's final thought is the success of the pragmatic, discreet and respectful Vancouver Mavis/McMullen Place.

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