

Book review of *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stewart (2020, Picador, HB14.99)

Suggested Review Title: The Hope and Tragedy of Poverty

In essence Douglas Stewart's Booker Prize winning novel *Shuggie Bain* is a love story as much as it is a story about hope. He tells the fairly tragic story of his childhood whilst being brought up in absolute poverty in and around 1980s Glasgow. For many people that surrounded the central character *Shuggie* as he grew up, hope was vanquished through poverty. Poverty is a beast and Stuart makes the reader feel it creep up behind you and put a cold wet hand on your shoulder. For the people who have experienced such abject poverty that hand is never far away and for others it may be not too far away.

But there is hope. *Shuggie Bain* always retains the hope that aspects of his life will improve. Despite so many knocks and so much adversity he can see a positive future. For many of the other characters it was not so obvious but being able to retain hope despite sometimes desperate circumstances would, according to Viktor Frankel, in some way shield you psychologically from some of the acute difficulties.

Poverty is rampant in the UK with 22% of the current UK population recorded as experiencing it in some form or other. This is despite the usual political calls to eradicate it – it is always there, has been for centuries. Psychology research has shown that poverty can have lifelong psychological damage for children into adulthood.

Sadly, without political will, it most likely could be with future generations for centuries to come. For some, poverty is close by, for others it is right there with you lurking and following you as a shadow would on a sunny day. But there is no warmth from the glow of poverty. Avoiding its shadow is crucial but this is not possible for many.

Shuggie Bain lived with it and dealt with it the best he could. Set in 1980s Glasgow, the poverty, the high rises, the misery, the alcoholism. It is a grim, a very grim portrayal. But it could be any city in the UK. It just so happened that this story about a wee boy growing up was set in my home city. But poverty makes a home in many towns and cities where there is a lack of opportunity or effective supports. There are myriad reasons for why poverty exists but politicians the world over continue the narrative that it should not need to exist, especially for children. But it does – now or then.

With poverty quite often comes the tyranny of isolation. Living for the majority of the story in the fictitiously named Pithead which was on the peripheries of Glasgow. No money, no real transport, no real shops, there are extra expenses to travel and to buy basic groceries. Many communities like this existed and served a purpose such as coal mining and when that stopped under Thatcherism they were largely forgotten as people who could exit for jobs elsewhere or stayed despite their being very limited employment opportunities. Adding to the lack of jobs, there was also the appallingly bad social housing in isolated areas with limited transport and scarcity of standard services such as entertainment or a GP practice. It becomes the tyranny of distance even on the peripheries of cities and lack of opportunities quite often leads to poverty for many children such as *Shuggie Bain*. For many years in Glasgow the Council, in their wisdom, built massive sprawling housing estates at the four points of the compass peripheries of the city boundary. Places like Castlemilk in the South, Easterhouse in the East, Drumchapel in the West, and Sighthill in the North were places that developed a dubious reputation for unemployment and crime. The author of this review grew up in the 1980s on the boundary of Castlemilk and delivered papers on many a cold morning. I could see the boarded-up flats, the waste land, but I also saw factories and people heading to work in an industrial estate. However, it felt like a tough environment for many, and I was lucky to be *just* on the other side of the trainline.

Poverty in different forms, even if not absolute, might seem quite contained in certain areas but it does permeate much wider circles. In 2017 the then Scottish men's national football team manager, Gordon Strachan, came out with an interesting excuse for not qualifying for another major football tournament. Believe me there have been many excuses over the years! Strachan stated that "...genetically we are behind." In football circles this comment was much derided, but he was specifically talking about height or the lack of it for Scottish players when compared to other nations. In essence he was referring to poverty and the inevitable lack of nutrition, which as we know, has an effect on growth through childhood and adolescence.

Poverty is a blight on our society and a stain on our credentials as a rich nation. The government of the day needs to *really* target the eradication of poverty; not just talk about it a bit more. In society there needs to be much more equity especially in policies which can reduce the hardship for many. By doing this a by-product may be the regular qualification of

the Scottish national football teams for major tournaments, which would make many people stand tall not just a few.

To sum, what the reader can learn from Stuart's incredibly vivid recounting of how poverty affected him throughout his early life is that there can be hope and there can be incredible resilience built up despite a very inequitable society. However, it also gives us insight into the thoroughly damaging and hellish effects that the lack of poverty eradication continues to have for many children and adults in the UK and beyond.

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