

Book Review

Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns by Kerry Hudson

ISBN: 978-1-784-74245-4, Chatto & Windus, Vintage

My Name is Why by Lemn Sissay

ISBN: 978-1-78689-234-8, Canongate

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In this review of two powerful memoirs, Samantha Fiander wonders how reflecting on the past might help us to address the challenges we face now.

“Family is a set of disputed memories between one group of people over a lifetime. I sort of realised that at eighteen I had nobody to dispute the memory of me.” (Lemn Sissay).

I am writing this in the middle of April. It feels important to give this frame of reference: none of us will know what our communities and world will look like when this issue of the Journal is published. I am quietly socially-distancing, living through ‘COVID-19 coronavirus lockdown’ in Scotland, while so much that so many people have taken for granted, is now turned on its head. A time when, perhaps, like me, you are looking to discover something new to read in the quieter moments.

I am not someone who tends to re-read books – fiction or non – but that doesn’t mean what I read does not stay with me. And so in thought at least, with what feels like new resonance, I have returned to two memoirs that particularly affected me last summer, resulting in this: less of a book review and more of a book reflection. For *Lowborn* by Kerry Hudson, and *My Name is Why* by Lemn Sissay, are stories of communities, of relationships, of values.

Each of the writers exposes so honestly not only so much of their life to date but how they now look at those experiences. These works are an exploration in understanding what happened in their childhoods, in ways which feel like these are being committed to paper selflessly for our learning. These are stories that they have been encouraged to tell, voices of experience that often go unheard. Hudson and Sissay are – to coin a very modern phrase - telling their truth, and in doing so both open up deep, multi-layered truths about the power, dynamics and destructive forces of the relationships we have as we grow up. That we are defined by these relationships is a myth. Rather, what we see through these works so clearly is that who we become can be shaped by relationships. The parent, the social worker, the friend.

Both contrast their own memories with a comparator – for Hudson it is returning to people she knew and places she lived, now decades on; for Sissay it is the files and records made by social workers that he fought to access and make sense of.

Lowborn is Hudson's first non-fiction book. Preceded by fiction – the old adage of write about what you know is so strikingly evident in the acclaimed Tony Hogan *Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* – *Lowborn* began as an online column and takes us on a journey in every sense, retracing the moments of her childhood that took her back and forth, across England and Scotland, through many turbulent upheavals, with her mother and sister in a constant search for a better, happier life. With her novelist skill the writing is so descriptive of the communities she returns to. There is no hiding from the realities of the difficulties of her upbringing, but her respect for the communities she now revisits is salutary. Hudson rebuffs any suggestion that she is anything but lucky to live a different life now.

Having followed his writing, and through my professional work, I had known quite a bit of Sissay's story – his poetry, his childhood, his legal victory against Wigan Council, the local authority responsible for his care. But this does not really prepare you for *My Name is Why*.

We read for ourselves the destructive impact of the actions of those supposed to care most for him: his adoptive family's rejection after raising him from infancy,

separated from all he knew, only to discover when he could finally access all his records, that his mother's wishes to be reunited with him were ignored.

That Sissay is a natural storyteller makes the disputed memories comment he often repeated while promoting his memoir last summer all the more poignant. It is all there in that phrase and I was left feeling that *My Name is Why* is part closure, part a need to bring the whole story together in one place. Sissay writes 'good people did bad things'. With this simplicity he leaves the reader to sit with their own feelings and judgements. Given what is laid before you, it is remarkable that what comes through from him as the stronger force is understanding, not blame. No child should ever experience what he did. There will always be something so prophetic about the name Sissay's mother gave to him. Why indeed.

Together these memoirs tell us so much about the needs and experiences of children, the role and impact of the very people who were supposed to help and support them, and how our circumstances can shape how we see ourselves. And the new resonance for me? The pain and despair of the impact of the pandemic has brought to the fore fundamental questions of how we treat and value each other, how we live, of poverty, of inequality, of community and fairness. It is how we prevent and respond to social injustices that matters most. While we may not know or be able to see what the future holds in these uncertain times, reflecting on these memoirs makes me wonder whether if we can understand the past better, perhaps there can be better times ahead.

About the author

Samantha Fiander is the Communications and Engagement Lead for CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection.

Samantha was reviewing her own copies of both these books.