

Love, Learning Disabilities and Pockets of Brilliance. How Practitioners Can Make a Difference to the Lives of Children, Families and Adults Sara Ryan, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2021 pp. 176, ISBN 978-1-78775-191-0, £18.99 (paperback)

Anyone who works in learning disability or autism services or research knows about the important scholarship of Sara Ryan, through her articles, her *MyDaftLife* blog posts about family life with her son, Laughing Boy (Connor Sparrowhawk or LB), and her previous book *Justice for Laughing Boy* (2017).

Love, Learning Disabilities and Pockets of Brilliance is a breath of fresh air within the many case-focused, professionalised books on social care, and the often deficit-based, behaviourism-sodden autism resources. Aimed at health and social care practitioners, it is a candid, jargon-free read that faithfully portrays the experiences of Sara Ryan and many other family members of disabled people, gleaned through interviews and social media. She describes this book as a 'mixed memoir: a collection of stories and experiences with the odd set of bullet points where appropriate' (15), drawing on 'a bundle of personal experiences, interviews and informal chats with learning disabled and/or autistic people, families, health and social care professionals, academic research, policy documents, tweets, podcasts, fiction and autobiographies.'

Justice for Laughing Boy details the experiences of Ryan's family and supporters during the #JusticeforLB campaign and the inquest into Connor's death. Ryan's aim for following it with *Love, Learning Disabilities and Pockets of Brilliance* was to generate:

'further insight and understanding into the lives of learning-disabled people and their families. To generate a space free from jargon and empty concepts, from the constraints and weight of 'official' processes and discourses – a space in which the love, laughter and joy that is woven through families such as ours can shine through, alongside the challenges.'
(15)

She, along with many of us who work and live alongside people with learning disabilities, feels the 'despair that we still need to rake over this stuff to try to rehumanise a loosely linked group of people and their families who are too often stripped of personhood, care, dignity and respect' (15).

In the preface, Ryan introduces herself, her partner and 5 children and tells us a little about the life of Connor: '(a) gentle, curious, hilarious and generous young man who loved his family, our dog, Chunky Stan, London buses, lorries, classic British comedies, and justice' (13). She describes his early school life as contented and happy until epilepsy seizures started when he was around 15. Leading up to his 18th birthday, Connor became deeply unhappy and 'unpredictable'. School played a central role in trying to pin down what was happening and why – there was no other support available. Connor was admitted to a specialist NHS 'assessment and treatment' unit in March 2013, with a large specialist staff and only 5 patients. Ryan writes (as her fingers ache and her heart howls) how he was sectioned on the first night and restrained face down. He had 'never so much as sat on a naughty step before that night' (12). One hundred and seven days later, Connor drowned in the bath at the unit while staff did an online food shop.

The book demonstrates the importance of supporting families, who experience so much adversity because of the never-ending barriers to providing a reasonable life for their loved one. Ryan depicts these challenges well, whilst also showing the lovely things about family life that can be lost in people's stories during all of this grappling with services. In other words: 'Families with learning disabled and/or autistic children typically involve additional layers of wondrousness, labour, challenge – and sometimes despair' (67). Ryan describes how these challenges are down to

expectations that children will adhere to narrow standards and behave in particular ways, and this expectation shapes how services are designed and delivered.

Each of the chapters has a wealth of insights and wisdom that Ryan has documented from her own or others' experiences. Chapter 1 asks 'What is Normal Anyway?' and Ryan critiques the practice of marking people out and drawing boundaries between people. Here she introduces her call for Tweets, asking for instances of 'sparkling actions (big or small) by health or social care peeps', which triggered a flurry of responses from disabled people and family members. These responses were described by Katherine Runswick-Cole (mother, scholar and activist) as 'micro-kindnesses in a sea of micro- and macro-aggressions.'

Chapter 2 presents a 'Brief Historical Whizz Through', detailing the origins of institutionalization, and the various scandals and media coverage that these practices brought about. Ryan gives an overview of the numerous developments in policy over the years, that despite good intentions have resulted in very little change.

The next three chapters, 'The Early days of Difference', 'Childhood Challenges and Wondrousness' and 'Love's Labours and More' blend Ryan's experiences of Connor's childhood and their engagement with services, with insights and narratives from her research participants and sparkling Tweets. Chapter 6, 'Becoming an Adult' covers a wealth of themes that offer examples of good practice and helpful signposting, such as: personal budgets, independent supported living, employment practices, fun and love, self-advocacy, as well as some useful books - fiction and non-fiction and podcasts.

The final two chapters are: 'Growing Older, Death and Dying' and the concluding chapter, 'The outlook: Patchy with Pockets of Brilliance', which recaps on the takeaways from the book.

There is so much important advice throughout. For example, on activism within the health and social care profession, Ryan recommends: 'Whistleblowing', small acts of kindness, calling out poor practice, acting to shift things, bending the rules and sometimes breaking them (135). And further, she writes:

There is nothing to stop professionals being part of a community response to injustice. If we were all to weave this strand through our everyday actions and activities, be they in or outside of paid work, things can only get better. Responding to injustice is only a small step away from behaving with decency, respect and thoughtfulness. (157)

Some advice on interactions with families is:

First, avoid acronyms and jargon. Second, try to put yourself in the shoes of families, try to understand what they are experiencing. Third, don't call me 'Mum'. This is demeaning, disrespectful and diminishing. The most generous interpretation I can come up with is lazy shorthand. Please use people's names, and if you do not know them, ask. Again, a tiny and straightforward thing to change. (87)

I would very much recommend this book to all social care students and social workers, educators and health professionals. Families of disabled people will find the book helpful and feel solidarity with those who have told their stories within it. Researchers who write about disabled and/or autistic people should absolutely read this. The writing is conversational, and Ryan uses enough academic sources for context, but only when useful. There is a wealth of personal experiences, and information about resources and media that readers will enjoy. Whilst I realise that I have used

many quotes – my defence is that there are so many gems to choose from. And in keeping with this, I am compelled to end my review with this quote from chapter 5, 'Love's Labour and More':

My fingers have itched at times writing this chapter because it involves page after page detailing grim experiences, a litany of challenges and the gut wrenching hard work that parents, in particular mothers, do. It would be disingenuous to brush over this labour or downplay it, because it can be bloody hard. However, the difficulty is to a large extent because of the lack of services and support, and a looming black hole when thinking ahead. The incredible joy and intensity of love and pride we feel about our children is extraordinary, and the ways in which we learn from them is something that we (all – dare I make this claim) hold on to. (111)

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