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Lemn Sissay, My name is why : a memoir

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Book review : *My Name is Why: A Memoir* Lemn Sissay Canongate (hb pp192) £18.99

Lemn Sissay is one of the UK's leading literary figures. He is an accomplished poet and as this memoir demonstrates a wonderful prose writer. He was the official poet for the London Olympics in 2012. He is the Chancellor of Manchester University. This searing memoir is an account of the eighteen years that he spent in foster care and children's homes. In his TedxTalk *Child of the State*, Sissy noted that many of the most popular characters in literature - not just children's literature - are in fact orphans, adopted or fostered. For example, Harry Potter was a foster child and Pip in "Great Expectations" was adopted. Later in that talk, Sissay's states that

"Children in care, who've had a life in care, deserve the right to own and live the memory of their own childhood. It is that simple."

This memoir is Sissay owning and living his memory of the childcare system and contrasting it with the official records produced by social workers and other professionals.

Sissay was born in 1967. His mother was a young Ethiopian student. Lemn and his mother were taken to an institution, St Margaret's Home for Unmarried Mothers, in Wigan. Against his mother's wishes, Lemn now renamed Norman, was placed in long term foster care with a white couple who were members of a Baptist Church. His foster parents then had children. Tensions grew in the family partly because of this new dynamic but also because of their strict religious beliefs. When he was 12, Sissay or Norman Greenwood as he was known at the time, was moved to a succession of increasingly bleak and brutal children's home. Sissay's memoir records the dehumanising nature of this system which fails to focus on him.. There were obviously people working in the care system and wider services who took an interest in Sissay and recognised his talents. An English teacher recognising his creativity gave him a book of poems. This was a spark that led to his later career. However, this is an isolated incident. For example, Sissay's idea that he might go to University is almost regarded as a flight of fancy. The winner of the 2019 PEN Pinter prize left school at 16 without qualifications that reflected his true abilities . Sissay spent his final period in care in Wood End a remand centre. In a moving section of the memoir, Sissay incorporates the testimonies of survivors of Wood End's regime of institutionalised abuse outlining the pain inflicted on young lives.

Sissay begins the book by outlining his long campaign to gain access to his records. It took over thirty years for him to receive them. He poignantly reflects that the official records lack the photographs, drawings and so on that make up other children's memories. Everything becomes officially recorded. As Sissay remarks "*memories in care are slippery because there's no one there to record them*". One of the greatest strengths of this book is the way that Sissay challenges the official account with his own memories of events. Sissay documents the racist abuse that he was subjected to as a child. Alongside this, the records contain overtly racist statements - a letter from Barnardo's in 1967 asks for clarification as to whether he is "negroid". The records also include examples of racist stereotyping -from social workers and other officials. For example, the year old Sissay is described as having a sense of rhythm. Later on, Sissay is seen as potential violent and dangerous. Sissay tries to find answers to questions of cultural identity by coming to Manchester and making contact with local community groups. Sissay describes how positive it was for him to attend an National Association of Young People in Care Conference at Ruskin College when he was 17. After a struggle, he is able to attend the Black and In Care conference in London. On his return to Wood End, he is stripped searched.

Conclusion

The contrast between the official record of the records and Sissay's searing recollections of the process whereby he is marginalised or an image of him as a threat, a troublemaker and a dangerous radical could not be greater. It is also a memoir that is full of wonderful insights such as the most institutionalised people in the care system are the workers. This is a remarkable book. Sissay has not just written a moving, poignant and thought provoking memoir, he has produced a forensic analysis of the failings of institutionalised care.