

Book Review

Book Title

Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care by Madeleine Bunting,

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Journalist and broadcaster Madeleine Bunting spent five years researching what she calls a 'quiet crisis buried in individual lives' (p.5). The book's page proofs arrived with the author just after the UK had gone into lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having written a book to shed light on work which is misunderstood, and marginalised, overnight care-work was featuring daily in news bulletins, and carers were being cheered and clapped from the doorsteps. Bunting's timing was perfect, but a book which examines 'the UK's precarious and overstretched health and social care systems' (p. vii) is long overdue.

This is not a book about caring for children, or about children's services. But it is one that examines what care is and how it is valued – or, on Bunting's evidence, seriously undervalued. It is also not the product of desk research, though it is very well researched and includes detailed notes on sources; Bunting shadowed carers, even volunteering as a carer herself, and listened to their stories. A real strength of the book is that carers are allowed to speak for themselves in contrast to their usual invisibility. Part of Bunting's thesis is that this invisibility is a product both of care being predominantly women's work and the theories of Western capitalism being expounded largely by men. In her Kilbrandon Lecture at the University of Strathclyde on 18 February 2021, Bunting referenced the question Katrine Marcal posed in the title of her book: Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner? While Adam Smith's mother kept him fed as he worked on his writing, Bunting points out the irony: 'Capitalism was built on ignoring and marginalising the care work of women' (p.23).

Labours of Love, bookended by an introduction and a final chapter considering 'possible futures', is structured in seven other chapters, each of which is introduced by an exploration of words most commonly associated with caring and being cared for: care, empathy, kindness, compassion, pity, dependence, and suffering. Caring, Bunting says, is largely dismissed, even by the people who perform it, even when it is valued so much by its recipients. 'Care lacks a language in part because it is often accomplished without words, but it also sometimes needs to be wordless. Discretion and tact can be essential. The quality of the care may lie precisely in not being obvious to the recipient or any observer' (p57).

In an earlier book, 'Love of Country: A Hebridean Journey' (2016) Bunting says of the island Iona that its history can be easily misunderstood; writers have emphasised the island's remoteness while in reality at several times in its history the island has been very well connected. That loss of awareness of connectedness reads like a metaphor for how care has become marginalised. In 'Labours of Love,' several forms of evidence are presented, such as:

- The way in which unpaid care is taken for granted and endemic low remuneration for paid work
- The spread of consumerism through public services
- The valuing of paperwork and systems over relationships, captured perfectly in the words of the home-care worker who told the author that 'the work is both closely supervised and yet lonely'
- Finally, what she calls 'obfuscating language' – 'words bankrupted of meaning' – such as 'delivery' of services and glossy brochures which drop the word 'care' – rather carelessly into every other paragraph.

'Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care' makes disturbing reading, but it also pinpoints what it is that we need to do to value care better. The book is beautifully written. The testimonies of Bunting's informants are interwoven with reflections containing references to literature and philosophy. It is also a deeply personal account. The author describes being 'confronted with the two pivotal experiences in the life course when care is required: birth and death' (p. 217).

Her father had a heart attack and was given months to live just three weeks after the birth of her youngest child. 'Once fed the baby slept deeply, utter contentment on his peaceful face, and my father was fascinated; he couldn't take his eyes off the fattening baby he called "Jumbo", and he expressed deep envy. I've wondered since what prompted his comments: whether it was the idea of a life starting anew, the peaceful ease, or the sense of being cared for' (p. 217).

I've said that this is not a book about childcare, but it is a book which should be read by child and youth care workers, and in fact anyone involved in caring of any kind. It will help them to think about what care is and could be. It is not a textbook, but students should read it. It is not a manual of social policy, but it is a critique on the failure of policies. If I have a criticism, it is that while the context for the book is the UK, the author does not consider the effects of devolution over the past 20 years, whereby responsibility for health and social care lies with the UK's four constituent countries, which in some respects have followed different paths in relation to aspects of care. When statistics are quoted it is not always clear whether these apply to the UK as a whole or solely to England.

Bunting's thesis is that the values of the market and consumerism are incompatible with care. 'Along the way, what is lost is the understanding of the power of care relationships, their capacity to forge some of the deepest and most meaningful connections. Care is a set of activities which, like music, poetry and art, makes us human: it reflects our capacity for tenderness and generosity, to reach beyond our own self-interest to serve the flourishing of another' (p. 276).

About the author

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The publisher supplied a copy of this book for unconditional review.

ⁱ Madeleine Bunting's lecture can be viewed at the archive of Kilbrandon Lectures at <https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofsocialworksocialpolicy/thekilbrandonlectures/>