

Edinburgh International Book Festival : Home/Less

Val McDermid is not known for mincing her words – and there are many words not to be minced when it comes to the parlous state of Britain’s housing situation.

One sixth of the UK population – that’s over eleven MILLION people – is currently living either on our streets or in insecure, temporary, threatening conditions. These ‘hidden homeless’ are sofa-surfing with friends, living in hostels and refuges, in violent situations, or in housing so poor that it affects their health. Many are disabled or chronically sick. McDermid describes it as ‘homelessness in the literal and metaphorical sense.’

‘If we classified homelessness as an illness, there’d be a public outcry’

Chairing the third session in Home/Less, her strand of The OU 50th Anniversary Series, author, OU honorary graduate, feminist and socialist McDermid is joined by Queen Margaret’s University sociologist Dr Geetha Marcus, Oxford University social geographer Professor Danny Dorling, and award-winning poet and playwright Joelle Taylor.

Only Taylor has first-hand experience of homelessness, and she opens this event with a powerful performance of part of her poem *Gutter Girls*, a response to *Down and Out in Paris and London* commissioned by the Orwell Foundation.

‘If my body is a house it’s a Soho club; derelict.’



Image courtesy of Edinburgh International Book Festival

Taylor grew up in a 'decent' working class family in Northern England. When both of her parents lost their jobs, the family ended up in bed and breakfast accommodation in Blackpool. There she was sexually abused, like 18% of women (5% of men) now living on the streets. She eventually went to university – the first person in her family to do so – but with no money to top up her student grant. She said : 'I met middle class people for the first time, people who ate out while I was stealing their food and books.'

After leaving she slept first in student corridors then very quickly ended up on the street, working as a lady's maid to a sex worker behind King's Cross station.

'What saved my life was drugs' Taylor knows this is a controversial statement, but her point is this: the drug economy is a counter-economy. Drugs can be exchanged for food. And although she acknowledges that the underworld community of drug addicts is dangerous and unhealthy, it *is* a community where 'people protect one another.' She also speaks of the system of squats that existed in London in the late '80s – another supportive network that no longer exists.

'I was 32 with a first class degree before I stopped being a sex worker on the streets.'

Taylor is now a highly successful artist, activist and mentor but, as McDermid points out, for every person who escapes homelessness, there are many more who don't.

Gypsy and Traveller Girls

Silence, Agency and Power

Geetha Marcus

studies in childhood and youth



Community is what Geetha Taylor looks to to support families in times of crises. Her latest book *Gypsy and Traveller Girls: Silence, Agency and Power* explores the racialised and gendered experience of Gypsy and Traveller girls in Scotland, and while she is excoriating in her comments on the centuries-old persecution of these communities.

'The last bastion of acceptable racism in this country'

She is also hugely impressed by the girls' resilience, respect for their parents and care for one another. As the dominant culture threatens their way of life, attempting to force its idea of 'home' onto their traditional practices, these girls are determined to preserve their culture, even though they are aware that their lives are in some ways circumscribed and limited. They do not consider themselves 'homeless', their concept of home simply dares to be different from the accepted norm.

'They support one another, and this is refreshing in modern society.'

Marcus no longer has any faith in the state as an agent of change, she does not believe it has the will to redistribute resources. He said : 'Great Britain is being stripped of its social infrastructure by hostile policies that wage war against its own people.'

Instead, action must come from the ground up; we need to build strong communities. The lynchpin is firstly the family, but if the family can't or won't support an individual – or is itself the problem – then the local community should step in;

'I am done waiting for the state to fix things.'



INEQUALITY

AND THE 1%

DANNY DORLING

FULLY UPDATED NEW EDITION

In San Francisco in 1995 Danny Dorling attended a conference of 5,000 geographers. He was shocked to find himself stepping over live bodies in the street, and he was equally shocked to

find that the American delegates were not, and that for them it had become normal. When he gave a talk about homelessness, only 7 of those 5,000 delegates turned up as it was not news to them. Now the UK is becoming equally desensitised. In London 250,000 young adults are sleeping somewhere that is not their home. If it weren't for friends' sofas and B & Bs, they'd be on the streets.

The perceived wisdom is that there simply isn't enough housing to go around, but Dorling swiftly punctures that fiction. There are, he says, far more bedrooms in London than there are people, but over the past thirty years the distribution of housing has become more and more inefficient. Council/social housing used to be allocated according to need – you got the number of bedrooms necessary to accommodate your family – but the right to buy legislation saw thousands of properties sold off, and these soon ended up in the hands of landlords who were happy to rent a 4-bed property to a single person.

In addition, vast numbers of flats and houses in cities are unoccupied or under-occupied. People buy multiple properties as somewhere to 'park' their wealth, and older people stay in their family homes because they want to pass as much money as they can down to their children. Property, in general, has traditionally been seen as a good long-term investment.

In university cities like Edinburgh and Oxford, even the worst flats can now be rented to students. Evictions by landlords are one of the main causes of the sharp rise in homelessness, as tenants are forced out to make way for people who are willing and able to pay more. Meanwhile rural areas are losing their younger generation as they can't compete with second home buyers whose properties are left empty for much of the week.

Dorling shares Marcus's belief that the state lacks the will to bring about change, but he is optimistic that the current political crisis may force its hand;

'When things have got this bad they tend to get better...The state did incredible things in the '60s and '70s; we got rid of soup kitchens and food banks.'

If houses prices crash as a result of Brexit, local authorities may be able to buy at the bottom of the market, and older people may want to sell their houses as fast as possible. He'd also like to see higher taxes for the investment owners of empty 'luxury' tower blocks – 'then they'd either let people live in them or sell them.'

He has faith in the Shadow Housing Minister, John Healy, who – unlike his counterparts in government – has worked in housing for several years (of the nine recent Housing Ministers, only two have been in post for more than two years), and in Labour's promise to introduce the compulsory purchase of land on the edge of cities at agricultural prices. He points out that the number of non-dom tax payers in the UK is already plummeting, and he believes that many former Conservative voters simply won't vote in the next election.

All three panellists share the view that the current housing situation is no accident, and that keeping people insecure and afraid is a political choice, designed to make people 'behave', do what they are told, and provide workers for capitalism, to create obscene wealth for the 1% who own most of it.

Dorling believes that only the state can bring about seismic change, but he does agree that local action has its place; in Oxford it is Muslim women who are providing food for the homeless.

This year's EIBF strapline is 'We need new stories' so what, asks McDermid, have the speakers learned about the power of those stories? Is imagining change the first step on the way to enacting it?

Thompson suggests that words can connect us, form a bridge between people :

'If you can control language and stories, you can control some kind of outcome, and yourself'

For Dorling, telling people's individual stories is not so easy; homelessness is, he says, like suicide, people are embarrassed by it and don't want to talk about it. Thompson, however, finds it 'mind-blowing' to be sharing her personal story at EIBF. Perhaps what is needed is empowerment – something that allows and encourages people to tell their own stories without shame or fear.

SONGS MY ENEMY TAUGHT ME

JOELLE TAYLOR

OUT
SPOKEN
PRESS

Thompson brings this thought-provoking session to a close with a passionate performance of *Everything You Have Ever Lost*, a poem she dedicates to her friend PACE (Thomas Kareen Crosbie), a grime vocalist, rapper and alumnus, later Poet Coach, of The Poetry Society's SLAMBassadors, a national youth slam for 13-18 year olds of which Taylor is both founder and Artistic Director. At the age of 27, PACE lost his home and eventually took his own life.

'Thomas was born in the east End of London and worked diligently his whole life, but still could not afford his own place to rent in the city he gave his breath to. And it is not only our streets that have been gentrified but our tongues. We are being forced out of our own mouths.' (Joelle Taylor, The Poetry Society obituary, 2016)

We need change. We need new stories.

'Gypsy and Traveller Girls: Silence, Agency and Power' by Geetha Marcus is published by Palgrave Macmillan

'Inequality and the 1%' (updated edition) by Danny Dorling will be published by Verso on 17 September 2019

'Songs My Enemy Taught Me' by Joelle Taylor is published by Out-Spoken Press

