

Selfless: a psychologist's journey through identity and social class

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Resisting psychology's boxes

Selfless: A Psychologist's journey through identity and social class (Routledge) by Geoffrey Beattie

Beattie charts his formative years as a working class lad growing up in Belfast, experiencing all the mundane, yet very real challenges of working class poverty – damp rooms, sharing beds with siblings and a tin bath hung on the wall. The writing has a warmth and a gentleness that invited me in. At the same time, my mind kept turning over the question – ‘who is this book *for*?’

As the book progresses, Beattie weaves in psychological insight with an enjoyable eclecticism. Gradually he merges and illustrates his own story with psychological narratives that hop from Freud to Skinner, to Chomsky, to Goffman. There is no attempt to persuade the reader of any single or linear ‘truth’, quite the opposite. Often, he introduces theorists or insights in a manner that juxtaposes what psychology might tell us about the human condition, opening a space for the reader to ponder some psychological truths that shape our lives.

Beattie narrates how he increasingly questioned some contemporary views in cognitivism and linguistics within his developing career, signalling that it's okay to resist the boxes Psychology might put you in. The book increasingly meanders back and forth as Beattie reflects on his youth, his family and his working class origins, and re-examines his sense of self, his relationships and what it means to be a person. He shares some deeply personal experiences including the sudden death of his much-loved older brother Bill, and the shocking accident which saw his lifelong partner Carol lose an arm.

I increasingly noticed personal and professional parallels between Beattie's story and my own. We share a professional concern for language and communication; he spent much of his career in Sheffield, the home to most of my professional life; and he tells a wonderful story about research that took him to a small village near the rather forgotten port town of Grimsby, the region I live in and a village I know well.

Beattie reflects on the complex relationship with his mother that does not end with her death. He tries to make sense of who they are in relation to one another and how social class plays in to that complexity. He shares some painful conversations that he had with her, and the feelings he was left with after she died. These stories are so familiar to me that it took my breath away. Perhaps it is just me, but I suspect people from working class origins will readily relate to these experiences and complex emotions.

Instinctively, I didn't expect much when I realised this book was written by a TV psychologist with a high-profile public persona. My working class origins make me suspicious of the power that comes with such fame, and my academic snobbery makes me determinedly unimpressed by it. I am revisiting those prejudices! In places, I think the book holds back, and it did not transform my thinking, perhaps because we have a similar worldview. I'm still not sure quite who this book is for, it seems to fall somewhere between audiences, but I hope people find their way to it. We need more books like this – where the author is authentically written in to the work, and Psychology is opened up, inviting people to explore it in relation to their own lives, rather than seeking to open people up to Psychology and asking them to understand themselves in light of its knowledge.

- Reviewed by Dr Laura Kilby, Associate Professor, Sheffield Hallam University