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## Book review

### Behind Closed Doors: Why We Break Up Families - and How to Mend Them

by Polly Curtis

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When approaching this book review, I initially started to write a 'classic' review in the time-honoured tradition that includes all the usual components. However, as I neared the end, the feeling grew that I should forego that road and take a different path. Because to be honest, there are other classic reviews of this book out there that are better than anything I could come up with. And so, I offer up my own 'novel' approach. I want to share how this book made me feel, what it means to be someone who cares about what this book concerns, what I learned, and what I agree and disagree with. The book – *Behind Closed Doors* by Polly Curtis – is a deep dive into the English Child Protection System.

*Behind Closed Doors* lays bare the difficulties for those working in the English system and highlights the often-devastating results for both the children and adults who come into contact with it. Using first-hand testimonies alongside her own personal reflections, Polly Curtis provides us with insights from those we rarely hear in such undiluted form. The problems within, and solutions to, the many issues arising from an imperfect system are investigated with a vigour that demonstrates the care with which she approached this book. She has not only used her talent to get to the core of the issues facing both families and professionals alike, but also self-reflects throughout, which adds greatly to the overall impact of the book. You may find yourself – as I did - agreeing with her on more than one occasion.

At first, I was scared to pick this book up (not that I don't always wait until the deadline approaches before I DO stuff). No, I was scared because I already knew of some of the damaging things I would read about. I understood that the system was unfit for purpose, that 12 years of cost-cutting policy and austerity had brought society to a darker place, that risk-averse practice was the norm because of the media scapegoating of Social Work over the years, and that poverty is the ubiquitous wallpaper that nobody mentions when intervening in the lives of the poor. So, it was with trepidation that I picked up a book that would sew all this and more into a cohesive picture, one that leaves the reader in no doubt as to the reality of the situation on the ground for all those involved. This book hammers home the pertinent points about where things go wrong in often heart-breaking detail. And if there is one thought I was left with following reading, it is that so much is wrong and so many lives have and are being

damaged unnecessarily because of decisions made by people whose focus is skewed by some political, cultural, economic, and/or social consideration that corrupts the work they are trying to do – protect children.

There are moments in this book when reading the personal testimony of those impacted by a broken system had me upset, angry, shocked, and shaking my head in a strange kind of all-too-familiar understanding. As someone who has lived through the care system and worked in and around it for nearly twenty years, I have come across too many similar situations to be surprised. However, to see it so starkly set out through individual examples and augmented with up-to-date statistics is a whole other level of sadness. It leaves the reader in no doubt as to the pain caused by a system that is supposed to find the best path forward for families. That it fails so often in so many ways is the most difficult bit of all to digest. It could and should be so much better.

Throughout the book, the (seemingly age-old) issues impacting how families are dealt with are recurring themes, a postcode lottery of good or bad services, resource issues, well-meaning but out-of-touch political interference, lack of cultural understanding (at worst blatant racism), the creation of a labyrinth of ways to avoid tackling head on a thorny issue, the negative narrative of poor people created by the political class (that is deemed so normal it has become TV entertainment), and the breakdown of community trust in the state. Put together, it makes for a bleak reality. When I then read the parts relating to the impact of the pandemic and the oft-polarising nature of the internet, my fears were realised, and then some. We can now add to that the cost-of-living crisis.

Polly shows us where the use of lived experience helps in pushing forward understanding. She notes the gargantuan efforts of some to support families (teachers delivering hundreds of hot meals during the height of the pandemic), she explores the efforts of those law professionals who challenge the status quo and do their utmost to lessen the impact of the system on those whose agency is but a side story as the machinations of the state grind through their lives. The good work – that should be rolled out across the country – is showcased to evidence how it could be done differently, and time and again she allows the voice of those with the knowledge of what is needed to say it clearly.

Relationships. Relationships. Relationships. However, the evidence is that the

system is only being held together by such efforts and that without wholesale changes it will continue to cause damage to many lives despite the efforts of all those good people trying to do the best they can.

There are so many more points to raise and that is the depth into which this book delves. The impact of social isolation, the nuanced take on addiction, the failure to address trauma in adults, the short- and long-term impact of adoption on all involved, the division of adult and children services (pertinent to the debate around the National Care Service in Scotland), capitalism and the marketisation of care, political ideology and its impact on society, the pace and nature of societal change leaving some behind, and much more. It was fascinating and enlightening to take the journey this book permits. I only wish I could have finished with more optimism. Because, whilst Polly gives us food for thought about how things could be better, her offered 'thought experiment' is a radical change to the system by replacing social workers with community workers alongside increased and targeted funding. I wonder if that is realistic given the circumstances on the ground. Is the political will there? I fear the good people that serve as the glue to keep the system (mal)functioning will be left to make do with whatever changes the recent English Care Review will see put in place and that those changes - though doing some good in some areas - will never be enough to bring about the change this book evidences as needed.

As a last word, I have chosen two points to offer some critique. The first is a relatively quick one to decide upon for yourself. Do we really 'mend' families? I don't know how much the author had to do with the title of the book, I just don't think it is anyone's job to repair a family. We offer support and we should offer the right support at the right time. The second relates to the author's decision to give Josh McCallister, Chair of the Review of Children's Social Care in England, a substantial opportunity to offer up his opinion. He is interviewed early on in the book and his words used again in a later chapter. Critics of the English Care Review - of which there are many - are mentioned, but only in passing. There are a number of individuals and groups who are both vocal and public about their misgivings and who offer up a different vision. I think this could have been explored further. Other than that, this is a book that offers the reader a lot more than I have spoken about and could be interesting to students, professionals,

academics and anyone with an interest in this area, even if you must steel yourself for the inevitable emotions such a read will evoke.

The publisher, Virago/Little Brown, supplied a copy of this book for review.

### **About the author**

David is a care experienced activist who pushes for the necessary changes to ensure all care experienced people, past and present, can realise their rights and full potential. He is a father and a foster carer to three children with his wife. Together, in France, they run a therapeutic farm where they welcome anyone who may benefit from the mixture of animals, nature and connection. David is a member of The Promise Oversight Board and also teaches Social Work students and Social Educators of the importance of love, respect and equality for people experiencing the care system.