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Book Review

Looked After, A Childhood in Care

Ashley John-Baptiste

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Looked After: A Childhood in Care is a memoir of Ashley's experiences of care in England from the age of two to 18 years old. His reflections seem relevant for understanding care experience in many contexts, not simply England, and they are deeply personal. Since gaining his degree at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, he is now a broadcast journalist and presenter. Reading this book was an emotional journey, with some parts leaving me teared up, facing the reality of life in care for many, and at other points filling me with immense hope and joy, knowing that people do care.

I saw a lot of myself in this book. Ashley accurately portrays many of the challenges which young people face while living in care and under the rule of adults who make major decisions about their lives. A moving account of how difficult it is to leave home and start again reminded me of just how challenging the countless transitions can be for people in care. The way Ashley described intergenerational trauma and the emotional load we carry as children in care was spot on. It struck a chord in me when he described the pain of watching a parent struggle and reminded me of the scaffolding of support needed for children and their families to thrive.

An important theme in Ashley's story is the complex relationship he had with the education system. Suspension, segregation and expulsion are common punishments for children in school and really do say to a child that they are different, other, and not good enough. It has always confused me that a place meant to be loving and nurturing would use such punitive measures against **children**, many of whom were simply struggling with the turbulent nature of their lives. Something that was clear to me as a child, and remains my opinion now, is that the schools our children and young people attend need to have more support and resources to nurture all of their students.



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Ashley wrote of feeling misunderstood, which also really resonated with me. I, much like him, wished that adults in my life would try to understand how the trauma we experienced affected us. Ashley also described feeling like he had to prove himself all the time, not only to professionals in his life but to those who cared for him, in order to be loveable. His description of this deeply complex relationship of being compliant and well behaved to receive love picked up on something important. It made me think that we need to show our children and young people love and acceptance in whatever stage of their journey they are at. His description of having outbursts and feeling out of control are so accurate. People who have experienced trauma can act differently to what is expected as 'normal', and having true trauma-informed practice in their daily lives can support children and young people, wherever they are at on their healing journey.

I remember some of the teachers who championed me in school, much like the teacher Ashley recalls in this book. Having trusted adults in your life is crucial as a child or young person dealing with the roller-coaster that is living in care. As a child or young person in care, you meet so many professionals who are constantly examining every detail of your life. This is an important part of record keeping and looking after children and young people, but it can be exhausting for them to have a revolving door of professionals in their lives. His story, much like mine and my peers', reminded me of the importance of continuity in relationships to allow for the development of trust. Safe people and safe spaces, in education in particular, can be a shelter during scary times of life.

Ashley also wrote of the challenges that care experienced people come upon when seeking to access higher education. He highlighted key issues, such as the need to financially support yourself whilst studying, and the precarious living situations during holidays. Thankfully, many universities recognise their corporate parenting responsibilities much better these days and have support packages for care experienced students. A challenging part of Ashley's story was hearing of the lack of support he received in university. It reminded me of the challenges we still face as care experienced students today, despite the support packages in place. Too many of us are facing homelessness, poverty, and a lack of mental health support. We have come a long way, but his story reminded me that we still have a way to go in supporting care experienced people. When Ashley described feeling excited and proud of himself for being at a prestigious university, but simultaneously feeling ostracised by the affluence around him, it spoke to me so deeply. Ashley was honest in the book about the feelings of self-doubt and shame we often feel as people who grew up in care. It can be really difficult to believe you are good enough when for most of your life people have not believed in your capabilities. After reading this book, I am thankful for the communities of care experienced students around me who support and inspire me constantly.



Whilst reading Ashley's book, I heard of the many challenges he faced throughout his time in care, all of them familiar to people in our community. It served as a reminder that we must keep up the good work we are doing to keep The Promise, Scotland's commitment to ensure that children grow up safe, loved and respected. I recommend this book to anyone wanting to understand how it feels to grow up as a child or young person in care. It was a raw and beautiful expression of his experience, and I am so grateful to have read it.

About the reviewer

I am a care experienced person who works within the sector advocating for positive changes in practice and policy to improve the lives of children and young people in care. I study dentistry at the University of Glasgow and have a strong passion for addressing inequalities in healthcare. I don't usually like reading but this book was a page turner.

The Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care supplied a copy of this book for review.

