

Received:  
28/02/2026  
Accepted:  
12/03/2026

**Keywords:**

Memoir,  
ethnography, lived  
experience,  
adversity,  
intersectionality

**DOI:**

[https://doi.org/  
10.17868/strat  
h.00096125](https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00096125)

## Book Review

# Stuart: A Life Backwards

**By Alexander Masters**

Publisher: Harper Collins

ISBN: 978-0-00-720037-5

Year of Publication: 2005

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I am not based in Scotland, I am based in England, and I am not currently practising as a social worker. So, you might reasonably ask why I am writing for a journal focused on residential child care. The answer lies in my journey through care practice, higher education, disability, and systems, and how one book shaped how I see them all.

I worked in social work for 20 years before ill health ended my career. I began at Caldecott Community (now Foundation) in Kent, a therapeutic children's home that was more than a training ground. I was not much older than the children living there and had no formal qualifications at the time. Later, while working, I returned to education, completing a degree, a master's in social work, and eventually a PhD.

During my master's, in a human development module, we were assigned *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (Masters, 2005). I felt relieved that it was not a textbook, but was a memoir, however, not in the traditional sense. Alexander Masters tells the story of his friend, Stuart's, life backwards, beginning with adulthood (homelessness, prison, addiction) and moving into childhood. Written by Masters, yet shaped through Stuart's voice, its structure challenged assumptions about how stories 'should' be told and demonstrated that lived experience can educate as powerfully as theory.

Ironically, I did not achieve a strong mark on the essay. We were required to align the book with prescribed developmental frameworks and



assessment criteria. Looking back, I see how much emphasis was placed on conformity to format rather than depth of insight in this essay assignment. This raises difficult questions about decolonising the curriculum. Are Freud (1961[1923]), Winnicott (1953), Bowlby (1969), and Erikson (1993[1950]), who were white, male, middle-class theorists from another era, still the primary lenses through which we interpret childhood in 2026? It is worth considering that many developmental texts reflect privileged social contexts far removed from the communities we serve.

Although first published in 2005, *Stuart: A Life Backwards* feels more relevant than ever in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and ongoing reforms to special educational needs and welfare systems. It compels us to consider holistic childhood development within contemporary structural realities.

My own disability, beginning in 2016 after my original essay, eventually led me to leave social work and shaped my PhD. Using autoethnography, I examined the self within culture and systems, exploring disability, chronic illness, and class in higher education. 'Auto' means the self, 'ethno', culture and others, and 'graphy' means the way knowledge is presented over time. My central contribution focused on the *graphy*: challenging language, layout, and presentation. If lived experience is to be truly valued, it must reshape not only what we write, but how we write it. Knowledge should not be confined to stylistic codes that privilege certain voices.

In the original assignment, we were also required to engage with the bio-psycho-social model, where 'bio' refers to biological factors, 'psycho' to psychological processes, and 'social' to environmental influences. Disability journalist, John Pring (2024), has critically examined how such frameworks can individualise structural harm. With that lens, the essay felt increasingly constrained. During my PhD, I revisited earlier submissions and rewrote them, feeling liberated from constraints that had once seemed fixed.

If I felt constrained by academic systems, Stuart was constrained by far more powerful ones.

Stuart was homeless, frequently imprisoned, addicted to harmful substances, a survivor of abuse, care-experienced, and disabled. He had



muscular dystrophy and attended a special school. However, in my original essay, I barely explored the impact of his disability. That omission now feels significant. His disability shaped how teachers, police, housing providers, and prison staff interpreted him. The way he walked or spoke was often misread as intoxication rather than impairment, reflective of systemic disability discrimination. Perhaps it is through my own lived experience that I now recognise this more clearly, given that lived experience sharpens what systems overlook (Astra, 2025).

Stuart's life illustrates cumulative failures across care, education, health, housing, and justice. Each system required adaptation from him, with none meaningfully adapting to him. Crucially, his story does not end with redemption. He died crossing a railway line. Although more stable at the time, the layering of disadvantage remained. Care leavers, particularly those who have experienced homelessness, imprisonment, and disability, face elevated early mortality risks (UK Research and Innovation, 2023). Stuart's ending resists the comforting narrative that systems ultimately repair what they damage. Revisiting the book years later, I question how many young men experience imprisonment and homelessness while their disabilities remain unrecognised or are themselves contributing factors in their marginalisation.

For residential child care practitioners, this is painfully relevant. Every child and family dynamic is different, yet institutions rely on standardisation. When does conformity become harm? When does assessment overlook structural inequality? When does disability go unrecognised because behaviour is easier to label?

*Stuart: A Life Backwards* is not simply a story of homelessness and addiction. It is a story of systemic misrecognition, disability and class marginalisation, and institutional rigidity. It showed me not only that memoirs are educational, but that they need not end neatly or follow institutional expectations of format or outcome. You can share your memoir in a way that makes sense to you. Moreover, when you do, others will follow.

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## About the review author

Dr Emma Astra (PhD) is a lived experience expert, independent writer and researcher, and a former social worker. She is a director of Leicester Vaughan College and a council member of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, all in a voluntary capacity. She is also establishing the Emma Astra Foundation, which aims to widen access to education, research and creative industries, including publishing, journalism, and AI technologies, particularly for people from disabled and working-class backgrounds.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

