

REVIEW

## Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care

**Madeleine Bunting, Granta Publications, London, 2020, 336 pp.,  
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In this book, Madeleine Bunting aims to rescue 'care' from what she argues is its invisible status in society in the United Kingdom (UK). Her focus is the array of activities of family carers and those working in health and social care. There are chapters on parents looking after their disabled children, nurses working in hospitals, general practitioners' surgeries, home and residential care, and on those caring for the dying. It is aimed at a general audience, has a journalistic quality and does succeed in giving a vivid depiction of the broad realm of care in the UK today. It often tends towards a campaigning spirit – it is telling that she writes admiringly of Barbara Robb (1967), author of *Sans Everything*, which casts a light on the poor treatment of older people in the 1960s. There is a comparable air of urgency to much of this book, which is the result of five years' immersion in the topic.

Bunting's chief method is to shadow people as they go about their caring activities, quoting their testimony verbatim (often at length). She also interviews experts (Anne Marie Rafferty, Caroline Nicholson and Alison Leary among them), makes occasional historical excursions, and proffers a well-focused summary of the present economic and social context. The whole is contextualised within a rich cultural frame of reference. She discusses the novelist Philip Roth's account of looking after his father, the artist Paula Rego's paintings relating to the care of her husband and John Berger's writing on general practice. There are epigraphs from Geoffrey Hill and Emily Dickinson.

Most striking is Bunting's concerted attempt to recharge the lexicon of care by way of interstitial meditations among the main chapters that focus on specific words, including 'care', 'compassion', 'suffering' and 'empathy'. Here, dictionary definitions are jumping-off points for brief two- or three-page forays that draw on an eclectic range of sources, e.g. Martin Heidegger (his conceptualisation of *Sorge*) and *King Lear* (provoking thoughts about dependence). Throughout, typically prompted by the comments of her interviewees, there are deft musings on what might be described as the building blocks of a phenomenology of care – grace, service, attention, presence and reward among them. As an attempt to revivify our language and thinking around care, these elements of the book have an obvious value. Care often seems to have become entrenched in a debased idiom to which

Bunting's book may be seen as a direct riposte. In one hospital she notes the dismay felt by a staff member at the big round sticker on every ward door with, around its edge, the 'six Cs of nursing' – care, compassion, competence and so on – and in the centre the slogan, 'Care is our business' (p. 116). That said, the book's contribution here is really as a *tour d'horizon* of ideas, some of which might be useful to feed into the debate (others not). In terms of depth, this aspect of the book is a mute echo of the kind of rich and detailed work being done by figures within the care field, such as Jonathan Herring or Camillia Kong (e.g. the latter's attempts to draw in the phenomenology of Hubert Dreyfus and the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas to the care of people with impaired capacity; Kong, 2017). Bunting herself favours the idea of the gift economy to underpin our approach to caring (drawing on the work of sociologist Marcel Mauss), wherein there is an obligation to give, to accept and to reciprocate – this enabling caring to take up its proper place in society.

One of the abiding challenges in the health and social care sector, well captured by this book, is that of pairing the intimacy and tenderness often involved in caring relationships with the potentially deadening effect of policy labelling and its associated bureaucracy (a tension embodied in the use of terms such as 'personalisation'). Bunting's closing chapter alerts us to some points of light in what can seem like a gloomy landscape given this challenge, coupled as it is with present economic circumstances and demographic forecasts. She highlights particular innovative programmes, and some of the personal testimony she has collected in the book is remarkable in the hopeful outlook it conjures up from what are often trying circumstances. The book was written before the COVID-19 pandemic but is prefaced with a note by Bunting in which she augments these very tentative arguments for optimism. She suggests that the collective experience of disruption and loss and the raised profile of care professionals, their new visibility, may give rise to a societal renovation in our understanding of caring and its associated obligations.

## References

- Kong C** (2017) *Mental Capacity in Relationship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
**Robb B** (1967) *Sans Everything: A Case to Answer*. London: Nelson.

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