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Book review

Justice for Laughing Boy

Sara Ryan

Jessica Kingsley; 2017; pp. 272; £12.99; pbk ISBN: 978-1785923487

Reviewed by: Iain Dickie, Researcher, University of Cumbria

Sara Ryan's *Justice for Laughing Boy* is a deeply touching and personal account of the life and untimely death of Connor Sparrowhawk, who drowned in a bath while in the care of an NHS learning disability specific support unit, Slade House. Ryan, a social scientist and mother of Connor, offers readers an intimate perspective on her relationship with Connor throughout his life and her frustrations of trying to ensure that Connor had support appropriately tailored to his individual needs. Ryan highlights through Connor's experiences at Slade House and the subsequent 'Justice for Laughing Boy' campaign that an important imbalance exists in health and social care delivery between individuals with and without additional needs in the UK. *Justice for Laughing Boy* is divided into five sections, with each section being further broken into individual chapters; the first section offers a highly personal account from Ryan of Connor's formative years. The opening chapter, entitled 'What a Wonderful World', introduces Connor to readers as a unique, exciting and vibrant character; in Ryan's words, 'Connor is, who Connor is'. Ryan's account of her and the rest of the family's relationship with Connor reminds readers of the human tragedy of the untimely death of anyone, whether or not they have an accompanying disability.

At points throughout the book Ryan raises the perception of autism, disability and additional needs as having a negative or pejorative label attached to it by health and social care professionals: 'I've long raged against the lack of recognition of the value and sometimes brilliance that Connor and so many others bring to society. The "learning disability goggles" often worn by health and social care services erase anything other than the learning disability label' (p. 110). Ryan raises an important issue for consideration by professionals from all backgrounds, including the probation service, that awareness of a service user's additional medical conditions should not overshadow the need to work with individual and family members to tailor service delivery to each specific person.

The second chapter describes aspects of family life, including holidays and Connor's relationship to their dog, Chunky Stan. Ryan touches upon the specific challenges faced in gaining access to appropriate support and a confirmed diagnosis of epilepsy following Connor's experience of a seizure, aged six, and later in his teenage years. Ryan also describes the challenges faced by Connor and others with autism and learning disabilities in accessing independent living, educational and employment support. An important area explored in the third chapter is a downturn in Connor's mood as he became more insular and at times would begin to lash out. In particular Ryan discusses her increasing frustration and distress in trying to identify appropriate support for Connor at a time when he was feeling increasingly distressed. The third chapter is poignant, with Ryan describing Connor's admission to Slade House, a Short Term Assessment and Treatment Unit (STAT), where he ultimately drowned in the bath while in their care. The second section of the book deals specifically with Ryan and her family's grief and distress in the immediate aftermath of Connor's death, focusing on Connor's funeral and the Care Quality Commission's finding of failure on the part of Slade House to meet appropriate health and safety standards.

The third section, entitled 'Looking for Justice', specifically deals with the creation and development of the 'Justice for Laughing Boy' campaign which sought to publicise Connor's treatment and death while in the care of staff at Slade House. Here Ryan also looks at the release of the report into Slade House completed by independent investigator Vertita that critically examined the conduct and training of staff at Slade House as well as the maintenance of an appropriate caring environment. In

this section Ryan also describes the establishment of the 107 Days of Action campaign in memory of the time Connor spent at Slade House and the adoption of charitable events in Connor's memory. Ryan also describes her frustration at the perceived obfuscation on the part of Southern Health Trust in their reluctance to make information available to Ryan and the family of ongoing investigations into Connor's death.

The fourth section examines how Ryan and her family fought to secure an 'Article 2' inquest, crucially, which includes judicial and jury oversight. Chapters in this section eloquently describe Ryan and her family's experiences as key witnesses and being witness to the testimony of staff working at Slade House at the time of Connor's death.

The final section of the book concludes by examining the aftermath of the Mazar Report that explored the level of unresolved deaths of individuals with additional needs in health settings and how the rate of unresolved deaths compared to other social demographic groups. Perhaps most movingly, Ryan reminds readers of how Connor's death has inspired national and international discussions into inequalities in health provisions between people with and without a learning disability. A key strength of Justice for Laughing Boy is the fact that, like the social media campaign of the same name, readers are reminded that a person is still a person irrespective of whether they have any additional needs, and specifically that the level of care a person receives should not be affected by whether or not they have a learning disability.