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CULTURE REVIEW

## Foster

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I have spent much of this year helping Sam\* learn to read and write. Slowly, we have moved from a state of fear, resistance and distraction to a steady and committed attention to words. It started when I read him *James and the Giant Peach*. ‘Maybe one day you’ll go to New York,’ I said. He looked at me, his face open with wonder, ‘But is the giant peach still there?’

Together and slowly, one word at a time, we read books about the solar system. My mum comes to visit and tells him that her house is like a spaceship because windows open at the press of a button. ‘I can’t wait to visit,’ he says, ‘because we’re going to the moon’. After an excursion to the Planetarium he writes in his notebook, ‘I found out we are all made of stars. It’s nice to know we are all part of the universe.’

Sam is my 14-year-old foster son. By the time this is in print he will be 15. He and his sister came to live with my partner and I one year ago and they will remain with us. When they arrived, I was shell-shocked from managing traumatised children, sleep-deprived from their endless nightmares, and exhausted from meetings with case workers and the daily grind of navigating an opaque child-protection system. A line of poetry became a refrain in my mind: ‘The world is gone, I must carry you’.

I cannot imagine that Paul Celan was thinking of child protection when he wrote ‘Vast, Glowing Vault’, or that it was on Derrida’s mind when he meditated on this fragment of poem in *Sovereignities in Question*. In Derrida’s interpretation of Celan, the end of the world marks the beginning of ethics and the horizon of responsibility. Part of the complex trauma that a child in care experiences is the loss of the only world they know. In our foster care training a home environment of abuse and neglect was referred to as a ‘trauma-world’. Children develop strategies to survive and make sense of the trauma-world and a foster home can feel like a strange, alien and hostile environment. The loss of the trauma-world can be a source of immense grief and desolation.

At its heart, fostering is a world-building task. It involves creating an environment in which the child feels safe enough to imagine a future that is not their past. It involves millions of

repetitions of small daily tasks that re-build brains damaged by trauma. It involves cultivating joy where there has been shame and fear. To foster children who will not be reunified with their families of origin is to help them to build, from the personal fragmentation caused by complex trauma, a world in which they can thrive. Sam's past is elusive to him and we have been given only scraps of information. He doesn't understand it either and spends much of his time living in a fantasy world in which he is the hero. He sits and he plays for hours with a train set which he builds and takes apart, and then builds again. Despite everything, Sam is a very happy person. His world is small, but he takes care of it. Our job is to protect this world and foster in him the biggest version that he can manage. Without a shared past, and in the face of an uncertain future, we have these moments carved out of the present and we are learning to read and write.

In Australia there are not enough foster placements to cater for the increasing number of children entering care. While there is clearly a crisis in the system, it is not merely one of numbers. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Anastasia Glushko reveals some alarming statistics about the outcomes for children in care in Australia. She writes that only 2.8% will go to university, compared with 39% of the general population. Will Sam ever go to university? He has complex disabilities and his learning may soon plateau. However, Sam has made the essential link between education and the future palpably real to me. Learning to read has meant that Sam can access new things. He can follow the instructions on the models that he builds, read menus in restaurants, and understand written instructions at school. It has also unlocked, for him, the world of narrative pleasure. Sam is intensely curious about the world and this is the first year of his life that he has felt safe enough to learn.

Child protection is everyone's problem. But building viable, independent and abundant futures for children in care must also become part of the mission of the modern university. Over the last year I have considered this question: What and how do we foster in the academy? Our institutions of higher education need to better understand the specific disadvantage faced by children in care, including a culture of low expectations, lack of cultural capital and limited financial resources. We need to find ways to close the gap between 2.8% and 39%. Organisations such as the not-for-profit 'Why Not You' and projects such as the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's 'Raising Expectations' are advocating and raising awareness on these issues. But we also need to remain attentive to the institutional policies that enable and constrain care. While many staff agreements have a provision for adoption leave (a wonderful step toward recognising the reality of the modern family), it is still relatively unusual to see provisions for foster care. In the 2017–2018 year there were 330 adoptions in Australia. In contrast, in 2017 there were 47,915 children in out of home care. Few workplaces have a leave provision to support the start of a long-term foster care placement or the additional time investment that children in care often require. Named leave provisions for foster carers would be a step toward fostering a workplace culture in which there is support for the people who care for the kids who are the most abused, neglected and vulnerable members of our community. Institutional policies also build the kinds of worlds we would want to live in.

Whenever I worry that Sam's world is too small, I need to remember that building in the wreckage of complex trauma is hard work. I should rest assured that slowly but surely, and with our help, he'll make the world that he needs. After all, his vision is grand:

*I found out we are all made of stars. It's nice to no we are all part of the universe.*

\*Names and identifying details have been changed.

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