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“The Erosion Of Libraries Is Warfare Against Poor Communities”

Kerry Hudson and Sarah Smarsh at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

“I really strongly believe that the erosion of libraries is warfare against poor communities and social mobility in this country,” said Kerry Hudson, speaking today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival with fellow writer Sarah Smarsh. The duo were discussing generational poverty, the subject their books - Hudson’s *Lowborn* and Smarsh’s *Heartland*.

Lowborn is an exploration of Hudson’s upbringing in the UK and looks “at real repercussions of being born into generational poverty and all the many things that also encapsulates,” whereas Smarsh has written about growing up as a member of the working poor in Kansas.

“There’s something about vastness of the country that I come from that makes it a little more possible for folks like mine to be invisible,” she said. “My region of the country is literally referred to, without any seeming awareness of the condescension inherent, as fly-over country.”

Both women agreed the conversation surrounding class needs to be improved either side of the Atlantic.

“[The] foundational myth was that we were founded on equality and that stops us from admitting the problem,” explained Smarsh. Hudson expressed a similar opinion about the UK; “God forbid we should shine light on the systematic disadvantage that exists for poorer communities and actually ask people to take some accountability.”

The shame attached with poverty was also a shared experience for the writers, but both rejected the idea of a pull yourself up by your bootstraps narrative.

“A lot of this book is about the shame you feel from the very earliest age because you know you’re different and that’s something that was bad, and adults carrying that shame around with you for years into adulthood because everywhere you go it’s reinforced that to be poor is somehow to be bad.”

Hudson said. “There was always someone to demonise the working classes and I do think there’s been, even more so now than in the 90s or 80s, that narrative of feckless, lazy poor people that then allows people to implement the most brutal social welfare austerity measures.

“This idea of pulling yourself up by their bootstraps - why the fuck should they do that? It should be an equal playing ground for everyone. I’m not going to pretend poverty isn’t grinding and brutal and isn’t responsible for all sorts of terrible devastating problems in those communities.”

Smarsh agreed; “This isn’t a story about individuals and bootstraps and gumption and getting out and escaping, it’s a story about simultaneously carrying the different narratives and truths and classes and experiences of my life and loving all of them.”

She currently lives a few miles from the farm she grew up on and explains that she doesn’t want to escape. “I never wanted to escape the place I was from, I wanted to escape confines of the situation. If I’m choosing to be there, that means there’s something wrong with the narrative that that place is inherently bad and full of lazy, trashy people, which of course it is not.”

Chair Jenny Niven asked what first steps they would take to tackle systematic poverty.

“Stop the erosion of libraries.” Hudson said. “Libraries are absolutely integral to them and having a future beyond where they started. I really strongly believe that the erosion of libraries is warfare against poor communities and social mobility in this country. And the other thing is that we need more social housing stock, we just need it. We need to buy more and we need to make it truly in the vision of social housing which is that it’s safe and comfortable and affordable.”

“I would start with a major restructuring of tax.” Smarsh said. “The second would be a public healthcare option for people who don’t have access to care. All of these other things fall away when you have a crisis of the body. All those becomes secondary to whether you’re going to live or die.”