

Relational

& Youth

# Child Care

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# An Editorial Swansong

*Rika Swanzen*

**W**hen we discussed this being my last issue as Editor of *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, a journey I started in 2015, the publisher mentioned that it would be my Swansong. The serendipity of this was not lost on me, as I just completed a postgraduate diploma in paediatric palliative care where I came across this word for the first time as part of end-of-life care planning.

The picture alongside is the title page of "Den singende swaen [the singing swan]" (1655), a book of songs by Willem de Swaen of Gouda, born as Reinier van Persijn in 1615. According to Wikipedia his nickname was Narcissus (Latin name for Daffodil) – another link to symbolism I was not previously aware of.

The swan song is a metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance



given just before death or retirement. The phrase refers to an ancient belief that swans sing a beautiful song just before their death since they have been silent (or alternatively, not so musical) for most of their lifetime.

More interestingly, the laurel from the hand emerging from the cloud is a symbol of victory. When you 'rest on your laurels' you're happy with previous successes, but not doing much to continue succeeding. While I can reflect that I am happy with issues of this journal that I was a part of (trusting they were 'musical' enough), especially where the voice of the Global South emerged, I will not be resting on my laurels and am still far from retiring. While my role in Child and Youth Care (CYC) may have changed a few times, there are exciting new developments that I remain part of.

Apart from this issue being the last issue of this volume, it also feels a bit like it may be coinciding with the end of other big things – like being able to take a collective breath as the Covid pandemic seems to have lost its momentum and devastating impact. Challenges remain however, with the global hope that the Russian-Ukraine war will soon end, that this decade can see the cessation of human trafficking and that the causes behind destructive natural disasters can be taken seriously.

Larisa Jeffares' reflection on the facing of her childhood 'vortex of trauma' towards getting to an emotional space where she 'sees humans standing in front of me' – acknowledging that this state is challenging to embody and at times excruciating when the complexities of people's pain are witnessed. With the use of some examples from practice, she shows how true validation of success for her is found in the moments where she accepts the human in whatever form they come, and how in this humble place a world of belonging exists.

Treisha Hylton explores the CYC possibilities in recreational and competitive sports, postulating that since sports contribute to physical and mental health, it can support successful transitions in young people's lives. From her experience as a black person involved in sport, she reflects on how racism and sexism intersected in the stereotypes females in sport need to push through. As a core component of young people's life space, she urges that simply by checking off "enrolment in sports" on a case management checklist does not sufficiently support these youths.

Marshall and Marucci postulate the use of polyvagal-informed practice to enhance needs-based relational practice and relational safety. They motivate how neuroscience provides us with an opportunity to liberate ourselves from ‘colonial youth work’ and go beyond the behaviourist strategies for managing behaviour. The sense of circularity continued with my own unfortunate experience of the complication of tinnitus. I learned about the Vagus nerve (the tenth cranial nerve, considered to have the widest distribution of all the nerves within the human body) and polyvagal theory provides critical understanding of the nervous system’s environmental scanning for safety and threat. This makes an exploration into how the theory applies to CYC critical to our deeper understanding of relational safety.

Starting as a strategy to reduce problematic behaviour in schools and increase time on task in the classroom, Fruth, Irving, Fechner and Embry provide results on the further testing of the PAX Good Behavior Game. PAX Tools is a collection of trauma-informed strategies derived from evidence-based kernels, which is the fundamental units of behavioural influence. Their guiding principle is that identifying workers’ competencies helps identify what professional development is needed and therefore increases the chances of implementation of high-quality programs. Towards the end of 2022 over 4800 participants had been trained in one of the various PAX Tools programs across the U.S., providing prevention programming with a uniform language and aim.

With much of the core of our practice remaining in residential care, three sets of insights build on our knowledge base. The fictional account and commentary by Ainsworth, about life in a group home for young male adolescents aims to highlight the difficulties both staff and the young people placed in a home, face daily. Therapeutic Residential Care (TRC), is defined as involving, the planful use of a purposefully constructed multidimensional living environment designed to enhance or provide treatment, education, resocialization, support and protection, to children and youth with identified mental health and behavioural needs. It is not just residents who need to change, it is the group homes themselves – if they are to become fit for purpose. Criteria for TRC are provided to enlighten this process.

Brothers, Rose and Greene tell their story of white professionals' experience of working with Inuit children in care. Recognising that prejudice is not the same as oppression; that the former is not done with the backing of a societal system of institutional power, they acknowledge that they are part of the system that continues to perpetuate oppression against Indigenous communities. In the process of educating themselves and building a sense of cultural courage, they provide anecdotes of what they learned.

Modi, Kalra, Srivastava, Ramakrishnan and Prasad reflect on the procedural preparedness of the sudden de-institutionalisation of children in care during the pandemic in Delhi. As per supreme court directives more than 1.4 lakhs (hundred thousand) out of 2.3 lakhs (64%) children living in child care institutions, have been restored to their families since April 2020. This rapid restoration was however done without adequate social investigation and follow-ups were largely absent, leading to an increase in cases of child labour, child marriage, abuse, violence and neglect and discontinued education. The authors unpack Udayan Care's response to this through the 3 R's intervention and circle of care framework.

Through the review of Mark Smith's book, Jack Phelan reminds us again how far we still need to go in residential care. Insights are provided from interviews with seven adult men who were in residential care in the 1980s.

So, I end here with a see you later and looking forward to different intersections of our paths. As Ray said in *Uptown Girls* (2003 film): 'Every story has an end. But in life, every ending is a new beginning'.

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## Dr Rika Swanzen

is the Research Manager at the Institute of Independent Education, IEMSA campus. Rika has been developing and teaching in the field of Child and Youth Care (CYC) since 2009, authored 22 peer reviewed publications and delivered 25 presentations at international conferences during the same period. In 2016 she was appointed by the South African Minister of Social Development as a council member to represent education and training on the South African Council for Social Service Professions. Rika has been a co-editor of *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice* since 2015. This is her last issue as editor after which she joins our Editorial Advisory team.

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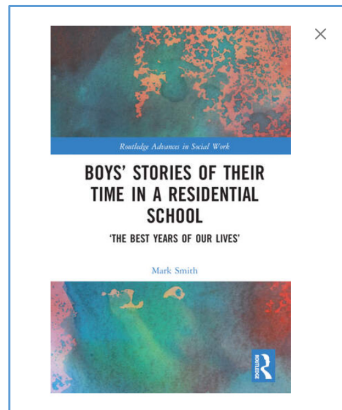
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BOOK REVIEW

# Boys' Stories of Their Time in a Residential School: "The Best Years of Our Lives"

By Mark Smith

*Routledge Publishers: New York*



**M**ark Smith declares quite early in this book that he is angry about the negative story that has been promulgated about children's residential care experiences over the past 40 years. He quotes several sources which describe a climate of abusive interactions of adults with children that have been "systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary and endemic". He attempts, quite successfully I believe, to offer an

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alternative narrative, not to negate the abrasive description, but to add to it, to broaden the viewpoint. Smith posits that the privileging of this very negative narrative about the reality of residential life for children has created a narrow, not completely accurate or fair description of a much more nuanced and complex experience for the children who lived in these settings.

Smith bases his credibility on a two-decade career directly involved in children's residential care as well as many years as a Social Work faculty member in Scottish Universities.

The research methodology he uses is described as a *bricolage approach* which is a French term roughly translated to gathering data from a diverse variety of sources. Smith interviews seven boys, now middle-aged men, who lived in a children's residence in the 1980's while he was a social worker/residential care worker in that facility. He also references the information from a Facebook group of former residents of that place.

The basic issue, identified early in the book is that life space work is not particularly well understood or accurately described using some of the supposedly scientific measurements that have been poorly applied to the research attempts that have documented some of the studies which governments and academics have used to describe residential care. Smith does a credible critique of the various studies which have created the familiar narrative which the press and public have received about children's homes. Smith states that both a more empathic historical context and a less narrowly focused approach would have created a more accurate and positive picture of what was experienced by the majority of children involved.

Smith uses the story of a specific children's residence, St. Roch's, which was run by the De La Salle brothers order during his time as a residential social worker in the 1980's to illustrate his argument. He also strongly commends the work of the brothers and their philosophy of care, which is embedded in the long history of this religious group. Basically, the focus is on care and education, with freedom to choose a path for oneself, stressing more open-ended educational experiences and relational connection over a more formal treatment or pathology approach. The goal for every child was to feel safe and cared for, with less formal classroom or therapy office programming.



The author quotes interviews with seven adult men who had been residents during his tenure in the facility, being aware of the research limitations of having a personal connection to his subjects and his own memory of these experiences. The adult lives of his subjects have been both successful and unsuccessful, yet each of them describes their time at St. Roch's quite positively.

The reader will find many of the personal descriptions of life in a residential program to be very familiar, and Smith lets the voice of his interviewees speak without interpretation. The now adult residents also state that if there were systemic abuse of any kind occurring, they all would have been aware of this. The basic message from each person was that they felt safe and cared for while at St. Roch's.

Smith describes the political shift in children's social welfare services in the past twenty years to a more individual focus which tries to create more control and safety, but results in less control and more coercive practices. Group dynamics which can create positive motivation to cooperate and support safety have been ignored and the resulting individualized adult connections have resulted in less safety and more need for external control. The author takes a broad view of how things have changed politically and in social welfare practice to a liability prevention approach which has damaged our ability to care successfully.

I commend Mark Smith for taking an unpopular position which I believe to be necessary and unfortunately missing from our policy discussions now. He is very aware of how easy it will be to accuse him of ignoring the abuses that have clearly happened. Smith has bravely spoken for the majority of adult's and children's experiences of living together in residential programs in the past 40 years, and he has the credentials and credibility necessary to begin to build an additional story that can expand our understanding of residential care for children.

*Boys' Stories of Their Time in a Residential School* is highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Jack Phelan*



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***Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*** (formerly *The Journal of Child & Youth Care*, established 1982) is committed to promoting and supporting the profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people.

This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, including personal growth and development, are essentially “relational”.

Certain pieces in *RCYCP* have received peer review. However, we do not peer review all articles as we choose not to exclude those voices where peer review would be inappropriate or on request from writers.

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# Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

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*Relational Child & Youth Care Practice* welcomes submissions on all aspects relating to young people, families and communities. This includes material that explores the intersectionality of Child and Youth Care practice and the lived experiences of all who are engaged in Child and Youth Care practice. Considerations will also be given to interpersonal dynamics of professional practice and all submissions that assume a relational perspective. This might include topics such as cultural values, ethics, social policy, program design, supervision, education, training etc. Welcomed are also submissions that address advocacy, social justice and reconciliation practices within the diverse spaces and places of Child and Youth Care. Each issue may include refereed articles that comply with acceptable ‘academic’ standards; submissions contributed by regular and guest columnists; short pieces that describe particular relational experiences and reflections; poetry; artwork and photographs.

Material should be submitted by email to [rcycp@press.cyc-net.org](mailto:rcycp@press.cyc-net.org) in standard word processing format (eg. .doc, .rtf). Formal articles should not exceed 6000 words in length (excluding references). Referencing should conform to either APA or Harvard format. Author-date citations should be used within the text and a double-spaced reference section should accompany each article. In all submissions, authorship details including an abstract of no more than 150 words should be included, as well as a short list of keywords at the beginning of the article, a headshot photo and a short author bio of about 100 words to publish with your article. Importantly, authors should also indicate whether a peer review is required (in addition to the standard editorial review).

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