

## CARE IN THATCHER'S TIMES: DOUGLAS STUART'S *SHUGGIE BAIN* (2020)

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### Abstract

In her article, Charlotte Alex examines how Douglas Stuart's novel *Shuggie Bain* (2020), which portrays the impact of Thatcherism's economic and social structures on private relationships of care in Glasgow's working class, engages with the topic of care. The article argues that Shuggie's and his mother Agnes's attempts at caring for each other fail due to a lack of larger structures of responsibility. The novel questions normative definitions of care and shows how the complex and often dysfunctional relationship between the two protagonists counters the era's rhetoric of individualism.

[...] there's no such thing as society.  
There are individual men and women,  
and there are families.  
Margaret Thatcher (1987)

## Introduction

Douglas Stuart's novel *Shuggie Bain* (2020) chronicles the precarious childhood and early teens of its eponymous protagonist. Shuggie grows up in 1980s Glasgow with two half-siblings and his alcoholic mother Agnes, whom he adores even when her addiction prevents her from taking care of her children. His father Shug leaves the family early on, and the few times he reappears are marked by his disappointment in Shuggie's non-normative masculinity. Although Agnes repeatedly attempts to sober up, the novel ends with her losing the fight against alcoholism, leaving her youngest child to care for himself.

In the following, I will discuss *Shuggie Bain* through the lens of care, arguing that while ideologies of profit force Shuggie and his mother to take care-responsibilities they cannot bear, the novel also portrays how their care for each other challenges precisely the neoliberal dogmas that constrain them. The term 'care' is used frequently in both everyday speech and academia, yet it seems almost impossible to make sense of what exactly it entails. 'Caring about someone or something' generally implies a level of attention and affection reserved for a limited number of people, things, or events. It can signify a myriad of activities and practices, and what care means for some may not mean the same for others. Not all care entails action, and people can care *about* others without actually taking care *of* them (cf. Tronto 1993, 106). It usually involves two individuals, but it remains opaque whether what 'care' *is* is determined by the carer or the cared-for. On the one hand, the word implies a caring subject, its actions and its intentions. On the other hand, it suggests a

result, a product, an improved object. Would it be possible to care badly, or is care a positive practice by definition? Does care always give (well-being, health, love), or can it also take away?

*Shuggie Bain* is concerned with these questions. Agnes's care for her son, though well-intended, does not correspond to conventional notions of motherly nurture and does not always have positive effects on him. Yet, these private care practices function as tools of survival during the period of the Thatcher administration (1979–1990), when much of public care was reduced or broke down. Thatcher's neoliberal policy agenda, which led to drastic cuts in benefits and the privatisation of many previously public health-care services, had a lasting impact on welfare and health-care in Britain (Scott-Samuel et al. 2014). Stuart's novel provides a fictional account of how this agenda affected the private space of the home and particularly women in charge of taking care of the household and its members. It highlights how care adapts to changing economic and social structures, thereby enabling characters to persevere in times of despair. However, it also shows that characters' private acts of care cannot supplement the lack of larger systems of responsibility. I thus argue that the novel questions whether individual care can truly exist outside larger networks of support, or if the isolation of care automatically demands the self-sacrifice of the carer and/or the neglect of the cared-for. As the proverb goes, "it takes a village to raise a child". But what if there is no such village?

## Care under Thatcherism

*Shuggie Bain* is set against the backdrop of the miners' strike that took place in many parts of Britain between 1984 and 1985, and the subsequent closing of coal mines across the country under the Thatcher administration. The unsuccessful strike substantially weakened workers' unions and led to a steep rise in unemployment. Described as "the un-making

of the working class”, the dissolution of the mines had a profound effect on social networks; one of the strikers’ slogans was: “when they close a pit, they kill a community” (People’s Collection Wales 1984; Gildea 2021). Along with the pit closures, the Thatcher government privatised many previously public services and drastically cut spending on welfare and health care, at one point planning to dissolve the National Health Service (NHS) altogether (Travis 2016). The effect on the working class was detrimental, leaving many previously vibrant communities fractured and dejected (cf. Levine-Clark 2020).

Beyond the mere enforcement of a set of economic policies, Thatcherism has been characterised as “an ideological project that set out to radically re-cast the relationship between labor and capital and between the state, society, and the individual” (Scott-Samuel et al. 2014, 54). The Thatcher government promoted a neoliberal agenda that paired the deregulation of markets with conservative, heterosexual family values, which depended highly on the unpaid work of women in the home. Its profit-oriented principles influenced realms often perceived as private, such as the home, the family, relationships of love, and community. The combined effect of the reduction of public welfare, the fragmentation of working-class communities through mass unemployment and the Thatcher government’s affirmation of the nuclear family led to much of the care work previously assumed either by larger communities or the state being relocated into the private space of the home (cf. Gearty 2020).

### Care in *Shuggie Bain*

*Shuggie Bain* depicts the disintegration of social networks through a prevailing ideology of individualism, showing how the collapse of communal structures of care harmed care relationships within families. Essentially, the story is one of neglect: Agnes and Shuggie are neglected by the state,

by society and by the patriarch Shug, and ultimately Shuggie is neglected by his mother. Yet, *Shuggie Bain* demonstrates that in the complex web of care, negligence, and agency the characters are part of, care and neglect exist side by side. Despite a pervasive lack of care, both Agnes and Shuggie try their best to take care of each other because they care for each other, even if their declarations of love are unconventional and sometimes contradictory. Amidst the misery prevalent in their lives, these displays of commitment to the other’s well-being make the story a hopeful one. While Agnes ultimately fails to take sufficient care of Shuggie and Shuggie is unable to save his mother, their perseverance shows the necessity of care for their survival and leads the reader to care for Agnes and Shuggie.

At the beginning of the novel, the Bain family moves to Pithead, a pit village on the outskirts of Glasgow. It entails the promise of “a happy little village. A real family sort of place where everybody knows everybody else” and where “[t]he wages are good enough that the women don’t even need to go out of the house for work” (Stuart 2020, 91, 92). The fantasy of a tight-knit neighbourhood and social safety net quickly crumbles when the family finds a community struck by poverty after the closing of the local mine, in which hostility, rather than solidarity, is the prevailing sentiment. Neither Agnes nor Shuggie make friends in Pithead. The other women are under the impression that Agnes looks down on them because of her glamorous appearance. The neighbourhood children bully Shuggie because he does not conform to their understanding of masculinity. Their ‘otherness’ renders mother and son outsiders, making Thatcher’s individualist assertion that “there’s no such thing as society” (Thatcher 1987) a painful reality for them. Consequently, Agnes and Shuggie have to take care of each other, even though neither is really capable of doing so. Agnes struggles to take care of her children by herself because she feels trapped in the failed promise of the nuclear family, leading her to drown her sorrows in alcohol. Shuggie feels responsible for his mother but cannot take care of her because he is too young. The result is that, despite their considerable efforts, the situation deteriorates:

neither of them is truly happy, healthy, or safe, and neither of them can prosper under the burden of care.

Preoccupied with her own sorrows and addiction, Agnes often fails to feed her children and has difficulty offering them emotional support. Yet, in spite of her shortcomings, she is concerned for her children's well-being and while she cannot provide them with a sense of domestic security, she wants to prepare them for the harsh world they find themselves in. When one day his mother asks him to dance for her, Shuggie does so with glee: It gives him the opportunity both to please her and to cast off his inhibitions. However, when he notices the children next door watching, he is petrified:

He was enjoying her attention. Something inside him flowered [...]. The self-consciousness left him, and he spun and shimmied and shook in all the telly ways. He was mid *Cats* leap when he let out a sharp scream [...]. He hadn't seen them at first, and he would never know how long they had been there. [...] [T]hey were gutting themselves with laughter. [...] He looked at his mother; when had she noticed? [...] Without looking out the window she spoke through clenched teeth. "If I were you, I would keep dancing." [...]

She was no use at maths homework, and some days you could starve rather than get a hot meal from her, but Shuggie looked at her now and understood this was where she excelled. Everyday with the make-up on and her hair done, she climbed out of her grave and held her head high. (Stuart 2020, 267)

Agnes knows first-hand what it feels like to be ostracized, as the other women in Pithead taunt her regularly. She refuses to surrender to their abuse and, knowing it is imperative for his survival, wants to equip Shuggie with the same skill. By telling him to keep dancing, she instructs him to endure an experience that makes him deeply uncomfortable and possibly endangers his safety, disregarding his feelings of shame and fear. Yet, of all the people in Shuggie's life, his mother seems to be the only one who does not want to change him. Intent on teaching her son resil-

ience in an intensely heteronormative society, her attempt at caring for him is by showing him how to stand up for himself, perhaps knowing that she herself is not always able to do so. Shuggie, though acknowledging her neglect of him, also recognizes her behaviour as an act of care that aims to free him from the burden of caring about what other people think. Through its ambivalence, the scene questions normative assumptions of (female) care and emphasizes the complexity and particularity of personal care-relationships.

The people around her expect Agnes to fulfil the role of loving housewife and mother, and she tries to play her part when she is able to. Her repeated attempts at sobriety are announced by the noises of domestic work: "As far as the good signs went, the sounds of the kitchen were the best to hear, the slurp and shake of the washing machine, metal spoons in the sink, and the sound of soup bubbling in big pots" (Stuart 2020, 222). When Shuggie's mother is drunk, however, she is unable to care for the children or herself, and the roles become reversed: Shuggie takes care of the shopping, the finances and Agnes, clothing and feeding her when she is no longer able to:

He turned her head to the side to stop her choking on her rising boak. Then he placed the mop bucket near the bed and gently unzipped the back of her cream dress and loosened the clasp on her bra. He would have taken off her shoes, but she wasn't wearing any [...]. Shuggie arranged three tea mugs: one with tap water to dry the cracks in the throat, one with milk to line her sour stomach, and the third with a mixture of the flat leftovers of Special Brew and stout that he had gathered from around the house and frothed together with a fork. (Stuart 2020, 198)

Shuggie knows that if he does not take care of his mother, no one will. The seemingly paradoxical act of preparing a mug of leftover beer for when she wakes up indicates that he can only offer short-term comfort and relief to his mother's pain. Burdened with trauma and solitude, it is impossible for Agnes to fight her addiction without external help.

In order to attain the feeling of safety that he yearns for, Shuggie tries to replicate the stability he believes his mother's housework to signify. By collecting "old bits of abandoned furniture" (Stuart 2020, 330) and assembling them on a small patch of ground, he creates his own domestic utopia. Taking care of this self-made home gives him a sense of purpose:

When he had all the furniture he wanted, he spent any dry day arranging and rearranging the stuff into a shabby front room. He found an old-fashioned baby carriage and pushed it around, struggling through the long reeds, collecting the prettiest flowers for his new home. [...] With no friends to speak of, these little rituals occupied him well, allowing him to spend the day feeling house-proud [...]. (Stuart 2020, 330)

Shuggie escapes his mother's addiction into a dream world where the spatial set-up of a bourgeois home symbolises the emotional security that is ideologically attached to it. In doing so, he confronts the notion that 'home-making', both in the material and in the affective sense, is a categorically female activity by taking over the labour his mother is unable to perform. Not only does he assume the care the adults in his life are not providing him with, he also feels solely responsible for his mother's survival. Shuggie holds on to the hope that his efforts will be enough to make her better: "I just have to try harder to help her. Be good to her. Keep myself tidy. I can make her better" (Stuart 2020, 403). Without a system in place to catch Agnes, the burden of responsibility falls to Shuggie, making him neglect his own needs over the anxiety of losing his mother. However, his care for Agnes is also an act of survival as against all odds that keeps their relationship intact and shows the world that they are both worthy of love. Thus, the novel again questions where 'care' begins and where it ends, and at which point relationships of care can become harmful or (co-)dependent.

By taking on the responsibility for Agnes, Shuggie ultimately sacrifices much of his own childhood to keep his mother alive. Agnes, in turn, can give Shuggie the skills to defend himself, but she has no outside help to

offer him the support he actually needs. All caring duties fall to her because she is his mother, while his father Shug is free to leave his family and start a new life elsewhere without repercussions. By contrast, Agnes does not have the choice of entrusting Shuggie to someone more capable of taking care of him. With benefits that are scarcely enough and little chance of finding a job, she struggles to make ends meet. She is not alone in her financial worries: with their husbands out of work, the women of Pithead are expected to hold their families together in a crisis (Gearty 2020). It is they who make the financial decisions, doing "sums out loud" at the supermarket, "[...] adding bread to oven chips to cigarettes and then, defeated, putting the bread quietly back on the shelf" (Stuart 2020, 129). Agnes knows that the common experience of poverty could unite them:

Some days, not many, Agnes thought it was a shame they could not be civil. There was so much the women had in common, although Agnes would have bitten off her own tongue before she admitted it. [...] They [...] knew the keen edge of need. The women could have been closer then. Separately, they had [...] gazed hungrily at the pages of the Freemans [catalogue] and lain awake in the quiet of the night, wondering how to make a pittance stretch around. If *he got this* and *she got that*, then what would they themselves do without? It was a mother's maths. (Stuart 2020, 163)

Although the structures necessary for solidarity are present, the women of Pithead do not support each other, and all must fend for themselves. With neither a private network nor a public system in place to come to their aid, Agnes and Shuggie have only each other. No matter how much they desire to help the other, they are fighting a losing battle: Although their relationship is vital for both of them, it is not enough to relieve them of their misery.

## Conclusion

As I have shown, *Shuggie Bain* offers a counternarrative to the prevailing neoliberal dogmas it discusses by demonstrating how individuals suffer under burdens of responsibility when larger care structures break down. It thus questions what ‘care’ actually means by showing that love and the will to care are not always enough to ensure the well-being of others, and may still lead to neglect. However, it also demonstrates individual characters’ agency in resisting these dogmas precisely through *doing* care as both a practice of love and a survival tactic. The Thatcherite ideology that everyone is responsible for their own happiness becomes palpable both politically and emotionally; even with a job it is impossible for Agnes to escape poverty, and there is no social support system in Pithead for her to fall back on. Agnes and Shuggie are trapped in cycles of poverty and addiction that seem impossible to break out of without change on a systemic level. Without larger networks of care, be they private or public, their scope of action is always limited by external factors. The stigmas of single motherhood and alcoholism, the inaccessibility of well-paid work, and the lack of community and support limit Agnes in her ability to look after her children. Unable to entrust the responsibility to someone more capable, she must take care of them in the best way she can. Unable to look after herself, that task falls to Shuggie.

By offering multiple perspectives and giving the reader insight into both Agnes’s and Shuggie’s inner thoughts and perceptions, *Shuggie Bain* shows readers the varied and sometimes conflicting understandings of love and care that its characters hold, which may be at odds with the readers’ own. Martha Nussbaum suggests that reading literature increases our empathy because we form deep connections with fictional characters who have experiences different from our own, “making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling” (Nussbaum 1990, 47). *Shuggie Bain* not only depicts the importance of

care in capitalism but is itself a caring narrative — the portrayals of Agnes’s alcoholism, the family’s poverty and the general atmosphere of despair are free of judgement or feelings of superiority and thus perhaps themselves enhance readers’ capacities for caring about others. Published amid a global pandemic which brought to light the necessity of both personal and public care infrastructures and the economic imbalances in care accessibility, the novel serves as an example of the effects of choosing profit over solidarity, and of the potential that care holds. Although characters are neglected and forced to take on responsibilities they cannot bear, it is also their care for each other that provides them with agency in a world that denies them hope and opportunities. *Shuggie Bain* is dark, filled with violence, neglect and missed chances. But beneath the grime there is defiant love, hope and dance for those who dare to care.

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## M(OTHER)ING AND CARE: ON THE POLITICS OF CARETAKING, AND GENDER

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### Abstract

Longlisted for the Booker Prize 2020, Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton* makes material the unexpressed concerns and cares in a mother-daughter relationship. Antara finds herself ushered into a new role — that of mothering her mother Tara who is showing early signs of cognitive decline. This role reversal inaugurates a crisis in the personal lives of the estranged duo and leads us to inspect the implications of a pertinent psycho-social issue — that of care-giving as well as care-receiving. The novel toys with the ideas of time, of order, of madness, and the entangled existence of mothers and daughters, and by primarily referencing works of Ira Raja, Rajib Lochan, and Julia Kristeva, I will attempt to understand how the mother-daughter relationship unfolds in the face of a role-reversal — where Antara becomes her mother Tara's mother.