



Book reviews

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Silverstein Jordana
Cruel Care: A History of Children at Our Borders
(Monash University Publishing, 2023)

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What makes nice people do bad things? This may seem like a trivial question, but it has been central to debates around the nature of cruelty, perhaps especially when perpetrated by large bureaucratic structures. This is the question with which Silverstein grapples in *Cruel Care*, a history of how Australia has treated asylum-seeker and refugee children since the 1970s.

When refugee children arrive in Australia, either alone or with their parents, the Australian government and its migrant apparatus – the policymakers, the security forces, the social workers, and the prison guards that manage migrant prisons and hostels – have to decide what to do with them. They decide where they should live – a prison or in the community, in Australia or offshore; who they should live with – their own parents, a foster family, as part of an institution; what resources they should be entitled to – education, healthcare, pocket money; and so forth. International law is clear: the child is a special category of migrant and their best interests should be at the heart of decision making.

In practice, children, like other refugees, find themselves caught up in the broader anxieties of the settler colonial state about the right to police its border and who enters the country. Policies that are too friendly to children – which settle them too quickly – might encourage more children to appear at the border; settling them with parents might ensure that they arrive as families; settling them in the community might encourage travel by boat. Rather than the ‘best interests’ of the child driving policy, the child’s best interests need to be weighed against a fantasy of migrant potential – migrants that don’t yet exist, but might, and might cause problems.

Cruel Care asks how good people – those who go into politics, who work for the civil service, who help to provide ‘care’ for refugees – justify, to themselves and others, implementing policies that are harmful to individual children, and which fail to put first the ‘best interests’ of the child. The answer it provides turns our attention to the emotions

of ‘good people’. Based on an analysis of the paperwork of bureaucracies, press reports and media, and interviews with politicians, civil servants, and others who have worked with refugees, *Cruel Care* carefully articulates how the concept of ‘care’, and its associated emotions, provides a mechanism for narrating and justifying bureaucratic cruelties. Within such narratives, care for one group of children – those who might come by boat – competes with care of those present in the country; compassion for refugees competes with sympathy for the economic migrant stuck on a list, waiting to enter the country through alternative routes; and the emotions of those making decisions – each and every time – ultimately matter more than those who suffer as a result. Many people felt bad about these decisions; they did their best – these were ‘good’ people.

Cruel Care is structured around some key narrative structures that help support individuals to recount themselves as caring people. A chapter on ‘crisis’, for example, explores how the framing of refugee and asylum-seeker arrivals as a national crisis positions the problem in such a way that decision makers appear constrained – good people having to choose from limited bad options. Another chapter on the immigration minister explores how his, and very occasionally her, duty of care for the refugee child positions the child as a passive subject, unable to know their own interest, and so reinforces the white policymaker, and their thoughts and feelings, as central to good decision making in this space. Rhetorics of care produce hierarchies of control, position individuals at different levels within them, and disguise the distribution of power beneath a paternalistic veneer.

Cruel Care places contemporary practices around asylum within its longer history of colonialism and control, from the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their land to the White Australia policy. It asks us to consider how a colonial logic underpins how we imagine the role of the border, concepts of Australian sovereignty, and our rights to police both. It offers an important contribution to our understanding of the operation of ‘caring’ bureaucracies, where cruelties are promulgated by good people trying their best, and points to an analysis of emotion as a critical tool for unpacking and highlighting the dynamics that arise. It is an excellent analysis and, written for a wide audience, an easy if uncomfortable read. Historians describe problems; they rarely provide answers. Silverstein comes close in suggesting that cruelty will continue until Australia refigures its relationship with its border and its sense of ‘right’ over who enters. The counterpoint that haunts the narrative is that, as a result, Australia’s cruel care is unlikely to disappear soon.

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