

BOOK REVIEWS

A Conversation About Happiness: The Story of a Lost Childhood

By Mikey Cuddihy

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Review by Helen E Lees, Newman University, UK

I wanted to read this book because I thought that it would give me insights from a “pupil’s” perspective into the radically democratic Summerhill School, based since 1927 in Leiston, Suffolk, UK. I had also heard intimations on BBC Radio Four that it contained details of child abuse at Summerhill. In the light of work by Ian Stronach and Heather Piper on Summerhill as a community where such things would be hard to perpetrate given the open forum of the Meeting (see Stronach & Piper, 2008) and the overall democratic atmosphere where abusive behaviour would struggle to hide, I wanted to see what that claim was all about.

With regard to the details of Summerhill as school, they were few. My hope for insights was occasionally met in small ways but always accompanied by rather bitter psychological baggage which is not, I consider, to be laid at the feet of the school but is the owner-author’s property. I did not know that Neill and his wife swam naked—pg 116—with the other children in the pool largely paid for by Joan Baez. I could have done without the nasty comments about Neill’s ordinary, natural human genitalia, incongruous with the openness, courageous naturism and educational body awareness that the naked swimming at Summerhill unusually offered to the children when Cuddihy was a resident. Nor did I know that Leonard Cohen had strolled around the grounds one fine evening. I had not known Summerhill (between some dates roughly in the 60’s or 70’s?—see comments below on reader experience) had no private room in which visitors could go to sit with the child they visited. I did not know Summerhill had a hockey field that never got used for hockey. That’s about it in terms of new knowledge.

Interestingly, despite the consistent albeit occasional bitter tone mentioned above from the writer, this book isn’t significantly about Summerhill other than to paint it in a good light. A troubled, orphaned, US citizen girl with a sad, dysfunctional family background and a bunch of siblings similarly discarded into the hands of A.S. Neill and his wife, find themselves being treated as valued by the school and cared for in ways their remaining family back in the US fail to achieve. They go on in various ways to thrive as adults in the wider world.

A school as surrogate parent is limited in what it can do to care but the stories told seem to indicate that both care and concern were in place for the Cuddihy children, even when their

damaged behaviours threatened to cause the school significant and potentially even catastrophic implications. The most significant mention of child abuse in the book was perpetrated by the author's brother as a teenager... Furthermore, as soon as the incident came to full light, that brother was then swiftly removed from the school by Neill after a sudden, single, serious situation no-one could have predicted would hurt another in the way suggested.

Lewd textual comments about other minor if now-a-days rightly outlawed situations only indicate that for an era when the current UK rampant CRB/DBS criminal or abuser checking of staff (and the overall atmosphere of vigilance and self censorship it creates) was not in place, Summerhill did handle things well enough and swiftly enough. Staff were sacked as soon as a sense of their inappropriateness surfaced for Neill's attention. Issues from staff and students were brought up in the Meeting for public admonishment or rebalance. According to the book's testimony, rather than silence issues, Summerhill found a community response which at no point in the book is portrayed as unethical or lax. To forbid at that time what we now suggest is wrong—for instance a teacher attempting to take posed (clothed) pictures of a girl; thereby making her quietly uncomfortable—was not dangerously untenable in the 60's and 70's UK school system's imagination or controlled by a "system" for school management to use either. Other boarding schools in the UK operating at that time have a much more troubled and troubling past in this regard of safeguarding, as the large numbers of boarding school "survivors" speaking out against terrifying experiences in non-democratic UK public schools would indicate (see <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/may/04/abuse-britain-private-schools-personal-memoir>). Despite the author's often accusatory tone against Summerhill's ability to protect her, it seems the reverse: it did a careful job in the circumstances.

I also found the jaded way it is suggested that—in lieu of a responsible parental or guardian figure in situ for the author's welfare—Summerhill in *loco parentis* badly or abusively took it upon itself to help the author gain contraceptive help (after she appeared through community rumours to be sexually active and was so by her own written admission, if not "all the way") unfair. The author writes of it as though it was against her selfhood for her to be taken to a Harley Street doctor to be measured for a diaphragm. Could she have said no to the appointment but did not? Contextual evidence of wilfulness and autonomy in other regards would suggest yes. Unfortunately the lack of responsible consciousness—honest, normal immaturity—that the author writes into the book of herself as a young woman, could have extended to bringing a variety of difficulties into being. What's a teacher without parental care or authority to refer to, to do? Ignore it all? Does not the situation, whilst clearly not a best memory for the author, suggest how significantly Summerhill *as a school* was taking her wellbeing into account? No doubt things today would be different but perhaps also Summerhill these days would not find itself with children on its hands whose family has close to abandoned them? A tricky situation for school management I do not doubt, even if a fees pay packet accompanies the burden. This kind of sourness towards Summerhill is, I felt, the most unfortunate part of the book because it is a stark contradiction to other things the author says about Summerhill being the only home she knew at that time and her fond relationship maintained with members of staff after she left. Nothing is perfect, especially for an orphan overseas?

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With regard to Summerhill's role in the author's upbringing it came across to me that the school had a huge role in saving her (and her siblings?) from the difficulties that frankly being "homeless" and parentless involves. Holiday stays in the UK were arranged for somehow, new dresses were jointly made with an attachment figure; a sense of belonging somewhere ensued. Yet, Cuddihy does not seem in her limited reflection of the school to understand any back scenes care, even as an adult looking back because she is full of complaints about it. It was not ideal for a young person but it was not Summerhill's fault.

It is disingenuous I feel that so much is used of the school to promote and publicise the book—e.g., the front cover showing the author sitting on the front wall, prominently by the Summerhill painted sign or the publicity on the book's release about Summerhill and child abuse intimations—when Summerhill as school and experience really only forms about 20% of the book, if that. Indeed it is mentioned as the backdrop to her childhood as she spent much time there but most text is taken up with detail about the author's memories and especially of her Self, *like a child would write*. For instance: "...in the hope that Hans...will see me as a sleeping beauty...perhaps he will be so overwhelmed that he will come into my room and – what? Kiss me? (pg 139)."

Essentially this is a badly written and close-to-boring book about one person's difficult childhood. It is not at all a *conversation* with anyone about happiness other than reflections of the author's on her childhood, without resolution or development or questioning. Lots of lost threads and me me me biography: tedious, if with detail pointing to the unfortunate. Too many loose ends for the reader to enjoy the work as writing, where constantly the experience is: When does this occur? Who is Evie? Who is Myles? Who is David? Who is Larry? Who is Ena? Who is Bob? Who is Sheila? Who is Pat? Who is Nanny? Why are you in Edinburgh? Why should I care about any of it? And a constant need to piece together the scattergun tale to try and work out the whole crazy assemblage of cast from the US to UK and back again and then returning, how and when is never clear. I would not have read it all beyond the first quarter, but for the task of this review.

The book offers no deep insight for the educationist about Summerhill School that cannot be summed up as follows: Chaotic seeming educational experience for democratic freedoms irons out personal trauma? Sets a troubled child without family supports on an adult path to taking a place in the world far better than we might have expected?

Respect needed. Research needed.

References

Stronach, I., & Piper, H. (2008). The case of "relational touch" at Summerhill School. Can liberal education make a comeback? *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(1), 6-37.

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