

Kit De Waal, Justice Disrupted interview

SPEAKERS

Byron Vincent, Kit De Waal

Byron Vincent 00:00

Hello and welcome to Justice Disrupted. As always with this podcast we advise listener discretion. Not only does the podcast discuss social justice and touch on many areas, including but not exclusive to crime, trauma and abuse, but we're very passionate people and it can also get a little bit swear-y, so you've been warned. If you do find any of the content distressing or are affected by any of the issues we broach, then check out the Community Justice Scotland website for a list of other websites you can go to to seek support, help and guidance. Now this won't be news to regular listeners, but I'm an idiot, especially when it comes to technology, I'm a Luddite. I should squirrel myself away in a clay cave with nothing more advanced than a loincloth and a pointy stick. I had a great chat with the wise and charming Kit De Waal; novelist, co-founder of Big Book weekend, and general all round mensch. Unfortunately, we had issues with the microphones whilst recording this podcast. Kit's microphone wasn't working at all, but fortunately, I had a backup recording. Long and boring story short, you can only hear me through my microphone, but you can hear me and Kit when Kit's speaking which is a little bit jarring. But you'll quickly get used to it, we're an adaptable species. So I'm going to stop waffling and get on with it.

Byron Vincent 01:34

Kit De Waal, welcome. A podcast is occurring.

Kit De Waal 01:37

Excellent. We are go.

Byron Vincent 01:40

Thanks so much for talking to me. Let's start where all stories should, at the beginning; you know, school, home life.

Kit De Waal 01:47

My home life was extremely strange, you know, I had a very unpredictable, difficult childhood. We were poor. My father is black, my mother's Irish, both immigrant parents. We never wore the right clothes, our house was a tip. We were also raised as Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jehovah's Witnesses, it's a cult. We were raised in a cult, a dangerous cult as far as I'm concerned. So we had this bizarre childhood. But fortunately, thank the Lord that I don't believe in, there were five of us, and we knew that it was all bollocks. I hated reading. So we had to read the Bible, so I've read the Bible 10 times at least cover to cover. I never voluntarily read a book till I was 21. You know, I was very studious, you had to be studious to be a Jehovah's Witness because you had to study the Bible. And I went to a very, very, very

good school that I hated. So yeah, no, I never wanted to be a writer. I never read books. I couldn't wait to leave school. I left school two weeks before I was 16. And goodbye.

Byron Vincent 02:50

When you're young, or maybe I mean when you're poor and young, your identity as a poor person is sort of fed back to you through the eyes of others. I remember being stood on the stairs at primary school when I was about six. And the teacher's daughter was coming down the stairs with two of her friends. And I was wearing a jumper that my nan had knitted. And they all started shouting, 'Pov, pov, pov, pov'. And I was wearing the wrong trainers as well, you know, 'pov' meaning poor person. And so you know, I was just wondering if there was any specific incidents that you remember, as a child, where you realised that coming from an underprivileged economic situation would be part of your identity?

Kit De Waal 03:32

I mean, I've written a memoir that just, only covers my childhood, goes up to 21. And in the memoir, I talk about lots of incidents, you know, where you come face to face with who you are, and the extent of your poverty and the extent of your difference. One I can remember very clearly is that two doors away, we lived on, in a middle class area, poor street in a middle class area. And two doors away, there was someone who lived in an identical house to us, two children, two parents, and they used to give us their comics, as, you know, a kindness obviously, charity. So once every three months, we would be sent round to collect the comics, and this was my turn to go and collect the comics. And on the table, there were cakes and little sandwiches. I went home and I said, 'Mum, it's their birthday'. And we never had birthdays; birthdays were not allowed in our house. But I could not conceive of a table with cakes and sandwiches on that was not some kind of major celebration. Because food came into our house; it never got to the cupboards. There was no stock of food. So I can remember that very clearly, because my mum said no, it wasn't their, it wasn't a birthday, that's how some people eat. And then obviously throughout my childhood, many, many instances of recognising the difference between my life from my neighbours'; my life and my cousins'; not only because we were black in a white Irish family and also mixed race white in the black community and Jehovah's Witness, but also just the fact that we had so many places that we didn't belong. We didn't belong into so many different communities that we fortunately became a tribe, but... I will take that children are resilient, and I know that resilience matters, but while I'm spending my fucking time being resilient, and working out how to survive this latest trauma, you're learning at school, you're having a good time, you're going to bed early, you're not having bad dreams. So of course you're resilient. But what are you doing, in your unattacked life, while I'm dealing with my attacked life? So of course you can say children, it is not necessarily a good thing, to have to bring your resilience to work, to school, to your life every single day, when the person that's sitting next to you is not having to be resilient.

Byron Vincent 06:01

Exactly. And when people say that children are resilient, what they actually mean is that children are adaptable. And if the environment that that child is adapting to is stressful, or toxic, then that stress and toxicity will be reflected back at the world. And we can't really blame the child for that, can we?

Kit De Waal 06:19

Absolutely, because you can adapt. Of course, we can all adapt to bad circumstances, and good, you know, you learn. As a child in my family, and in my circumstances, I thought I was normal. So I thought everyone ate like we did. I mean, I certainly knew that we were poorer than most people; I didn't know the extent to which I had a mad upbringing and a damaging upbringing till obviously, you know, much later, because you learn to normalise what you are. And also, I think children that grow up in difficult circumstances, the thing they learned so well, is code switching. So when I'm with my Irish family, I'm going to use these words, and I'm going to use those words, and I'm going to use that language, and I'm not going to talk about this, and I am going to talk about that. And so you just learn to meld. Now, that's a great skill to have as you go through life in that you are genuinely comfortable in lots of different circumstances. But it's not always come from a good place. It's sometimes come from a place of shame. One example I can remember very, very well is I went to school, and it was the first or second day of grammar school, and the teacher, nice word for her, but the teacher went 'round the class and she said, I'd like everybody, say your name and say what you had for dinner. And I'm like, I didn't have dinner last night. But what I was just thinking whatever the person says over there, that's what I'm saying. So she said fish and chips, so I said fish and chips, and she said what did, what did you have to eat? And she's doing this, this sort of motion of food, like rice in mouth. What did you have to eat? Because you couldn't have had fish and chips because you're black. I was massively embarrassed. It's almost like she could see that I had lied, because I'd said fish and chips and I didn't have fish and chips. But she wanted to know what exotic bananas and pineapple I'd had. Because you're black. You must be having something [No way] Oh yeah, I mean, thousands of those, you know, literally you just... and again, I hated it, it was a horrible experience. You get over it, you get over it. You get to an age then where you go, you fucking bitch. But at the time, you just think, this is my shame. This is about me. This isn't about that teacher. And those sort of, you know, what people call micro-aggressions. I don't even acknowledge that word micro-aggressions; they're aggressions. And you internalise them, and you deal with them, and you deal with them, and you deal with them. And as I say, the girl next to me is not getting the motion from the teacher about I don't believe you had fish and chips. You do adapt, and you bend with the wind and you learn to navigate all these different worlds that you're put in and these circumstances you're put in. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But it is extremely damaging when it's internalised.

Byron Vincent 09:09

A lot of the working class, underclass, whatever you want to call us; writers and artists, we all kind of know each other because there aren't that many of us. So I've had conversations before. And one of the experiences that seems pretty common to those of us that grew up in a more underclass environment is that we didn't really know how anomalous our experience was to wider society until we started mingling with middle class people, and you'd be at a dinner party, and you'd tell an anecdote and there'd be gasps. And you'd totally kill the vibe. How has travelling through the class strata as much as we ever do, if it's even possible, reframed your perception of your childhood?

Kit De Waal 09:50

So yeah, very similar to you that I've made jokes about being hungry, and I think it's really funny, you know, d'you remember that time that we didn't eat for two days and everyone's like, that's not funny at all. One example and it's a contrary example really, I can remember being with a group of friends, we were all poor. We are trading these terrible Monty Python-esque stories about how poor were you? But

yeah, but did you have that? And there was a girl sitting there, this middle class girl, and we were talking about just, you know, the trauma of growing up. And she said, I remember, it was really, really hard for me when my dad sold my pony. [laughter] And I looked, and I went, and she was deadly serious, and she was upset. Now she was genuinely upset that her dad, you know, in her world that is a trauma. It was an unpleasant childhood experience for her. And so you learn very early on that there are only certain people that will ever understand what you're talking about. You can have the most well meaning middle class friends who can intellectually understand it. You can't really understand it, until it's a lived experience from childhood, even if you had a lovely childhood, and then you became poor. Having a childhood of marginalisation, deprivation and damage is such a unique thing. It must be like being some kind of survivor. So I was asked to write this memoir by a publisher. And I'm like, Yeah, great, oh I'll write the memoir, and I've got, like, my 20 anecdotes about my childhood. And they're all funny. And I've learned to massage them so that they come out as this sort of, you know, story that will make people laugh. Let me tell you, it's the worst experience I've ever had, of really going back there. And let's take the massaging of the truth out of it. And let's have a look at the detail of hunger, of growing up thinking I would die at any moment because I was a Jehovah's Witness. It was a traumatic experience to really remember things that I had chosen to gloss over, in the retelling, as a joke.

Byron Vincent 12:12

It makes absolute sense that we'd gloss over it, doesn't it, because if we truly focus our attention on this stuff, when we recall it, then we re-traumatise ourselves. I have an incredible dichotomy that I choose to address in my trauma in art. Because on the one hand, I certainly don't want to be defined by it. I just want to make good art about the full spectrum of human experience. There's more to me than my formative experiences. But equally, those experiences were profound and impactful. I'm driven to tell those stories, I'm very passionate about telling those stories, because if we don't, who will? They either won't be told, or they'll be told by somebody who fundamentally doesn't understand them. You know, none of us want to be pigeonholed. But for a lot of very talented writers, exploring their formative discomfort and trauma seems like the only in to an industry that otherwise carries innate prejudices towards certain kinds of voices. So it's a complex thing. Do you think once we've shared these personal stories, it's possible for us to move away from being cast as the poster child for poverty or whatever issue it is that we're exploring?

Kit De Waal 13:21

I think we can move away from it, and we can absorb it and explain it and find a place of peace with it. I think if you're in any way in the public eye, no, you can't, because there's nothing a journalist likes more than a label. Oh, Kit De Waal, working class champion, you know, actually, I'm a person and I'm a writer first. And of course, I'm working class. But don't give me that label. I'm not having that. I'm a writer first; I write about working class things, you know, working class issues. I support all the working class writers. Also, I wasn't working class, I was subclass. The working class people, I thought were rich. That's the people with the cake on the table. And we didn't have cake on the table. So if you want to really get into who I am, you're going to have to find a number of different labels.

Byron Vincent 14:08

Speaking of labels, I tend not to use working class, mainly because most people didn't work where I grew up, I guess 'council estate raised' adds a little bit more context. But even that is still a very broad

church. There are innumerable flavours of working class, underclass people, and no particularly satisfying definitive boundaries, as far as I'm aware. You put together Common People, which is an anthology of works by working class writers. Was deciding who's working class an issue during that process?

Kit De Waal 14:39

If only I'd have had a quid for every email I got that said, 'Am I working class because my mum worked in a shop but my dad was a teacher?', or 'Am I working class because when I was 12, my dad won the pools?' You decide if you're working class, you know, it's nothing to do with money. There are impoverished gentry. It's not to do with how much money you've got in the bank. I always use the example of Wayne Rooney. Is Wayne Rooney middle class? No, he's not. He's a working class man with loads of money. It's not to do with education; I had a brilliant education. In our school, you learned Latin and Greek, and our teachers had mortarboards. And you know, we called them sir and we used a fountain pen. It was a grammar school and it was a great school. It's to do with access to privilege.

Byron Vincent 15:22

Well, this is a thing that gets my heckles up when talking about privilege. I think a lot of people when they talk about privilege, just mean stuff, you know, just mean material wealth. There's so much more to it than that, you know, networks, stability...

Kit De Waal 15:35

Language, accent...

Byron Vincent 15:37

...good health, you know, there's a whole sense of entitlement and confidence that can come from a financially secure environment. Not always, obviously. There can be a weird sort of survivor's guilt when we've escaped poverty, you know, because it is anomalous, because most of the people that grew up in the situations that we grew up in, are trapped in that situation forever. And you end up asking why me? You know, I had friends who were way smarter than I am, you know, very capable and talented. I think in my specific case, maybe there was something about having to adapt to a lot of different environments and having to be chameleonic and mask. Because of my neurodiversity, probably forced me to focus on people's behaviour and respond to it in a way that was helpful when attempting to escape my formative situation. And it sounds like there's a similarity there in our experiences, in that there was a lot of necessity for social dexterity, and adaptability. Do you think those early challenges stood you in good stead in later life when you were moving through the overwhelmingly middle class world of publishing?

Kit De Waal 16:41

Yeah. I think, like I say, we became a tribe, so there's five of us. And I'm the least arty in my family. So my mum was, you know, I'm just gonna use the phrase mad. She was, she was bohemian, she was very, very odd, she probably would have had some diagnosable mental health condition. But one of the things that she did do is that she would smother us with, 'Why don't you draw today? Why don't you draw a picture, draw a picture? Why don't you draw a picture, draw a picture. Here's some plasticine. Use plasticine, have some scissors.' I can't draw. But I'd have a go at drawing. And then you know,

she'd have a different persona. And it was go to church, but there was a lot of bohemian-ness with my mum. She bought a mouth organ, and a Davy Crockett hat and she used to walk around the streets with the mouth organ in the day, you know, she was crazy, but we normalised it. So we just thought, 'You can be anything, you can have a Davy Crockett hat, and a mouth organ. Doesn't matter.' And we also grew up in a very bohemian area of Birmingham called Mosley, where it really was in true 1970s hippie style. I mean, there was a woman with green hair. This is way before; way, way, way before punk. Fortunately, because we were strange, and the environment was strange, you sort of felt you could do all these things.

Byron Vincent 18:04

Sounds like there was a huge disparity in the experiences that you were living through as a kid, in this liberal, bohemian environment, in a strict Jehovah's Witness family. Being able to navigate both has obviously paid off.

Kit De Waal 18:19

Beneficial in lots of ways. You know, except that, I know that when I was having my bohemian lifestyle, I wanted to be Barbie. I wanted to have a sofa that didn't eat you alive when you sat on it. And I wanted to be warm, and I wanted to be well fed. I know I would have traded that weirdness, which later on served me, for a lot more stability and warmth when I was young. You know, I would have really liked a very, very normal childhood.

Byron Vincent 18:53

I bet you were a bit rebellious as a kid.

Kit De Waal 18:54

Oh yeah. So I left home when I was 16. I mean, you had to leave home if you weren't going to be a Jehovah's Witness, you know, you either got with the programme or left. So me and my sisters left and my brother left, and, sex, drugs and rock and roll. I mean, you know, I was brought up to believe that the world was going to end in 1976. This is 1976 when I've left home so, I haven't got much time. I'm like, I'm gonna die. So let's go for it. I've only got a few months of, what is that drug, I'll have that, I'll have that, I'll have that; I'll do that; I'll go there; I'll do this. Because I was packing it in. The end didn't come in 1976. Therefore it's coming in 1977, gasp, they're only a year out, do some more, do some more. So I had these five or six years of packing in wildness, that's the only way of putting it because I just thought, you know, I'm gonna die, but I want to have a taste of everything. But five years later, I'm knackered [laughter], I am nearly off my rocker, you know, really fairly damaged by the lifestyle. And I just thought I can't be doing this. I had some really, really bad experiences and I thought I can't be doing this, maybe the end isn't going to come. So I stopped taking drugs. And I just thought, you've got to get yourself together, you know that the end is not going to come, and start doing something else.

Byron Vincent 20:26

You know, you strike me as a very grounded and together and robust person, but life can deplete us; circumstances can deplete us. How did you manage to regroup when you emerged from those wilder years?

Kit De Waal 20:42

So, you wouldn't have said I was robust if you'd seen me then; I felt I was clinging on to my sanity by my fingertips. And I was really, genuinely clinging on to my sanity. And there were definitely months of extreme fragile mental health. And I had a really horrible experience with my mental health, I suppose it was a breakdown. And I knew it was to do with my drug taking and lifestyle. And I never took another drug. I mean, literally, it was overnight, just like, no. One of the very, very, very few advantages of being a Jehovah's Witness is that you had a sort of grasp of what I didn't want, I knew what I didn't want. And when I stopped drinking, stopped shagging about, stopped taking drugs and just got a job. I knew that if I stuck at this lifestyle, I knew I'd come to, I knew there was a sort of normality if I played the game, is what I believed. And I did play the game, you know, I did do as I was told, work really hard. And then sort of refound myself, you know, found I could laugh again, found I could let go of it and not be, you know, wearing this sort of straitjacket. I still don't sleep, you know, I don't sleep. You know, I've had insomnia since I was a very young child. And that only ever made it worse. So I don't sleep well. I have panic attacks and don't think they'll ever go. Sometimes they're vicious and then sometimes it's just like, oh, I can feel a panic attack coming. It can come from anything; come from crossing the road, coming from seeing a pork chop, doesn't matter what it is. It's just like, here's a panic attack. And you learn to live with those things, and to just accept it as part of you. But it is, some of it directly to do with my traumatic childhood, some of it to do with drug taking, some of it to do with the state of the world, and the absolute shit government that we've got that triggers me sometimes when I feel that I'm being gaslit by the bastards. And I think what I do now is I'm much more compassionate to myself and to anybody that's going through a hard time. Don't know, Boris Johnson, I wouldn't mind seeing you have a hard time. But for 99.9% of the world, compassion is the answer. You talked before about the people that I grew up with who I lost a lot of friends to difficult young years of drug taking, and I was scared. I never took heroin. I wanted to, but I was absolutely petrified of what might happen, because I'd seen it happen. So fear kept me safe in a lot of circumstances; got me into a lot of trouble as well. But thank God for being scared of drugs and being scared of some situations I narrowly avoided.

Byron Vincent 23:37

Oh, trust me, you'd have loved it [laughter]

Kit De Waal 23:38

Yeah! I know, I would, that's the problem. I know me. And I know exactly where that would have led me.

Byron Vincent 23:47

For a bit; and then, you know, the experience tends to sour. So there's wild and carefree Kit De Waal, there's literary Kit De Waal. But there's a considerable gap between those two stages, what was going on in the lost decades?

Kit De Waal 24:02

So I started working for the Crown Prosecution Service, and that's just because I had some good O-Levels, and I'd learned to type. I started reading the classics, just out of desperation, because that's what you do: if you haven't got any drugs, you find a different addiction. I became obsessed with reading, and I just read everything I could get my hands on, which was a lot of books, hundreds,

thousands. I also just worked and worked and worked and worked and then got married. And then when I was 37; I can't have children, I adopted a girl. And then I was 41, I adopted a baby boy, he was very ill and I stopped working when he got ill, to look after him. And when I stopped working, and I've worked really, really hard for these sort of 20 years of keeping it together and just doing what you should do. When I was 45, because I was still looking after Luke, I was just like, oh, I'll write a book, I'll be really good at it. I'll be great. I've read so many. How hard can it be? I'll knock out a book, I'll send it off to Penguin, they'll publish it in about three weeks, they put a wrapper on it. It's in Waterstones. That's what I believed. Surprise, surprise, I was shit at writing books, really bad, couldn't do it. And I was like, hang on a minute, why can't I do it? I was absolutely stunned that I could not write a book. It was the only time in my life that I'd ever felt ambitious about anything. I've never been ambitious about a job, anything. But here was this thing, that oh, my God, that's what I want to do with the rest of my life. So I just worked really, really hard on becoming a better writer. And it was really hard. And by the time I was 55, I'd written two novels, loads of short stories. But I also wrote, My Name Is Leon, which was the story I'd been trying not to write. Because it's about children in care. You don't write about children in care unless you've been a child in care and be very careful. It's so sensitive, and what do you know? I had these two children, obviously, by then; they'd been in the care system. I'd worked in the adoption panel, I'd worked with foster carers, I've worked in prisons for many years. But I knew that you don't really take someone's pain and make it into entertainment, that was my attitude. It's don't write that book. And then I'd written all the other books that had failed. And I thought, You know what, I'm gonna write that book. And I'm glad that I did. Because I wrote every person in that book with compassion, even Carol who's shit, you know, she's a shit mum. But I tell you, I get where she was coming from. I understood her. That was it. I was 56 by then.

Kit De Waal 24:35

I'm reading 'My Name Is Leon'; it's brilliant. And the voice and experience of a young kid in the care system feels very authentic to me. I was never in the care system. Lots of my mates were. So I'm curious about your research. Actually, what I'm curious about is, there is a lot of allotment-based horticultural information in the book. Is that all from Wikipedia, or are you green fingered?

Kit De Waal 27:13

So I had an allotment, so yeah, there's a lot about gardening. And I actually do genuinely believe in its power to heal. You know, there is definitely some sort of communion with the earth, and with seasons, particularly, that is very comforting. The spring is going to come, the winter is going to come, the blossom will come on the trees. There's something reliable and true about seasons and about weather and about plants. And I love that and also the reward that you get from planting something and seeing it grow is extremely nurturing and simple and pure, which I wanted Leon to have that experience and the rest of the research was zero. I did no research for it, because I have lived Leon's life, have been obsessed with sweets, and being quite poor and feeling a bit out of it. So have a lot of the men that I worked with in the prison system, who were Leon's, they had Leon's life. And also, I set it in 1981; I was 21 in 1981. So I know all about 1981 and the royal wedding and the price of a Curly Wurly. So it was zero. I mean, literally all I did do was research Curly Wurlys in 1981, and how much they were, do they melt if you hold them like that? Yes, they do. They do melt. So I did some of that research [laughter]. The rest of it was calling on my memories of being a child, and just the powerlessness of childhood. And you know, you did as you were told, and people talked over your head, and people would move

you around like a chess piece. And I hated that. And I know Leon hated it. So he's basically me. In fact, he's me, but I'm Sylvia. I'd be the crapness of Sylvia. But he was me as a child.

Byron Vincent 29:04

In the book, Sylvia buys Leon a red BMX. I am 47 years old, and I still want an 80s Skyway Street Beat BMX. I absolutely fetishize them, because I coveted them as a young person, and I couldn't afford them. Is there anything you were denied as a child that you massively indulge yourself in these days? Or have you been able to let go of all of that stuff?

Kit De Waal 29:28

There is no lid whatsoever on the things I missed out on. The first thing is we couldn't have birthdays. So I didn't have a birthday at all growing up. Just a Jehovah's Witness thing. So you know, on your eighth birthday, you know, you'd turn to your sister and you'd go it's my birthday today, and she'd say happy birthday. That's it done. Done. We never had Christmases. Consequently, my birthday is something like the Pope's visit. It's like the biggest event of the year. Everyone has to acknowledge it's my birthday. I'm 61, and I act like a four year old. Christmas is the most extreme set indulgences, you can imagine. But the worst thing that I have, and we all have, the five of us, is if your fridge is not about to burst, it's just not right. So my son left home a few months ago, and he was a greedy gannet and we had a packed fridge. But when he left home, I thought, well, I don't have to have this packed fridge now, I can relax a bit. So he came round one day, and I had just enough food for one person, for maybe two days. And he opened the fridge and he said, that looks like grandma's fridge. My mum's fridge. And I was absolutely traumatised. And I got rid of him, so I could go to Waitrose. I was very, very, very upset. You know, I'm laughing about it, but it hurt me. And I was like, I've got grandma's fridge, I've got grandma's fridge, I've got grandma's fridge, and I couldn't even hear him. Because I thought I'm never, ever, ever gonna have an empty fridge as long as I live, and my fridge is packed. And it's packed with stuff that I have to cook. Because why have I bought it? I bought it to try and solve something that went wrong 50 years ago. Stop trying to solve it with food, it's ridiculous.

Byron Vincent 31:21

I know I said I don't want to be pigeonholed. But in reality, these days when I'm making work, I'm aware that I'm making work for a largely middle class audience through Radio 4 or whatever. And what I'm trying to do is use these platforms or use narrative to engender empathy and build a bridge between these disparate experiences. You know, like I said before, I am compelled to do it. And I wonder if you feel the same way? And if so, is it something you resent? Is it something you're comfortable with?

Kit De Waal 31:49

I'm very comfortable with it. Me personally, I feel I have a responsibility to open the door so that whoever's coming behind me, if there are people coming behind me, can have an easier route to success in publishing, that's the only thing I can ever influence. I personally feel I have a responsibility, but I don't think everyone has a responsibility. So if there's someone with an identical upbringing to me or a worse upbringing to me or a different upbringing to me, I think they have no responsibility, except to do their art the way they want to. I think anyone that judges someone for not holding the door open, or for not feeling robust enough to give an interview to the paper about their background, or to just want to do their thing, and not represent anyone but themselves. They don't want to say I'm working class,

they don't want to say I'm neurodiverse, or I'm gay, or whatever, they just want to make their art. And we have to allow people to do that. Not everyone's robust enough. And even if they are robust enough, they might be private. And I think we do sometimes glorify the people that do it a bit too much. And for whatever reason, they don't want to do it, leave them alone. So I'm fine with it. But the next person might not be and I think they should be allowed their privacy.

Byron Vincent 33:09

You know, I touched on this before, but I think a lot of people from tumultuous or lower income backgrounds believe that their only opportunity to break into publishing or the arts is to prostrate their trauma. But as we both know, once our stories are out there, they're public property, and it's open season, which is fine, if you're savvy and aware of that stuff. But for most people, the most difficult elements of their lives are unresolved. What advice have you got for someone out there who might want to tell their story, or feel that they need to tell their story, who might not be so aware of the machinations of the publishing industry and media? How do they protect themselves? How do they prevent themselves from becoming trauma porn for middle class people?

Kit De Waal 33:55

So when I give interviews to journalists, the one thing, or anybody, I always say, I don't discuss my children's stuff. That's like a red rag to a bull to a lot of journalists. My children say to me, I don't care if you talk about me mum, but if my children want to talk about their shit, they can talk about it, it's not my business. And it's not anyone else's £6.99, so it's massively off limits. And I would say to anyone thinking about writing an autobiography, writing about trauma or memoir, that, yeah, someone's gonna pay £6.99 to excavate your shit and to have a look and to hold it up and to go, Oh, look at that. Now, I would say there are certain privacies everyone's entitled to, I would say to people that are considering writing about it, make sure that you have a place that you don't go. There are certain experiences that you don't talk about, and you hold close to you. You can talk about them later on if you want to. Everyone has certain things that are uber private, and maybe uber painful, and worth more than a £6.99 paperback, don't put it out there, don't cheapen it, don't lay it bare for people to trample over. There'll be some people that will read it with dignity, and with respect for your feelings. There are just as many people that will trample over it with shitty feet and make light of or not understand or misrepresent. And be very aware that that is out there; the world, as we know, is not universally a nice place. There's also things that I wouldn't write about; I'm very happy for them to be out there. My brothers and sisters aren't, but I can write about my trauma. My trauma is, of necessity, the trauma of my siblings, and certain things I would never speak about that affect my brothers and sisters.

Byron Vincent 35:51

Another consequence of writing autobiographical work or issue based work is that once it goes out into the world, there's going to be an emotional reaction to that. And often you can get bombarded with letters from people who feel a connection with you and want to share, sometimes in great detail, their own difficult and traumatic experiences. And that can be overwhelming. You know, we're not mental health professionals. How do we deal with that? How do we create some boundaries in that kind of situation?

Kit De Waal 36:21

Absolutely. And sometimes with the people that I work with, or mentor; writers that I mentor, and sometimes, you know, you do read difficult stuff. You have a level of compassion for the world, and also an acknowledgement that this isn't yours, you know, you can feel it, and you can have compassion, and then there has to be an element of self protection. In that you take a step away, you examine the effect that it's had on you, and you comfort yourself. Don't have the news on every hour so that you can get the latest bulletin of shit. You know, I gave my memoir to a couple of friends to read. And they said, I'm not reading that, I don't want to read it because they read the first bit, which is about being a Jehovah's Witness and said, no, it's too much for them. Triggering is the word. Make sure that as far as possible, you aren't reading and watching triggering stuff. I don't.

Byron Vincent 37:13

Yeah, and there's really nothing wrong with that at all. I've got mates who've experienced similar difficulties to me, and have messaged me when I've made a thing and said, oh, sorry, I've not watched that yet, or read that yet. I'm like, honestly, don't bother, it'll be massively triggering for you. If you've grown up in a place of difficulty, there is absolutely nothing wrong with staying in a place of safety and bliss.

Kit De Waal 37:40

Absolutely. Otherwise, you're paining yourself and you are, you know, nailing yourself to a cross again and again and again, to what end exactly? To prove that you can, or to be as good as that other person? I don't know what that other person's shit is. Maybe there's things they can't do, that I can do. But I know there's certain things about poverty, and especially where children are concerned, that I can't do.

Byron Vincent 38:06

Growing up in a working class environment, bigotry seemed to be very overt. And that's horrible. But in my naivety, when I was first able to move out of that world, I was drawn to middle class bohemian types, because they just seem to expound in ideology that I agreed with, you know, peace and love and all of that. I thought they must be such beautiful souls, because they express their sensitivity overtly. And they're not damaged, at least in the same way that we are back in the 'hood. You know, they must be the nicest people in the world. And the arts are populated with middle class liberals, who were very, very vocal about their attitudes towards social justice. But then as the years went by, I obviously got to understand the truth, which is that a lot of these people are lying. And this virtue signalling hides a wealth of personal prejudices, sexism, racism, classism, and also deep seated systemic bigotry, but it's so furtive and surreptitious, and sneaky, that we feel bad about challenging it because that commits the worst middle class crime of all, which is making things awkward. How do we address this stuff without us coming across as the ones that are unreasonable or angry?

Kit De Waal 39:30

Well, you know, if you're black, you've had a lifetime of this shit. But certainly by the time you're my age, you have had every panettone shade of racism from the, 'I didn't know I was racist, I'm a really nice person', to National Front, to 'I hate you, you're black, leave the country, I will kill you'. So you've had the in your face, Enoch Powell, Nigel Farage racism, and then you've had people saying, oh I don't

think of you as black. Or, God I bet you were good at sports at school, or whatever, you can dance, everything, you've had the whole gamut, you know, you really are an expert in letting a lot go, because you do let a lot go, you have to let a lot go. Otherwise you'd be in prison. And then knowing when you go, sorry, what do you mean by that? And then the other version, which is, 'Do you wanna fucking go? Let's go, let's have it'; having that type of discussion where you're really in someone's face, you know, most of my life is about calibrating those responses. So of course, you know, that in the arts, which is a very class-based structure and system, you are condescended to, you are overlooked, you have your accent made fun of or assumptions made about who you are, and the sort of art that you should make, the sort of books that you will read, the content of your art, that definitely all comes into play. And sometimes you let it go. And then other times you have to take issue with it, you absolutely have to, and should. So one of the reasons I wrote *Common People*, because the difference between working class writing and working class writers. So working class writing is when a working class writer decides to write about their environment, where they come from, and the issues that arise from being working class, even if it's in a piece of fiction. And then there's a working class writer, who is going to write science fiction, or you know, the next Jane Austen novel or graphic novel or a screenplay that has nothing to do with working class writing. When we get to the position where we can have a working class writer writing *Pride and Prejudice*, or writing whatever they want to write, and not expected to be constantly regurgitating their story, that'd be major progress. And one of the things I wanted to do with *Common People* is to show the breadth of the experience of being working class, from the two holidays a year, two cars, net curtains, to the very sub class generations of not working, your granddad didn't have a job. So you've never been working class. It's a different strata of working class. And I wanted to show the talent, that there is, the breadth of experience, the humour, the solidarity, of course, the problems. And for me, that will be the day when we allow working class people to write about whatever they want. And they don't have to keep going, 'Oh, I had a [???] and a flat cap and my dad worked down the mines', because that's what they think we're going to say, or, oh, yeah, I used to take heroin in a council house. That's it. That's the experience for a lot of middle class people. And we have to get away from that. And celebrate being working class, and all the great things that there are, about being who we are and coming from where we come from, as well as an acknowledgement of the issues.

Byron Vincent 43:10

The stories of marginalised and underrepresented people in this country are always told through the prism of the middle classes, or middle class sensibilities, whether that be on telly or in the media, because we aren't producing *Benefits Street*, or whatever. So the behaviours and experiences that those types of shows and that type of journalism, quote unquote, focuses in on is in no way representative of our diversity. It's just a lazy caricature. All of us are massively influenced by culture. So eventually, we become their idea of what we are, you know, 10 years ago, there was no Instagram influencers, and now that aesthetic is everywhere. There's a class culture war has been going on for ages. The middle classes tell us that we're *Benefit Street*, tell us that we're *Geordie Shore* and then mock and berate us, when we inevitably adopt the culture that they created. What the media tends to do is look at people in poverty and show their extreme behaviour. Whether that be criminality or violence, or brashness, even. It shines a spotlight on these behaviours that it deems to be sensationalist or negative. What it rarely if ever does is ask why these behaviours occur. What's the evolution of these behaviours? Where do they come from? What are the structures that create them? Where does the power lie? You know what I mean?

Kit De Waal 44:30

Where's the power and also while we're looking at the behaviours that are transgressive in some way, let's look at the strengths and the power and the things that there are to celebrate about that background. So much of having a working class life is equated with crime, criminality, broken homes, drug taking, and all the rest of it. And my god, take one step into the Boris Johnsons of this world. And let's look at criminality. Let's look at drug taking. Let's look at fraud. Let's look at poor family structures in that class, and stop attributing it only to working class lives.

Byron Vincent 45:29

It's not just I'd be fascinated to find out why all those Bullingdon boys behave in the way they behave. As a collective, they massively lack empathy. Is that some kind of attachment issue? Is it something to do with being abandoned at a very young age into what looks to me like a pretty brutal and adversarial education system? Cameras following them round, but instead of strong white cider, it's cocaine and instead of shoplifting, it's fraudulent PPE contracts. We live in an age where banks and governments can misappropriate billions, billions in public money, without any investigation. We have open corruption and cronyism in government. In that context, how are we supposed to tell someone, who's shoplifting a bit of food or hustling an extra fiver a week benefit money, that they're a criminal?

Kit De Waal 46:21

You're so asking the wrong person, because I was a magistrate for 10 years. So I've worked in criminal prosecutions. I've worked in criminal defence law for a long time, and I was a magistrate, and I used to train magistrates for a living. So I've seen the whole judicial system from, you know, lawmaking to law breaking to sentencing and prisons. I've seen it all in action. And I've been part of that system. And it is impossible to have any way to normalise or to make right, the fact that a woman goes into a corner shop and steals a five pound packet of sanitary towels, for which she will be fined and punished. And then a politician steals £45,000, for which he's told off; there is no justice. It's absolutely the most corrupt, and disgusting way to behave. And it's a system I would want no part of and is desperate for reform. The only way that it carries on happening is all about who has the power. I don't know if you saw recently, but some squatters occupied a Russian billionaire's house recently. So £25 million house in Kensington. And some squatters moved in, you know, in protest about the war in Ukraine. And what is the government response? Seven vans of armed police rock up to get rid of the squatters. I could ring the police today and say I was being attacked in my own home. And I would be very lucky if the keystone cops came within the hour, but I would never get that kind of response. The response is all about wealth and power. So wealth and power has been threatened by squatters. And so wealth and power are going to respond with these armed police turning up and getting rid of the squatters out of the billionaire's house. When people see that, people that have rung the police when something's gone wrong in their council estate, for example, 'We're being terrorised by gangs in our council estate', 'Oh are you? That's a shame'. We're certainly not sending the armed response unit in to protect you and your family in your house, because you don't matter. They're the same people that they're saying you don't matter that they want them to go and work a menial job, and not break the law or not have a spliff on a Saturday night. And again, sorry, why again am I keeping the rules? It's only when we have the sort of change of government where we have some equity between law and order, and who you are; some loss of hypocrisy that we are ever going to get to a system where there can be any respectful law

and order. It's like slapping a child every single day and then saying, be non violent, that child's going to learn violence because of the way you behave to it.

Byron Vincent 49:18

I feel incredibly powerless a lot of the time, when watching the news or observing some populist or draconian policy being touted. What can, you know, average schmucks like us do, if anything, do you think?

Kit De Waal 49:32

I think in as much as you know, your vote counts, and I do believe your vote counts. So using your vote at General and local elections, to vote for whoever it is that is hoping for judicial reform and legal reform, to vote for a compassionate, non hypocritical government would be a massive start. We've got three more years of a Tory government, you know, we're looking at, possibly, which is extremely dispiriting and something I mourn every single day. But there is a proverb that says tend the garden where you stand. And so there is actually really little we can do about this government apart from protest, write to your MP, stand up for what you think, you know, let's face it, not a lot is going to change about the criminal justice system by you telling your local MP you didn't like the way they voted. They'll go 'Yeah, okay, great, nothing's gonna change'. I do believe that the small actions that we take towards one another count, and that we can affect our local community, we can affect how we behave to one another, which engenders a sort of trust in the human race to help people that, you know, you can help people that, you know, a lot of people do commit crime because they're struggling, not everybody. But there are some people who commit crimes because they're broke, because they don't know any better, because they're damaged, there are ways that we can alleviate that for some people. So I believe in compassion as being a tool for social justice. And even if it's not a tool for social justice, it's the right thing to do to help people's transition, going through tough times, as far as we can in the garden that we stand; tend that garden so that someone might have an easier time, and therefore be less likely to commit crime or just generally feel able to cope with some of the most difficult circumstances that there are to be alive at the moment.

Byron Vincent 51:35

You know, even though this is a justice focused podcast, I had no idea you'd been a magistrate. That's really interesting. And I'm just curious, a decade is a long time to spend in that system. And, you know, social and political change often takes time. You know, I once heard government policy described as a supertanker, you know, it takes a very long time for it to turn around. But observing that environment over a decade, you will have seen changes. Yeah, what changes did you see? And has there been a lasting impact on the way you think about criminal justice?

Kit De Waal 52:10

Yes, so obviously, I've worked in criminal prosecution for a while. So I saw the world from that angle, but that was only about a year and a half, I think. Then I worked in criminal defence, that was about 15 years, and definitely saw how bad people do good things. Good people do very bad things. And I thought I sort of understood that when I became a magistrate, I saw the absolute greyness of good and evil. You could say, okay, there's a really simple law, never do a burglary, then you find out why people have done a burglary and you say, okay, well, wow. It's really complex. And I think what I learned from

being a magistrate was the greyness, of good and bad. So I can tell you one case that made me stop being a magistrate. So I used to sit in Stratford on Avon Magistrates Court, Stratford on Avon is a very, very middle class town. It's a tourist town, obviously, extremely pretty and extremely privileged with pockets of deprivation, like most pretty towns, and we're sitting in the magistrate's court. So this is a fines court. So it's a court for people who've got thousands of outstanding fines that they haven't paid. And this man comes and stands in the dock, looking a bit scruffy. And he's got thousands of pounds of fines. And so we listen to why he hasn't paid them. And then we retire, to come to a decision about what to do with this man. And as we walk into the retiring room, and I'm sitting with a woman who looks not unlike Margaret Thatcher, and a guy who was a butcher, and the Margaret Thatcher turns around, she said, I'm horrified that that man dares to come to court without ironing his shirt. And I'm like, love, he's got thousands of pounds worth of fines. Why has he fucking turned up, is what I'm thinking. But he's turned up. Surprise, surprise, he hasn't got an iron, or he hasn't got any electricity to iron a shirt. But he has turned up and in the witness box told all the reasons why he hasn't paid his fine. I didn't see the man's unironed shirt. I was just gobsmacked that the bloke's turned up because he knows he's gonna go down for a couple of months. And he's probably thought it's worth it. I'll get my fines wiped out, I'll turn up, I'll go to prison. I'll come out with no fines. And I just thought, Oh, God, I can't be part of that decision. And obviously, you know, very nicely say to her, maybe he hasn't got an iron, Catherine, you know, she's still horrified and she's got no fucking idea about what it's like to have no electricity or no iron, and to have got up early in the morning and rocked up in court knowing he's going away for a few months and until we change who becomes magistrates and we change people's understanding of who is standing in front of you in that courtroom, where have they come from, what's going on? What does their flat look like that they've just woken up in and got their unironed shirt on? Let's start from there. And that's one of the reasons I didn't want to be a magistrate is because that's what we're up against. That kind of attitude that is punitive, obsessed with details of appearance, until we can get a system that is fairer than that. We're always going to get people who will punish that man for not wearing a shirt as well as the fact that he hasn't paid his fines. Restorative justice, I think is a great idea. Citizens juries where people can come and say, I'm the person that burgled your flat, this is why I did it. And then the person would say, yes, you burgled my flat, and this is how it feels. And that has such good results and such good outcomes for everybody. The victim feels that they have looked at that person, and been able to explain the effect of the burglary on them, or whatever the case was. And the perpetrator or the defendant can say, maybe that wasn't good, I felt I've said why or I've been able to apologise and look you in the eye, or I have just had that opportunity to sit there and reflect on what I did. And hopefully not do it again. We saw it in South Africa on a huge scale, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where you have people who have murdered people in the name of apartheid, and you've had people that have lost people and victims and perpetrators coming together to find some way through a much more difficult situation. And if it can happen, not without some issues, but mostly successfully in South Africa, then that kind of response to crime and response to wrongdoing and response to hurt, can only do a good thing. Of course, it costs money. It certainly doesn't get votes. So it's only ever going to be something that's trialled within really tight boundaries, which is a great shame.

Byron Vincent 57:08

You know, it's a cruel irony that the things that tend to be effective and genuinely beneficial, are the things that wider society are more fearful of, or suspicious of, and therefore politicians will never put their weight behind.

Kit De Waal 57:22

It's also, it's murky, as well, you know, it takes a long, long time to get any results from restorative justice. They want, that man burgled the old lady's house, now he's doing two and a half years in prison. There's our result. There's our statistics. That's the way we like it.

Byron Vincent 57:39

Like you say, it's a massive grey area. And what's been occurring over the last few decades is that the guidelines that judges and magistrates are expected to follow have become much more stringent, it's become more difficult to reflect on the nuances of each individual case. So we have this blanket approach.

Kit De Waal 57:55

Absolutely. When I was a magistrate, you know, you practically got the fucking chart out. One burglary, one previous conviction, there's your sentence, goodbye. A computer can do that. That doesn't work. You need to have some kind of discretion as a magistrate, however, let's look at the people who are using that discretion. Because you don't want to give discretion to somebody who is going to complain about someone with an unironed shirt, because they can give them transportation if they had their way. And what you want to do is allow that discretion to weigh on the side of compassion and understanding.

Byron Vincent 58:31

Should we end on something positive? Might be a tough question, because I've got no idea how I ended up where I am. It's all been so haphazard, but for anybody out there who has aspirations to be a writer, have you got any advice in terms of steps they might take or what not to do, even?

Kit De Waal 58:46

So if I was talking to someone from my background that said, I want to be a novelist, and I want to get published. I would say, first of all, learn the craft. And that's got nothing to do with going to do an MA in creative writing, you certainly don't have to spend nine grand. I would say if you've got nine grand spend it on something else, and learn the craft a different way but learn the craft. So don't assume like I did, oh, I've read a lot of books, I'm going to write a book now. So learning the craft means practising the craft. It's absolutely no different to say I want to be a chef. So if you want to be a chef, you're going to start off make cottage pie. Then make something a bit more ambitious and read cookery books. Go to restaurants that you can afford to eat in and when you're eating a meal think about, is there lemon in this, is there garlic in this? So it's really about reading books, understanding how they've been put together. How has this writer built tension? Also, if you can afford to go and see and listen to your favourite authors talk about the craft, and then start writing, enter competitions. Write the thing that you're scared of. Everyone's scared of something. And just like me, who I wrote two thrillers before I wrote my My Name Is Leon, because I'm not going to write that book. Write that book. I could have saved myself a lot of time if I'd have written that book, because the thing that you're afraid to write really matters to you. And if something really matters to you, you're going to draw something up from your

gut. And it's going to be on the page. And if you have the combination of something you care about, and an adherence and respect for the craft, you're probably going to write something good. And then when you've written that good thing, let's say it's a short story, or it's a novel, get someone to read it, not your mum, not your boyfriend, not your best friend, but someone who might say, okay, this is good about it. And this isn't bad, this is bad about it, we need to change this incident, you need to work on. And keep going, be determined. You know, I started writing when I was 41, maybe 42. I got serious when I was about 45. And I got published at 56. That's a long time. It looks really short. But it doesn't feel like a long time, but it is a long time, it's 15 years. Don't wait for the conditions to be right. But write now, write flash fiction, that's a 300 word story, in your break at work. Write about what matters to you, what makes you laugh, write the book that you haven't seen, and write the thing that you just think no one else can tell the story. Only me because I know this story. I know that person. Above all else, value who you are, value your background, your life experience, the talents that you have, the love that you have, the compassion that you have, the anger that you have, value all of those things and get them down on the page.

Byron Vincent 1:01:47

Very strong advice there. Kit De Waal, thank you so much for talking to me. It's been an absolute pleasure. And I'm very much looking forward to reading the memoir. Give Kit a follow on social media to find out when that's released. That's all from this month's instalment of Justice Disrupted; thanks for listening.