

Cruel memories of displacement

A tale of squatting told in a graphic novel

Sean Alan Cleary

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a review of

Welcome Home by Clarrie and Blanche Pope. Minor Compositions 2022

When I picked up Clarrie and Blanche Pope's *Welcome Home* and saw the tower block on its cover, it shook out of me a memory of watching the BBC documentary series *The Tower: A Tale of Two Cities* about the privatization of the Aragon Tower at the Pepys Estate (housing estate is the British euphemism for public housing, or projects for Americans unfamiliar).

It was 2007 and I was living with a cousin at the time who'd once lived in the tower and because of this the whole thing struck her as something verging on a lived memory.

In the opening sequence of the documentary, scenes of the run-down estate are interspersed with interviews of young professionals, and the parents who bankroll them, touring models of the luxury apartments that would soon replace the estate's massive riverside apartment block, Aragon Tower.

A brochure for the future, an interview with the middle-class urban aspirant, cut against a man kicking in a door for eviction, a juxtaposition common in that era's investigative documentaries, and one that the director Anthony Wonke uses to jarring effect to play a joke on the pleasantries of the prospective middle-class urbanites and glossy brochures: there's no papering over the incongruity of their words, no hoarding plastered with pleasant renderings to block out the destruction.

Clarrie and Blanche Pope's *Welcome Home*, a beautifully composed graphic novel about a council estate on the verge of privatization, doesn't quite use the same heavy handed ironic juxtaposition. But in their graphic novel, depicting not the Pepys Estate's privatization, but that of a different tower block, in a fictionalized Newark of Zone 1 South London, the authors bring out the cruel ironies of memory and destruction central to any displacement.

In writing about council housing in London, it's a well-trod story of displacement and fear, abandonment, and greed at once, but the Popes do something more with the form. Like the 2007 documentary, the Popes utilize the empty language of the luxury flat brochure and the eager displacers to great contrasting effect. Their employment of this contrast is less jarring than in Wonke's directing, which allows the graphic novel to find a less cynical humor, a more inclusive and hopeful one.

Interspersed throughout the book are pages pulled from the new brochures, pages deftly drawn that splash big images of middle-class Londoners with smiling noseless faces beaming the uncanny quality of modern urban progress. One page bears the slogan "Cycle Recycle Be Cycle" spilled across scenes of smiling people shopping at the manufactured bespoke retail synonymous with London's urban middle class.

These images of the future are set in contrast to *Welcome Home*'s story, which follows a group of self-declared squatters. In the first sequence, the Popes give a run-down of how they break into and occupy an abandoned flat in the tower block in a comic, step-by-step process, a guide of sorts. They want to join and support community resistance to eviction, bringing with them their questions about belonging, activism, and how to square anti-capitalist activities with a life inexorably stuck within the capitalist framework.

Still, perhaps like all things, at the novel's core is a love story. Our main character, Rain, loves her friend Eva. Eva loves and doesn't love her boyfriend, Tomaks, a restless and sometimes lovable man caught between the worlds of his own life in London and that of his parents in Poland.

It's a love story that the Popes set alongside the central questions of the novel: how do we belong, and how do we band together to resist? How do we, despite everything, remain after the inevitable wrecking ball does its job on our communities?

Clarrie Pope, the visual artist of *Welcome Home*, brings to this plot a black and white set of drawings that blend sharp contrast with a cinematic sense of perspective as playful with its framing as the language is with the dialogue of its subjects. The book is full of small moments that can't be quite explained, but ground the action in familiar life.

In one scene, Rain talks with a childhood friend who lives in the building, and as she talks she plays with a clothes pin (she's in the middle of hanging laundry to dry across the living room of the flat). When, in frustration, she says something unkind about her roommate, Eva, that she's fallen for, the panel zooms in on Rain's hand.

She's pinched it with the clothes pin, as if the pressure from its soft wood offers her something of penance. It's a small moment, but these moments abound in this wonderful book. It gives *Welcome Home* a quality of a world you can open up and explore, finding each time something new, some new evidence of the past winding its way through the action.

This is what makes it worth reading, inhabiting, and feeling. It isn't just its art, the way it plays with its form—how official document and emotional expression inflect its playful use of the comic frame—and it's not even the wonderfully rendered story which layers activism, memory, history, and love, but instead, why you should find this book and read it is because it does all this with humor, wit, and a good dose of hope. When the wrecking ball comes—as it inevitably does—there's something left. There will always be something left.

Rain, the central presence in the novel, works as a caregiver in an old-age home (a nursing home for the Americans), and it's from her this sense of hope permeates the form of the story. Her imaginings, and her vision help anchor the sometimes-chaotic action and time-shifts, making the continuity of the different forms coalesce. In a single sequence we might jump from a memory, to an imagined hope, to a brochure for the old-age home, to the repeated moment of Rain opening the door of the facility with her employee badge. It's when all of these worlds come together for Rain that she begins to see that what she sees on the surface is just the beginning of what is there.

Like in the fictionalized tower in *Welcome Home*, eventually all of the residents of Aragon Tower in the Pepys Estate were evicted. I'm often transported back to that time. I used the time living with my cousin to travel, but, maybe ironically, that year I had been squatting, with varied permission, in her immobile caravan (a trailer of Americans) in her nettle covered garden. We watched the documentary. We booed the developers, and she remembered the families and fellow artists who'd lived there until the end.

She'd left years before, but as we sat there miles and years away in a cottage between rented sheep fields and a Christmas tree farm that stretched out into the summer gloom of Devon, it felt close. Then, seeing the gleaming banality of the new tower and its people, I felt hopeless, but these years later, *Welcome Home* offers something more.

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