

Mikey Walsh. 2010. *Gypsy Boy. My Life in the Secret World of the Romany Gypsies*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books St. Martin's Press.

Book review by

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Gypsy Boy is the autobiographical story of Mikey Walsh, a Romani boy belonging to the Gypsy community^[1] in the UK, who had to abandon his family because of his LGBTIQ identity. Throughout the book, the author describes his childhood in a Romani family, residing in caravans, moving to different campsites, earning a living via various formal and informal activities, segregated from the rest of society. Mikey's childhood is marked from the beginning by a violent relationship with his father who, unsuccessfully, tries to make him a bare-knuckle fighter, and the difficulties of blending into the patriarchal environment in which he finds himself. Here, sex is taboo, preventing him from speaking openly about his sexuality. Gender roles are sharply defined: men are expected to fight other men, experience sex at an early age with *gadjo* (non-Roma) and marry a Gypsy woman a few years later, spend nights drinking in pubs talking about fights and money, and prove their virility both inside and outside their community. As a result, all forms of sexuality which fall outside this model must be hidden and rejected, with no opportunity to face them. Mikey pays the tragic price for this when he falls victim to sexual violence committed by his uncle, which his father, even when told of it, refuses to acknowledge. Only at the end of the novel does the author have the strength to escape this circle of violence and find someone willing to accept and support him.

Seemingly, gender roles, physical and social distance, illegal activities, violence, and the tradition of bare-knuckle fighting depict a typical representation of "the life of Gypsies" in the UK. This group, like other Romani groups in Europe, has long been the object of external representations that, by taking some visible aspects of their lives and traditions, have constructed an orientalist and stereotypical image of "the Gypsy" (McGarry and Drake 2013; Matache 2016). *Gypsy Boy* offers a different perspective, from the inside, which provides a more complex depiction of the everyday life of a boy growing up in a Romani family. One example is the bare-knuckle fights which are traditionally associated with "Gypsies" and have attracted the attention of non-Romani artists and moviemakers eager to represent this "mysterious" and "underground" world. These representations, on the one hand, make the Gypsies out as bare-knuckle fighters, ignorant and attached to the family, and, on the other, as emotionless and bloodthirsty fighters. They are mere stereotypical sketches of a certain non-Romani idea of "the Gypsy", whilst failing to properly acknowledge their agency and humanity. In *Gypsy Boy*, the complexity behind the stereotype of Gypsy bare-knuckle fighters emerges, highlighting the suffering and pride connected to it and its relationship to violence suffered within non-Romani contexts. It is no coincidence that Mikey's fight training becomes even more violent after his father returns from prison.

The exclusion, prejudice, and violence suffered by the Romani community are key to Mikey's experience and grief growing up as a LGBTIQ Roma. Beyond reinforcing a circle of deprivation and violence, the exclusion of the Romani community from society and the stereotypes associated with them have contributed to the invisibility of the Romani LGBTIQ community. Few literary and scholarly works have so far dealt with the oppression suffered by this group, and this invisibility has prevented LGBTIQ Romani persons from emerging to support each other and fight prejudice within their own Romani communities (Baker 2015; Maté 2015). For this reason, Walsh's testimony represents an important contribution to the

1 The term "Gypsy" is here used to refer to a specific Romani group that lives in the UK and self-identifies with this term, in no pejorative sense.

struggle against the invisibility of LGBTIQ Roma and is located within the emerging production in this field (e.g. Jovanovic 2009; Maté 2015; Tišer 2015; Fremlova 2017). Apart from presenting an internal depiction of the life of Gypsies in the UK and their relationship with the external world, Walsh's book effectively describes the challenges faced by LGBTIQ Roma. The similarities between his experience and of other Romani LGBTIQ authors are numerous, such as the pain caused by the experience of "passing" or hiding his identity. As other authors have highlighted (Jovanovic 2009; Baker 2015), this reinforces the loneliness suffered by LGBTIQ Roma and aggravates it with a constant fear of "being discovered".

Another aspect that appears in Walsh's account is the intersectional discrimination that Roma LGBTIQ people suffer. He is rejected by his Romani peers because, although he hides his true sexuality, he disappoints his father's hopes to make of him a true "Gypsy man". On the other hand, he experiences the daily discrimination Roma face, leaving a school where teachers barely paid him any attention at all. All relationships with the outside world are marked by prejudice and violence – in school, in prison – and this prevents Mikey from finding understanding and comfort outside his family. He remains an outsider, both within his own Romani community and in non-Romani society. A touching passage that, for me, eloquently reveals the deep suffering caused by deprivation and rejection is the one where Walsh describes his short friendship with a dosser:^[2]

"I was a messed-up boy, and he was a dosser; both of us outcasts. But Kenny treated me like a human being, he cared what I thought and spoke about things other than fighting and money. He made me feel as if, just for a moment, I mattered, and for that I loved him."

Lack of recognition from others and the impossibility of finding emotional support even pushed young Mikey to consider suicide, more so than the physical violence suffered at the hands of his father.

Another aspect that I appreciated in Walsh's book was his use of irony in describing his family, his everyday life, the relationship between his people and their behaviour, and the external picture of the "Gypsy". In this description, he disrupts some of the most common stereotypes associated with his group: "Contrary to popular belief, they don't believe in magic, and the Gypsy 'curse' is no more than an age-old way of scaring non-Gypsies into buying something." In the same way, he does not victimise his people, breaking another stereotype usually associated with Roma: poverty – "we certainly weren't poor. Contrary to popular belief, not many Gypsies are. Our clothes were clean and well-made, and we had all that we needed and plenty to eat." At the same time, irony is used to engage with non-Romani readers and their prejudice: by referring to some of the most common stereotypes associated with this group – robbery, bad health-related habits, weird and kitsch looking – Walsh seems to ask us, non-Romani readers, to face our own prejudice and its subsequent painful consequences.

By the end of the book Mikey manages to escape his poor situation and to find a space within the non-Romani LGBTIQ community. Yet, Walsh never rejects his Romani identity and, until the end, expresses pride and love for his roots and family. This is evident when the book takes a romanticised turn by

2 The term dosser is used to identify a non-Romani person, usually homeless.

finding reconciliation between his LGBTIQ identity and his family – his mother, sister, and brother go to Mikey's marriage to a non-Romani man. His claiming of his Romani LGBTIQ identity can be read as a process of empowerment. He could have hidden his ethnic identity to non-Romani peers, but this would have represented a new denial and denigration of his true self, another manifestation of the violence of antigypsyism. As Fremlova and McGarry (2018) highlight, LGBTIQ Romani identity, from a source of discrimination and pain, can become an empowering and inspiring site in the fight against the prejudice affecting the whole Romani community. Furthermore, it is with this idea that Roma LGBTIQ activists started emerging recently across Europe, becoming active both within Romani and LGBTIQ movements. This new wave has the potential to fight prejudice towards LGBTIQ Roma both within and outside their own communities and *Gypsy Boy* is surely an important step towards this goal.

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