

Kristof, Nicholas, and WuDunn, Sheryl (2020) *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope*, Knopf, NY.

Review by Allison L. Hurst

In many ways, *Tightrope* is a counter-telling to Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018) and J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), books that made a huge impact on the national scene as distraught liberals everywhere tried to understand the rise of Trump. Both of those books were autobiographical accounts of moving 'up' and out of poverty, with a tendency towards eliding structural inequalities in favor of individualistic accounts of fighting the odds and bemoaning working-class culture. Kristof and WuDunn attempt something different here, telling stories about real peoples' struggles (many of whom are personally known to them) to push all of us to recognize 'our collective irresponsibility' towards those in need.

Our escalators of social mobility are broken. Our safety nets are full of holes. For too many years, we have watched our nation's leaders destroy the foundations of the American Dream. Thus, we are all complicit to some degree with what has resulted – a sadder and sicker polity. Kristof and WuDunn passionately argue, 'we need economic change but also cultural change, and ours would be a richer nation if it were more infused with empathy, above all for children' (251). They argue that while poverty *is* a choice, it is a choice not made by individuals, but by the country as a whole. 'The United States has chosen policies over the last half century that have resulted in higher levels of homelessness, overdose deaths, crime and inequality – and now it's time to make a different choice' (253).

JWCS readers may be aware of other accounts out there that, to my mind also reject the individualistic 'escape from poverty' discourse in favor of a more structural telling of what has been happening to the working class over the years. I would recommend anything by Joe Bageant, but particularly *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, Christine Walley's *Exit Zero* (2013) and two relatively recent books out of the UK – *Poverty Safari* (2018) by Darren McGarvey and Diane Reay's excellent 2017 memoir/critique *Miseducation*. The difference here is that *Tightrope* is not an autobiographical account, as are all of my above recommendations. Kristof and WuDunn are a rather privileged pair, and, despite their great empathy and concern for friends, neighbors, and perfect strangers, the story they tell remains at arms' length. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is to be noted. There is a certain level of privileged liberal hand-wringing that may turn some readers off to their message. I hope that isn't the case, as their message of collective responsibility is an important one to hear.

The book is full of stories – hard stories to hear, hard stories to bear, hard stories to forget. Many of these stories are of people Kristof knows from his hometown of Yamhill, Oregon – a town only 30 miles from the hipster metropolis of Portland but quite different culturally. Rural, conservative (a majority of the county went to Trump in 2016), and far from prosperous, Yamhill may best be known as the hometown of Kristof (and Beverly Cleary, I must add). *Tightrope* begins with a clever and heart-breaking chapter titled 'The Kids on the Number Six School Bus,' which kids included Kristof and several others whose

lives were either ended prematurely or thoroughly stunted through addiction, poverty, and violence. Their lives resemble a tightrope walk, possible to get to the other side but not easy at all, despite good intentions. The sometimes-gory stories of the falls off the tightrope are peppered throughout the book.

Kristof and WuDunn attempt, and often succeed, in exploding the Left/Right partisan default setting we seem to be operating under today. You want us to consider individual responsibility when explaining poverty? Sure, but let's not forget collective irresponsibility as well. We should make America great again? Let's do it. Bring back good jobs, raise the minimum wage, repair the safety net. Throughout they chide both liberals and conservatives for their short-sightedness and partisan doubling-down. For example, when liberals denounced Moynihan 'as an out-of-touch racist', they failed to give heed to his warnings about family stressors in poor communities. Of course, some of their attempts here are less successful than others, and their arguments are not always as strong as they could have been with some social science to back them up, but the attempt has value. I think they are right that we need a new collective understanding of what has happened to us as a nation in the last several decades. I don't think anyone living through the American response to the global pandemic would argue with that.

Perhaps it was because I read this during quarantine that I found the chapter on healthcare one of the strongest. Chapter 11 ('Universal Healthcare: One Day, One Town') begins with a story, as does every one of the twenty chapters in the book. Remote Area Medical, known for providing free dental services in poor nations around the globe, began servicing Americans in the last decade. The first day Stan Brock pulled up to Sneedville, Tennessee with his dental office in a pickup truck, 150 people lined up for help. Many had never been able to afford a dentist before. On the day Kristof and WuDunn visited, one man was having 18 teeth pulled. Remote Area Medical now puts on more than seventy 'health fairs' around the US each year. That this is necessary is appalling. Is it any surprise that we have an opioids epidemic when there is so much physical pain out there in the 'heartland' -- can you imagine walking around every day of your life with 18 rotting and rotten teeth? Other stories and facts presented in this chapter are similarly outrageous. For example, two women, on average, are still dying *every day* in this country from pregnancy complications (153). The conservative campaign to limit poor women's knowledge of and access to contraception, and reproductive healthcare more generally, has resulted in a literal bloodbath.

This is a gut-wrenching book. It is not without its faults, but being overly shy with the perilous state of our fellow Americans is not one of them. At first, I found phrases such as 'as pain seeped across America' (20) a bit too much. After reading the entire book, and looking around me as we scramble to find masks and tests and basic protective gear for our healthcare workers, and hearing a President suggest we ingest bleach to cure ourselves, I think perhaps it is just about right.

Reviewer Bio

Allison L. Hurst has been a proud member of the Working-Class Studies Association for many years and currently serves as its President-Elect. She is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Oregon State University, where she teaches courses on theory, qualitative research methods, and class and inequality. Her publications include *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades and Double Agents* (2010), *College and the Working Class* (2012), *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* (2016, co-editor with Sandi Nenga), and *Amplified Advantage: Going to a 'Good' School in an Era of Inequality* (2019).