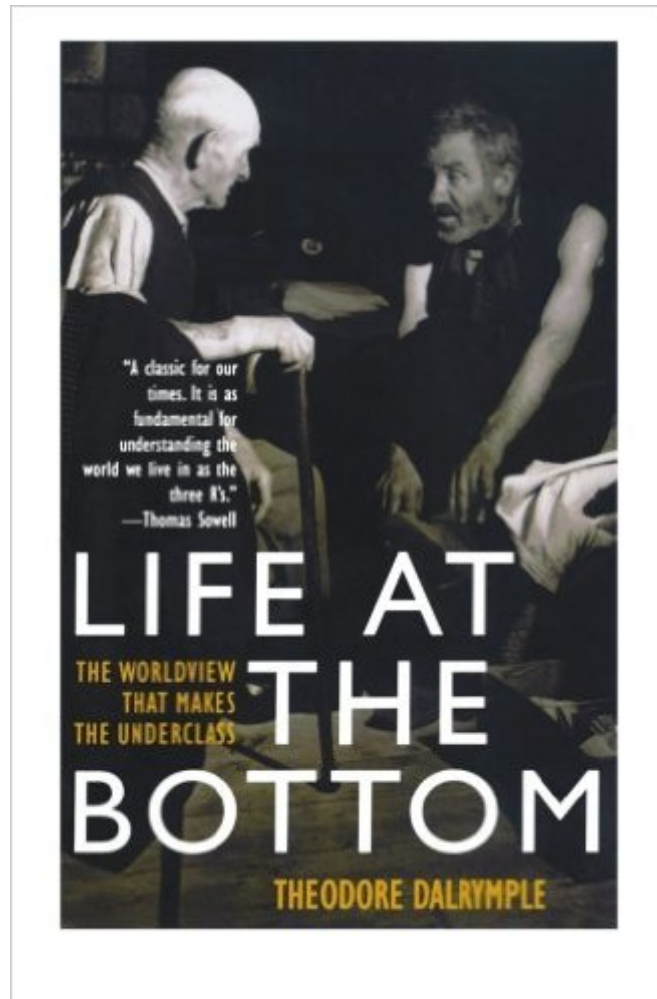


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Life At The Bottom: The Worldview That Makes The Underclass



Synopsis

Here is a searing account-probably the best yet published-of life in the underclass and why it persists as it does. Theodore Dalrymple, a British psychiatrist who treats the poor in a slum hospital and a prison in England, has seemingly seen it all. Yet in listening to and observing his patients, he is continually astonished by the latest twist of depravity that exceeds even his own considerable experience. Dalrymple's key insight in *Life at the Bottom* is that long-term poverty is caused not by economics but by a dysfunctional set of values, one that is continually reinforced by an elite culture searching for victims. This culture persuades those at the bottom that they have no responsibility for their actions and are not the molders of their own lives. Drawn from the pages of the cutting-edge political and cultural quarterly *City Journal*, Dalrymple's book draws upon scores of eye-opening, true-life vignettes that are by turns hilariously funny, chillingly horrifying, and all too revealing-sometimes all at once. And Dalrymple writes in prose that transcends journalism and achieves the quality of literature.

Book Information

Paperback: 284 pages

Publisher: Ivan R. Dee; Softcover Ed edition (March 8, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1566635055

ISBN-13: 978-1566635059

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.7 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (293 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #6,393 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in [Books > History > Europe > Great Britain > England](#) #4 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Policy](#) #5 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Mental Illness](#)

Customer Reviews

I got this book after listening to Mr. Dalrymple interviewed by Dennis Prager, a radio host based in Los Angeles. I was raised in a lowerclass family which fell from the middle class when my dad would not stop drinking and spending money on "toys" for himself rather than things like the rent and the electric bill. We moved from cheap apartment complex to cheap apartment complex. Like many of the individuals described in *Life at the Bottom*, my own father found blame for his

"misfortunes" in everyone and everything but himself and his lack of selfcontrol when it came to alcohol, money, and his temper. I have watched friends raised in middle class homes end up on welfare or living hand-to-mouth because they have not one or two, but three or more children with three or more men (who, of course, pay no support and never marry the women), and their low-level office jobs cannot possibly pay for the needs of a family of 4. Yet without exception the women blame "men" as the foundation of their problems, not their own promiscuity or their apparent lack of knowledge concerning the rudiments of birth control. It was with these experiences in mind that I read *Life at the Bottom*. Mr Dalrymple shows in essay after essay how the choices the underclass in Britain make determines their destiny. There are countless parallels to American life - the rampant gambling that goes on in casinos and in bingo parlors (and those who cannot stop then blame the casino for their problem!); the spending of needed cash on lottery tickets; the horrible standard of education that graduates illiterate young adults who can barely add in their heads; the ignorance of science, history and math that students display; women who go from one violent man to another, making baby after baby with them and then saying they "love him" and cannot leave him. The stories are pathetic and frustrating because the "victims" are their own hindrance. They live in some sort of parallel universe where they have no more control over their emotions or actions than a squirrel or a worm, and blame their problems on the government, the bureaucracy, their parents, the pubs, the casinos, their teachers... everyone carries the victim's sin on their own shoulders, because the underclass itself is not responsible for anything. One story that has stayed with me was one in which Mr. Dalrymple says the patients he sees often refer to their violent, brutish, immoral behavior as "not really me," as though inside the skin of a drunken, gang-banging wife-beater beats the heart of a noble knight that is too deeply imbedded to be truly exercised. Some reviewers have noted that the author does a lot of complaining, yet has no answers. That is the point of the book, isn't it? There is no one outside of these people who can change them. More government agencies? More welfare money? More policemen? What? The entire theme of the book is the relinquishing of personal responsibility by the underclass so that they can live and die as they see fit and someone else can foot the bill. How many young men in Britain are forced to rob cars, rape women, steal food, skip school, have numerous children by numerous women, tattoo and pierce themselves, drink themselves silly in pubs, etc? What magic pill is there for these miscreants that does not come from inside the individual himself?

The review from *Publisher's Weekly* makes many points, but begins with a fallacy: Dalrymple's repeated claim is precisely that these people are NOT 'trapped in destructive behaviors and

environments' but that most of them, while they may well feel trapped, are there as a consequence of their own choices. His examples and insights are particularly useful for Americans who naturally associate these behaviors with our own experience, where they correlate with race. Dalrymple makes it clear that they do correlate with culture (e.g. different populations from India now residing in Britain have very different crime and drop-out rates, though they all look 'Indian' and so should all have the same experience of racism or non-inclusion). The book is a collection of shorter pieces and could have used some editing of content (to reduce repetition) and of style (the vocabulary editing for the U.S. reader is inconsistent), but the cumulative evidence of Dalrymple's experience cannot be waved away. As he points out early on, if a person's fate in life is pre-determined by his social and physical environment, then we should all still be living in caves... Certainly in a modern and liberal society, citizens have the right to pursue their own lives and their own visions (and versions) of 'happiness.' But whether the rest of us should subsidize the layabouts is another question. Publisher's Weekly is quite wrong in saying that he 'offers few concrete or theoretical solutions.' Dalrymple is crystal clear on that: take responsibility for your own life; the greater community will help in an emergency, but will not provide a home and a meal ticket for years. This book is worthwhile reading for everyone.

Some books you either love or you hate. This is one of those books. I myself thought it was one of the greatest I've read all year. 'Life at the Bottom' touches on a variety of topics, and it is to Dalrymple's credit that such a coherent, clear-eyed critique emerged. Something is rotten in the state of modern times. You know it; I know it. At the bottom of all this is a desire to be excused from any restraint and responsibility. Dalrymple cites from his personal experiences of what well-meaning social theories have wrought on those it meant to help. The results are plainly hideous, but at the same time are glossed over behind talk of sensitivity, diversity and tolerance. Each essay is meandering but interesting - there is no filler. The incoherence of multiculturalism is highlighted in 'Reader, she married him-Alas'. The darker side of freedom is portrayed in 'Freedom to Choose'. My personal favorite was 'Tough Love', which shows the fruits of the sexual revolution in mature bloom. The results seem a mixed blessing at best, and not only because of the unwanted children, the abortions and the broken homes. We demand sexual freedom for ourselves but fidelity from others. A recipe for jealousy if ever there was one, and it is noteworthy that jealousy is the most frequent trigger for violence between the sexes. This incoherence is a large cause for the ever-growing surrealism in our society. In the end, this book shows that our attitudes author our destiny. Dalrymple says what is considered heresy in many circles - that the poor are there because of life choices. But

having spent my childhood among the poor, there are many things in Dalrymple's Britain I immediately recognize. A lack of responsibility, a sense of entitlement, and a vague anger toward any example that would otherwise force them to ask: "why did he make it and not me?" Sadly, they rarely look at the most likely culprit for their failures: themselves. Everyone else is to blame, not me. One must wonder when Dalrymple's essays cease to be anecdotes and start to show the deeper flaws of our progressive ideals. As I read 'Life on the Bottom', I kept hearing myself think: Finally the truth. We've fought the battle for human rights; the battle for human obligation lies ahead.

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