

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

November 12 or 14, 2024

Rough Sleepers by Tracy Kidder

Conversation with author abridged from:

<https://www.boston.com/culture/books/2023/01/18/tracy-kidder-jim-oconnell-rough-sleepers/>

Boston.com: Tracy, can you talk about when and why you realized you wanted to write about 'rough sleepers' and follow Jim's work in Boston?

Tracy Kidder: I'm always looking for a good story, and I was accompanying a guy I was writing about who got a ride on [[Pine Street Inn's](#)] [outreach van](#). And I was fascinated by this world that was suddenly revealed to me, really, in plain sight. But, like many of us do, I performed that slight of mind where you manage not to see these people.

Jim's relationship to these people who were really strangers to me struck me as being quite remarkable. It would even be remarkable if they hadn't been homeless, if they had just been regular doctor's patients. Because as Jim told me, he was taught at Mass. General "you can be friendly, but not a friend." But these were clearly warm relationships. ... I wasn't looking to write about homelessness. In fact, if that had been presented to me as a possible topic, I probably would have said no, no one's going to want to read about homelessness. But this was different.

I had been with [Paul Farmer](#) [[writing "Mountains Beyond Mountains"](#)] and ... that stuck with me. I had seen a part of the world that I hadn't really known existed, hadn't seen. And now I was seeing it in Boston. So I felt it was an important subject, but also a really interesting story.

Do you feel you've been impacted or changed by what you observed and getting to know some of the patients that were served by the Street Team at Boston Health Care for the Homeless?

Kidder: I hesitate to say I've been changed. I mean, in some superficial, not very important ways. Suddenly what had been a muffin shop was now the place across the street from where this couple would sleep with all their bags and their witchcraft equipment. A colorful couple. And a storm at sea makes you think in the winter about the people you've gotten to know. When you see someone sloshing down a doorway on Bromfield Street, you think, I wonder who was sleeping there last night.