Poverty was in the news in the UK for much of 2015, not least because the Conservative government which was elected in May 2015 decided in July to redefine child poverty. Moving away from the definition of child poverty as living in a household with an income of less than 60 per cent of the UK average, instead, the new measure will include worklessness, debt and addiction. The Child Poverty Act 2010, which set the 60 per cent marker had all party support when it was passed, but the new measures have been widely criticized for clouding accountability and making the measures of poverty more confused.

In this context, Daly and Kelly’s book examining the lives of 51 families living in poverty in Northern Ireland during late 2011 and early 2012 is important and timely. This theoretically informed and empirically detailed study provides rich insights into the ways that families cope with life on a low income, all the pressure that brings, and the choices people have to make. Daly and Kelly set out the four aims of their book in the introduction: to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on families and poverty; to explore decision making about resources in families; to look at people’s support networks, particularly the roles of family and friends; and, lastly, to examine how people’s social interactions are affected by income shortages and how this impacts on the public face that they show. By examining family life from an economic viewpoint, they shed light on so much more than just economics, showing how a lack of financial resources impacts on many other aspects of life, and in particular how parents go to great lengths to provide for their children and to hide their poverty from them.

The authors present detailed quotes from many of their respondents, enabling the participants in the study to tell their stories in their own words, which provides narrative power throughout the book. This also means the reader can see both the public and private faces of the families, as they explain, for example, how they manage to pay for their children’s school trips, how they feel about whether their child’s teacher knows about his or her home situation, and how it feels to still need support from your mother when you yourself are a mother in your thirties or forties. Anyone who has ever been short of money will feel a stab of recognition at hearing how it felt to have
added up incorrectly while going round the supermarket, and the shame and embar-
sament at having to put items back once at the till. The authors also
demonstrate how although inadequate income featured in all the stories, some
families had members in work, while many had worked previously and
wanted to return to work.

However, a high prevalence of health problems, in addition to the chal-
enges faced by lone parents in finding work that fitted in with their child care
responsibilities, meant that for many, work was unlikely to be a straightfor-
ward route out of poverty. While there is an emphasis in current rhetoric
about poverty, if not in policy, that poverty is at least partly a result of failure
to adequately manage resources, Daly and Kelly’s work refutes claims that
low income families are poor managers. In discussing the structural factors
which influence people’s poverty, particularly the cumulative impact of factors
such as low income, relationship breakdown, lone parenthood, illness or dis-
ability, they demonstrate the limits of an approach which seeks to place blame
for having to struggle on the people who are struggling; as they explain, a pure
agency approach is insufficient because participants in their study ‘exercised
agency all the time’ (p. 191) but were hampered by structural constraints
beyond their control.

Having set out with four aims for this book, Daly and Kelly have hit all
their targets. The rich empirical data alone should make this book a classic
in the social policy and sociology literature on families. Their theoretical con-
tribution comes from the solid foundations provided by the data, enabling
them to provide new theories on the relationships between family life and liv-
ing with poverty. As well as becoming a social policy classic, this book should
also be compulsory reading for politicians and policymakers, particularly the
current incumbents at the UK’s Department for Work and Pensions. It might
give them the insight which they currently appear to be lacking.

Sally Brown, Edinburgh Napier University

Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain
BY LISA MCKENZIE

Since I agreed to review this book in the summer of 2015, the profile of its
author Lisa McKenzie has been raised considerably due to her outspoken
views, political bedfellows and the resulting media attention. It is not the pur-
pose of this review to discuss these matters, but it can be argued that her
recent notoriety is the logical extension of the standpoint she has chosen to
take; a standpoint which is made clear within this work. The book is not
just an academic text, it can be seen as having a wider audience similar to
Mary O’Hara’s Austerity Bites (2015), a book which arguably owes more to
the journalistic than to the social scientific tradition. The debt owed to the
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