

A writer and photographer whose storytelling has highlighted the lives of poor people in America has spent several weeks walking through some of the most deprived areas of the United Kingdom / By MADOC CAIRNS

Britain's back row

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CHRIS ARNADE walked away from the perfect life. By most standards, he tells me, he had it made. From a humble start in a small town, his life unfolded into something very like the American dream: hard-working, talented guy goes to college, completes PhD, makes it to Wall Street and a high-powered, highly-paid job. A few more details – a home, a wife, a family – and the picture completes itself. Success. He was, as he'd write later, sitting in the front row of life. Then he threw it all away.

It all started when he started to go to the places he was told not to. Arnade had spent 18 years as a bond trader by 2011. The 2008 crash had changed a lot for a lot of people, but, he wryly reflected, not for bankers. His days were spent in a New York bubble, working with and talking to people very much like him: similar jobs, similar views, similar stable, prosperous futures. Arnade had always taken photographs, as a hobby; he'd always gone on long walks, for 10 or 15 miles, time to unwind and think. One day he walked into

Hunts Point, the Bronx. Right into a very different kind of New York. Right out of his comfort zone.

He would talk to people, and listen to their stories, and, eventually, take their photographs. Along the way, he started to learn. Always gifted academically, Arnade's capacity to absorb and apply information had taken him from a small town to the biggest city in America. But walking through Hunts Point – and other down-at-heel, deprived areas of New York, exactly the places his friends and colleagues didn't go to – he started to learn about the world in a different way.

ONE OF THE most immediate lessons of his time with the residents of skid row – alcoholics and street preachers, the homeless and the nearly so, addicts and indigents and those struggling to get by – was that, compared to them, he knew very little. "It was a slow and shocking revelation to me," he would later write in *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*, "one I kept trying to fight." He

read three newspapers; kept up with current affairs; donated to charity; held the same progressive views as everyone around him. But the more he talked to the people he knew people like him didn't talk to, the more he realised how ignorant he was about everyday life in the city and country he called home.

That epiphany – and the curiosity it fired – changed Arnade's life for good. He kept walking, taking pictures, talking to the people he met, listening to them, feeling himself change in the process, letting himself learn. The "front row" holds all the power in America, he tells me: all the money, all the culture, all the control. Those at the "back row" – those in poverty or close to it, the uninsured and undocumented, sex workers and nomads and the severely mentally ill – never have their stories told. So, when his job let him go about a year after his first visit to Hunts Point, he knew what to do. He set out to tell them.

He's still surprised at the traction he got, he tells me. Starting to write for *The Guardian* in the US, one of his stories – about how

Arnade walked through some of the poorest areas of England, talking to and photographing the people he met (left and below)

McDonald's functions as a community centre for poor Americans – went viral. Walking through deprived communities, Arnade wrote, you notice, looking closely enough, that McDonald's is far more important than you might think. There, you can find warmth, a place to sit, company: all for the price of a cup of coffee. The collapse of the industrial economy and the small-town economies it sustained, the withering of civil society, the privatisation and policing of public space: McDonald's stood athwart the tide of history, paper coffee cup in hand. "If you want to understand America," Chris tells me, "go to McDonald's."

WHAT HE LEARNED about politics on the "back row" caused a stir, too. In the run up to the 2016 elections, Donald Trump was derided as a celebrity candidate; dismissed as an unserious extremist, a loudmouth without an electoral hope in hell. Arnade wasn't so sure. The "front row", he said, had many virtues, but there were places they wouldn't walk; neighbourhoods they'd know, without being told, that they'd never visit, types of people they'd never speak to. If they had, they might have picked up on the energy and the anger, crackling in the rust belt, surging on the back streets. They might have realised, as Arnade did, that Trump had a serious chance.

"The front row and the back row have different attitudes to politics," Arnade tells me. "How highly educated, news obsessed, front row types think about politics is almost entirely divorced from how most people think about politics. Which is rarely. Most people in the back row treat elections like most front row people treat the NFL – something in the background that doesn't impact them. Sure they might tune into the Super Bowl, because everyone else does, but they don't have a huge stake in it. Sure they might have a team they root for, but they are just watching, not playing. So why care too much?"

It's a big gap. One of many. Meeting ordinary people on the streets of left-behind neighbourhoods, counties, cities, Arnade kept running into gaps in his social vocabulary: concepts and feelings he couldn't make sense of with his current set of presumptions and prejudices. He tried to stick it out, tried to "listen with humility", he tells me, tried to keep learning. "I stayed in a place long enough for it to change what I believed," he says. I ask how long he did that for. On and off, he says, five years.

In those five years his whole world view changed. Living in a stable world of credentials and politesse, education and commerce, he thought he had an expansive, enlightened mind. But on the back row, he floundered. People on skid row valued different things: faith, place, meaning, hope. Often they valued immaterial things more than material ones. When you see someone living in poverty, he

tells me, you might think they want money first. Talk to them, listen to what they have to say, and a different picture emerges. They want respect.

For all that front row people like Arnade wanted, sincerely, to help others, they didn't live with them. They shared a city but not a language, a means to know and be known through eyes radically different to your own. Maybe forms of community, such as religion or social clubs, bridged that gap. Maybe the gap itself wasn't so wide before the factories closed and the suburbs boomed. But the gap was here to stay, now: two countries, two rows, each alien to the other. That insight brought Arnade from the back streets to the front row press – *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* – and to write *Dignity*. Published in 2019, it was a national bestseller.

Then the pandemic shut the world down. When it opened up again, Chris went back to his beginning. He started walking. He hasn't stopped yet. Peru, Thailand, Turkey, Korea: for the past year, he's been walking across cities all over the world. He takes photos, talks to locals, get a sense of where the area's coming from, where it's going. "Walking forces you," he wrote on the Substack newsletter he started to track his travels round the world, "to see a city at its most granular. You can't zoom past anything. You can't fast forward to the 'interesting parts'. It is being forced to watch the whole movie, and more often than not, realising the best parts are largely unseen by tourists." This summer, he visited England. He walked through some of the most deprived areas of the country: Liverpool, Luton, Wakefield – and some of the richest.

The gulf between the two is even starker than it is in America, he says. When I first met Arnade, at an upmarket Chelsea pub, he gestured to the skyscrapers in the distance; the salubrious residential flats all around, the well-dressed drinkers next to him, and said – with a tone somewhere between condemnation and provocation – that people here had no idea what life was like outside London. No idea, he repeats. He'd been spending the last few weeks, he tells me, talking to broken

people "eaten up by drugs and addiction", in towns a long way from Chelsea: Huddersfield, Luton, Leicester.

As in America, the areas he walked through in England are ex-places; towns where factories provided well-paid, skilled work to people with no degree, maybe little formal education. Not front row places, but not back row either. Churches and trade unions stiffened civic sinew; local high streets preserved an economy on the human scale. All that is over, has been for decades. What's left are broken services, broken economies, broken people. A void, waiting to be filled.

And what filled it, in the UK, was Wetherspoon plc. The pub chain is everywhere, Chris tells me, and – struggling to contain his admiration – it's really good. Nice, cushioned chairs; cheap drink; food that isn't restaurant quality, maybe, but certainly won't kill you. If you want to understand America, go to McDonald's, Chris repeats to me. But if you want to understand Britain, he says: go to Wetherspoons.

Having a pub function as an ad hoc community centre has downsides, Chris thinks. He finds the UK's attitude towards alcohol unhealthy – and a little disturbing. "I had to leave the Wetherspoons I was in on Saturday night in Liverpool," he admits. "It was getting too depressing." Arnade's no puritan: he likes to drink, and he's worked with addicts of all kinds for a long time. But in Britain the culture seems geared towards extreme drinking in a way he hasn't seen before. "People seem proud of it," he says, wonderingly. "They go out determined to get wasted."

BRITAIN'S DYSFUNCTIONAL relationship with alcohol might go hand in hand with our irreligion, he thinks. Here, "place has replaced religion. History has replaced faith. You meet people who've been there [in the same town] for 12 generations ... The Anglican and Catholic Churches seem pretty dead here," he says. Immediately, he qualifies: "... as the centre of people's lives, I mean ... Pentecostal Churches seem to be doing really well."

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Muslim communities he encountered appeared devout: but the white working class didn't seem, he told me, to have much use for religion. It's a sharp contrast to many other cities he's walked through, such as Istanbul, a place that transformed how he saw religion's role in humanising the inner city. Or on America's back row.

One of the key differences between front row and back row world views in America, he wrote in *Dignity*, is faith. Front row people are humanistic, well-meaning; tolerant of others' religious beliefs, sometimes even believers themselves, in a genteel, understated way. On the back row it's different. Unlike science, which is distant and irrelevant, faith is immediate; a source of hope, a place of solace, a site of meaning in confusing, chaotic times.

It's common, when you don't have much, to "have a faith that informs how you live – that drives your life", Arnade tells me. When you don't have comfort, when you don't have money, when you don't have a home or a job or a family, when everything's fluid and changing one day to the next, religion doesn't give you all the answers, but it gives you hands to hold, fingers to grip, and the one indispensable thing: dignity.

In *Dignity*, Arnade relates an episode from his own youth in a small town he couldn't wait to get shot of. A precocious teenager



Collective pride around being working class bolsters people in Britain, says Arnade

employed on a janitorial team, Arnade worked side by side with a man the others called "Preacher". And that's what he did, Arnade recalls: he preached to the other workers from an old Bible, on their breaks, every day. The younger Chris didn't join in. In fact, he laughed at them.

"I felt sorry for him, living such a shallow, close-minded life, so I thought." But 30 years on, revisiting his home town, he realised how wrong he had been. "Standing in that neighbourhood, I look back and see Preacher Man

and the others praying and see people striving for dignity in a harsh world ... I see Preacher Man living across the tracks in a beat-up shotgun shack or low-income housing or whatever, desperate to stay clean, desperate to make sense of a world that has given him little."

It boils down to two things, Arnade tells me, wherever in the world he goes. People need community, and they need transcendent value. Something to make the day-to-day bearable; the other to give it meaning beyond itself. It's something he's come to appreciate in his own life; a long-time lapsed Catholic, Pope Francis has drawn him back to some kind of faith.

What does that look like in post-religious, post-industrial Britain? Arnade's reluctant to make sweeping judgements based on a few weeks' stay. But he thinks identity and place are stronger, more definite forces here than in America. "There's a punk rock attitude to it, embracing the stigma," he says. "People are on the bottom, but they're proud of it."

COLLECTIVE PRIDE around being a Scouser, or being working class, bolsters people, he thinks, in a way it would be hard to imagine happening in America. The divide might be far starker here – "it's hard to beat skid row," he laughs, "but the UK manages it" – yet "the calcified class system allows people to be more content". That's what he liked about Liverpool, he says – it's his favourite place in Britain. People are tough there, survivors. And they know it. In spite of everything, they're comfortable in their own skin.

But even strong identities can only go so far. Arnade returns to one of the key themes of his book, his newsletter, and all his work: you can't write off religion. You can't dismiss the human instinct for transcendence, he tells me: it's always going to be there, like "a carpet too big for the room". And you can't write off community, the desire for fixed points, roots, thick, meaningful relationships that meritocracy can attenuate and undervalue.

It's one of the things that crops up, with metronomic frequency, all around the world, wherever he travels. Everywhere, the front row build ordered, rational, identical cities. And everywhere, human beings, with their irrational longings, their impossible hopes, spoil the perfect, sterile, image. Clinging to particularity, reaching for transcendence, demanding things money can't buy, the back row is pushing back against the front, Arnade says, all the world over.

That's going to be the story of the future, he tells me. You'll never see it from the air; even travelling by car, you're likely to miss it. But slow down, step outside, say hello to your neighbour. Talk where you normally don't, go where you know you shouldn't, and you might catch a glimpse: transcendence leaking in, community breaking out. Anyone can see it, Arnade says: it's not mysterious at all. Do what you always do, but do it differently. Open your door. Take a walk.

Chris Arnade's *Substack* is *Walking the World*.
<https://walkingtheworld.substack.com>