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"So what?" - emotional report from the trailer for "Irish Gypsies"

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Girl power, 2014. Photo by Jamie Johnson from Growing Up Travelling (Kehrer Verlag, 2020). Provided by the publisher

When American photographer Jamie Johnson visited Ireland for the first time in 2014; she immediately felt connected to the Irish travellers living there. She spent the next five years going back to Galway, Limerick, Cork and Tipperary, taking portraits of the communities, particularly the children.

Numerous trips and interactions with the marginalized class of nomads - the "pavey" have turned into a photo book with pictures that have been compared to the best portraits of Sally Mann and Diana Arbus.

In fact, Jamie Johnson, an American woman, devoted all 20 years of her photographic career to photographing children; creating portraits of babies and adolescents from Laos, Cuba, India, Mexico and the Amazon, she has traveled half the world, always bringing to her native Los Angeles not only colorful pictures in the style of "National Geographic," but also personal discoveries - stories about

new cultures, languages and customs... Her debut photobook, *Growing up Travelling* (published by Kehrer Verlag, 2020) is her first long-term project, a selection of nearly 100 works from her 5 years of traveling to Ireland in the footsteps of the Shelt camp of trailers. Jamie's great love and interest became "pavey," or "Irish gypsies"- a nomadic ethnic group that for centuries adheres to a special authentic way of life on wheels on the periphery of society.

Jamie Johnson first came to Ireland in 2014, having met the "travellers" at the annual equestrian fair and festival in Ballinasloe in County Galway, where representatives of this community come from all over Europe - having set up camps nearby from trailers, they communicate with relatives and friends, in parallel selling puppies and ponies. In an interview, the photographer will later recall how easily she, the mother of two daughters, was conquered with lightning speed by the open and daring children of Irish gypsies; both girls dressed up for the holiday with bows and golfs, and cocky boys in boxing gloves with curiosity entered into a dialogue, posed and even photographed a stranger from a distant country. Probably, feeling that she came to shoot (as Victoria Sorochinski once defined the formula for success in children's photography) "not easy to click."

This kind of hospitality is indeed a rare stroke of luck, given the fact that the pavey seldom make contact with the hostile outside world. Sedentary Irish are rather suspicious of them, noting similarities, but differences - and they have many reasons to do this: "travellers" follow traditional gender roles, for example, they marry early and have children, and speak hard to understand by ear dialect (in cinema, the gypsy dialect is expressively demonstrated by the character of Brad Pitt, Mickey, in Guy Ritchie's film "Big Jackpot").



Travelling Babies, 2014/2. Photo by Jamie Johnson from *Growing Up Travelling* (Kehrer Verlag, 2020). Provided by the publisher

Despite the obvious cultural and linguistic specificity, the government of the country recognized the "Irish travellers" as an independent ethnic minority only in March 2017, which, however, did not affect the improvement of their situation: according to British studies, members of the community continue to face ostracism, discrimination and a mass of social, psychological and medical problems. Unemployment rates are high among travellers, and [2010 statistics](#) showed that 11% of nomads commit suicide. As Professor Mary M. Burke notes in the introductory text to *Growing Up Travelling*, the reason for mistrust of travellers is the nomadic way of life itself, lack of attachment to the land, settled life, which society considers as pathological, which do not fit into the concept of "norms."

Keeping in mind such a socio-cultural dimension and the history of Irish travellers, it can be assumed that a photo project about their everyday life will have (for now) the form of a story about the "underprivileged estates", which often reproduces popular stereotypes, which is traditional for world professional journalism, instead of trying to tell about another something new, "different," to build a dialogue that reflects the personal perception of the contact.

But in *Growing Up Travelling*, Jamie Johnson has the right balance of tonality for the visual storytelling. On the one hand, in the portraits we find confirmation of the love of "travellers" for the ceremonial, external, their readiness to demonstrate conventional gloss, pride in "being beautiful," on the other - the universality of emotions of any childhood. Both reportage and Jamie's more staged work is her one-on-one emotional observation of a marginalized community trying to stay afloat



(from left to right) Boy with ice cream, 2015; Philomena, 2018. Photo by Jamie Johnson from *Growing Up Travelling* (Kehrer Verlag, 2020). Provided by the publisher

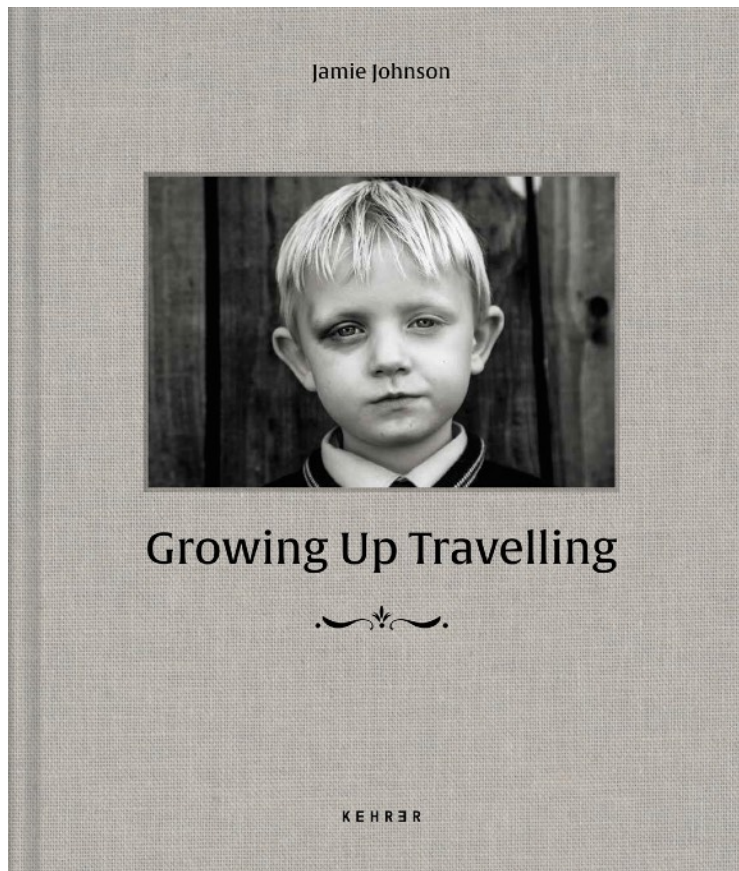
despite society seeing them as outcasts. The children and adolescents in the American photobook seem surprisingly familiar; the spectrum of imprinted states immediately resonates with the personal memories of any of us - joys and grievances, failures and discoveries that are not tied to any culture or time.

The symbolic center of the entire project is the portrait on the [cover of the book](#). It shows a close-up of a six-year-old boy with a black eye. "Sometimes at school I get offended. It happens that they also offend at home. So what? So what?" - reads the signature. In my opinion, it is this direct and simple question that most clearly conveys the daring and cocky squint of any nomadic people who are constantly faced with discrimination and oppression. When the whole world laughs, wonders and twirls a finger at the temple, you just continue to do what you think is necessary - in the hope that the gap between "friends" and "aliens" will one day disappear. And you grow up on the road.



Young Boxer, 2018. Photo by Jamie Johnson from Growing Up Travelling (Kehrer Verlag, 2020). Provided by the publisher

Mary M. Burke ends her text for the photo book with a quotation of an episode from the story of Irish writer and playwright Brian McMahon, "The Cat and the Cornfield," where she recalls the dialogue between the "traveller" girl and the sedentary Irish woman. "Don't you ever get tired of the road?" - asks the second. "And you - from the need to be constantly attached to the house?" - redirects the question to "pavey". The chain of open questions unfolds on its own: what gives you the right to assume that your choice is the only right one? What makes you think I need pity and not you? Or (perhaps even simpler and more capacious) - "So what?"



Jamie Johnson

Growing Up Travelling

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86 duotone illustrations

English

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Texts: Mary M. Burke

Design: Kehrer Design (Anja Aronska)