

# RUBY FISCHER

---

## Photo Book Review | Growing Up Travelling by Jamie Johnson

November 28, 2020



American photographer Jamie Johnson specializes in documenting the lives of children across the globe, from the jungles of Laos to the streets of Kathmandu, her work investigates the many cultures of growing up around the world. For the last few years she has journeyed between Galway, Limerick, Cork and Tipperary, photographing the lives of Irish Traveller children, whose portraits come together in a wonderful collection published by Kehrer Verlag. The foreword by Mary M Burke helpfully places the images in context: a historically nomadic and non-literate minority, Travellers have lived on the fringes of Irish society for centuries, working trades and providing short-term labour to sustain a life on the move. Johnson was introduced to a group of Travellers at the Ballinasloe Horse Fair and Festival in County Galway where Travellers from Ireland and Europe congregate annually to reunite, set up camp and trade horses and ponies. While widespread discrimination has left the community justifiably wary of “buffers” or outsiders, she has managed to forge intimate and trusting relationships with the families she has visited repeatedly since 2014, drinking beer with camp matriarchs, listening to family gossip

and clothes shopping on the high street with young girls who are always, infallibly on-trend. The result is a remarkable collection of images that grant extraordinary access to their lives and culture.

Johnson's subjects are almost exclusively children, though dapper jackets, flat-caps and snappy haircuts make the boys look more like miniatures of their fathers, while girls clutch swaddled dolls and smoke cigarettes behind heavily-lined lashes. They are captured playing outside caravans, fighting in the grass or clutching adoringly at the manes of one of their many ponies. Black eyes are a source of pride for Traveller boys in boxing gloves who learn toughness from an early age, and teenage girls wear their hair long and pose hand-on-hip with confidence for Johnson's camera, which seems to affirm a unique cultural identity that clearly holds deep significance for even the youngest children. Occasionally an image is captioned with quotes from the youngsters. "We don't sit at computers or play games all day;" reads one, "we are always running about." Another reads "Traveller kids are lucky 'cause we live in nature and have ponies."



Johnson's photographs are full of the freedom, delight and mischief of childhood, but also, in many of the portraits, a marked defiance which suggests they're perfectly aware of the prejudice they face from settled people. One particularly evocative photograph of two small girls perched beneath an old-fashioned chimney stove is captioned "People don't like us living near them." While many Travellers try to protect their nomadic heritage, decades of pressure from the Irish authorities have meant that many now live in houses or "halt" in caravans on the outskirts of towns and cities. Nevertheless, the importance of custom remains, with strict adherence to Catholicism, early school-leaving and early

marriage, rich kinships shared between extended families and distinct regional identities. These values appear in many of Jamie Johnson's images, and serve to counter the obviously difficult conditions under which many Traveller children exist.

Growing up Travelling is at once dark and joyful, an emotional and enchanting collection that doesn't seek to ignore the harsh realities of one of Ireland's oldest minority ethnic groups, but rather to replace easy stereotypes with a glimpse into the pride, optimism and vivacity of its youngest members.