

**Room to Read Bookgroup**  
**Without Warning and Only Sometimes by Kit de Waal**  
**Report by Ruth Lapworth**

This account of the author's childhood growing up in a Birmingham suburb in the 1960s could have been a gruelling read. Instead we found it to be a well-written and often humorous memoir of a haphazard and extraordinary upbringing.

Kit de Waal ( born Mandy O'Loughlin ) was one of 5 children with an Irish mother and a West Indian father. Her professional name, Kit, is the childhood nickname she was given after an accident left her with a lisp resulting in her mispronunciation of 'kisses'. As a child of mixed heritage Kit faced prejudice and racism not only from people around her but also from both grandmothers who did not fully accept the children of the partnership.

We felt that descriptions of the way in which Kit and her siblings were regularly neglected by both parents and often went hungry, although painful to read, were written without blame. (The pre-retirement professions of some of the group led them to question why this neglect had not come to the attention of social services).

Kit's parents seem to lead separate existences. Her father worked as a bus driver and only helped with the children when his wife was away or in hospital. He spent all his time at home watching television or dreaming of his return to his native St Kitts. Any money he did not spend on fancy clothes was saved for this return. Meanwhile Kit's mother, Sheila, worked long hours juggling various jobs to make ends meet. On her return from work she did not think about cooking or feeding the children, which is why they were constantly hungry. Sheila's escape from this hard existence was to find comfort in the Jehovah's Witnesses. Consequently, Kit and her brothers and sisters were dragged to regular meetings to be indoctrinated as well as being denied usual childhood pleasures including celebrating Christmas and birthdays.

The last part of the book describes Kit's breakaway from home, her bohemian existence, downward spiral into poverty and drug dependency. We thought this final section to be rushed compared to the description of her earlier years. Eventually Kit returns home and surprisingly ( to us) is accepted and rehabilitated by her mother. Kit's life is then literally transformed by the boss in her first job. He suggests she should read as a cure for her insomnia which eventually leads to her writing career.

We gave the book a score of 5 for a bookgroup discussion and 4.5 for recommendation to a friend.