



A tragic life backwards

*I've written numerous book reviews over the years, but none of the works left me with more sobering reflections than *Stuart, A Life Backwards*. This review and interview with its author Alexander Masters, initially written for the OU magazine *Open Eye*, then appeared in the **Independent** in 2005.*

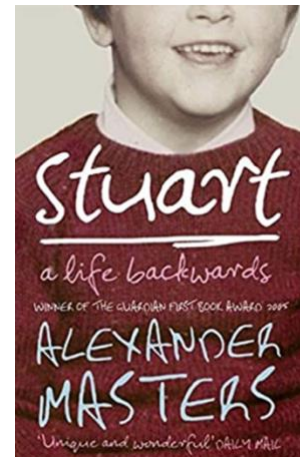
The story of an unlikely friendship between an Open University maths student and a homeless ex-con is becoming one of the surprise hits of the year.

But then *Stuart: A Life Backwards* is no ordinary book. Its subject is a violent recidivist, armed robber, hostage taker and heroin addict, who was persuaded by author Alexander Masters to talk about his life and what turned him from, in his mother's words, "a really happy-go-lucky" 10-year-old into a man known variously, even to his fellow vagrants, as "Psycho", "Knife Man Dan" and "that mad bastard".

MSc student Masters' account of his three-year relationship with Stuart Shorter has won him a national literary prize, a publishing deal and a serialization in the *Daily Telegraph*. And in May the book was shortlisted for Britain's richest non-fiction award, the £30,000 BBC Four Samuel Johnson prize.

What makes the book really individual is that while it tells Stuart's tragic life story - shaped by mild muscular dystrophy, a childhood of taunts about his disability, and rape by his brother and subsequently at a children's home - it is far from a one-sided, middle-class view of homelessness. For much of it is in Stuart's words, and tells of how he and Masters gradually earned each other's respect and learned from each other - and worked on the book together.

"It struck me that there were very few accurate descriptions of homeless people," said Masters, a Cambridge University physics graduate who is two years into his maths MSc with the OU. "We either see them as a group of people to love and we excuse them for everything they do, or to hate. Getting to know Stuart as an individual - one who was very intelligent but could also do and say very stupid things - taught me a lot about the lives that homeless people really lead, rather than the perception we have of them.



"Although he had a violent history, I didn't see any reason to treat him any differently from anyone else. There were times when we couldn't stand each other, and we'd argue, but I was never frightened of him. He was an intelligent man, and empathetic. If I'd had a go at him he would tell me later that it upset him, but he would also apologise if he'd been out of order."

Masters first saw Stuart begging on the streets of Cambridge in 1999, but it was the following year that he really came to the student's attention, when Masters was working in a hostel for the city's homeless. Masters' colleagues Ruth Wyner, the director of Cambridge's Wintercomfort centre for the homeless, and her day centre manager John Brock had been given five- and four-year jail terms (later reduced after an appeal) because drug dealing had taken place at the venue.

Fellow staff and supporters had immediately launched a campaign to get them freed, but at the first public meeting, among all the well-meaning, well-dressed attendees, it was scruffy, chaotic Stuart who spoke the most sense and gave campaign leader Masters some of the most practical ideas for drawing attention to the pair's plight.

"It was Stuart who suggested we camp outside the Home Office," said Masters, from Wickham Market, near Ipswich. "We got a lot of publicity, but he also did it because he wanted me to have just a little idea of what it's like to be homeless. We did it for three days, and that was enough for me."

The secret of Masters' book is that it does not pigeon-hole Stuart. He's intelligent, but often stupid; thoughtful but reckless; philosophical but violent; a victim of circumstance, yet his own worst enemy. And it's clear there were some days the two men couldn't stand each other. "What Stuart means when he says it's not the cold or the hardness of the streets that drives you crazy," wrote Masters of their Home Office vigil, "is that it's the other people. It's the people like fucking Stuart, ranting and raving. Shut up, will you!"



The book itself first attracted attention when Masters, 39, submitted it for an Arts Council competition and won £7,000 and a minor publishing deal. "I was then able to send it to an agent, who later told me there had been an auction - four publishers wanted to buy it. I'm delighted because it raises awareness of what homelessness is really all about."

The book has been so well received that he has already written off this year's OU studies. "I'm going to have to delay my next MSc course until next year," he said. "I've done a bit of writing before - I used to be a book reviewer and I have done some freelance travel writing for the broadsheets - but this is the first time I've been able to make my living from writing and I'm really busy. My publisher and agent have asked me about writing a second book, so I'll be talking to them about that. It's all very exciting."

The great sadness is that the man who made it all possible is not alive to see how much impact his story is bound to have on thousands of readers, and their attitude to Britain's homeless. Stuart Shorter died in 2002, killed instantly when he stepped in front of a train. He was 33.

**Two years after this article's publication, Stuart: A Life Backwards was adapted as a film for television starring Tom Hardy and Benedict Cumberbatch. Alexander Masters has continued a successful career as a biographer.*