

Home truths

John Bolloten's new book, *Love Story*, examines the fraught lives of Gary and Maree. He tells **Amy Davies** all about it

It wasn't until John Bolloten turned 43 that he first picked up a DSLR. In 2008, looking for a new way to be creative, he bought an entry-level Canon camera and taught himself how to use it.

More than a decade on and he's created some incredibly hard-hitting documentary work, mostly focused around the city in which he lives – Bradford, West Yorkshire. I met John at 2018's Photo North festival. Giving a presentation in conjunction with the homeless charity Simon on the Streets, you could see he felt nervous.

Considering he spends his photographic life with characters and in situations that could be described mildly as 'uncomfortable', it's ironic that a small room full of polite listeners should bring on such uneasiness.

Never judgemental in his approach, he photographs with a kind of empathy that shows the lives of those on the fringes of our societies, let down by the systems which are supposed to protect them.

Often, documentary and news photography highlights problems on foreign shores – it can be easy to forget that right here at home we have more than our fair share of potential conflict waiting to be documented.

John has been photographing in and around the streets of Bradford for several years. His superb book *Nothing to See Here* was published in 2017 by Fistful of Books, and has since gone onto a second edition when the first quickly sold out. Wanting to go even deeper, he chose to enter the private spaces of the couple seen across these two pages for his new book, *Love Story*.

Born in Brighton, John moved to Scotland at the age of nine before settling in Bradford at the age of 18 in 1983. Always having felt like somewhat of an outsider, it's this which helps him to resonate with his photographic subjects. 'When people talk about photography being a mirror, I absolutely believe that,' he tells me in a chat after the talk has finished. 'When I'm photographing people who use drugs, because I did that myself when I was younger, I feel like I'm photographing myself – or how my life could have turned out.'

Relationships are vitally important to John – he doesn't 'smash and grab' pictures and then move on to the next. It can take weeks

or even months to build up to the stage where those in front of his lens feel completely confident with his presence. That's not to say that once that trust has been established, it's an easy ride.

'They [Gary and Maree] said to me at the beginning "you can photograph anything you want," but when you're there and it's very late at night, and the atmosphere is quite strange, you're constantly thinking, "do I photograph this, or do I not photograph,"' he explains. 'You're just learning on the job day by day.'

Shot over a period of eight months, John would spend several hours with Gary and Maree in their flat. It was a dirty and dark place, and at the time the UK was in the grip of a heatwave – which didn't help. Gary and Maree have a largely on/off relationship, characterised by intense periods of being 'on', with arguments and fall-outs which inevitably led to break-ups. 'She [Maree] was really hyper,' John says. 'She was the life of it, really. If I'd photographed just him, it wouldn't have worked, but it was the dynamics of their relationship – and the intimacy and toxicity – that made it.'

Gary's leg was amputated in the summer of 2016, and he's been a drug user for the best part of 30 years. Maree is a lot younger, but is also in the grip of a drug problem. Clearly, these are vulnerable people – something which John is always mindful of. 'People might talk about, is it right for a photographer to take images of people like this – but I think the bigger scandal really is how people are living when they're ignored and people aren't taking care of them,' he says.

There's no denying that these pictures are difficult to look at, something which John acknowledges but doesn't shy away from. 'Doing the talk today, there was a woman in the front row who could barely look. I don't want to put people in distress, but it's important work. All I care about is making honest pictures.'

The work came to a natural conclusion on a happier note: Gary received a false leg and was just beginning to learn to walk again, hopefully getting his life back together in due course. It's clear nobody would rather see that happen than John – 'I'm very close to them both. I care about them. Sometimes this project might have been draining, but sometimes it was absolutely wonderful.'



John was given free rein by Gary and Maree to photograph whatever he wanted

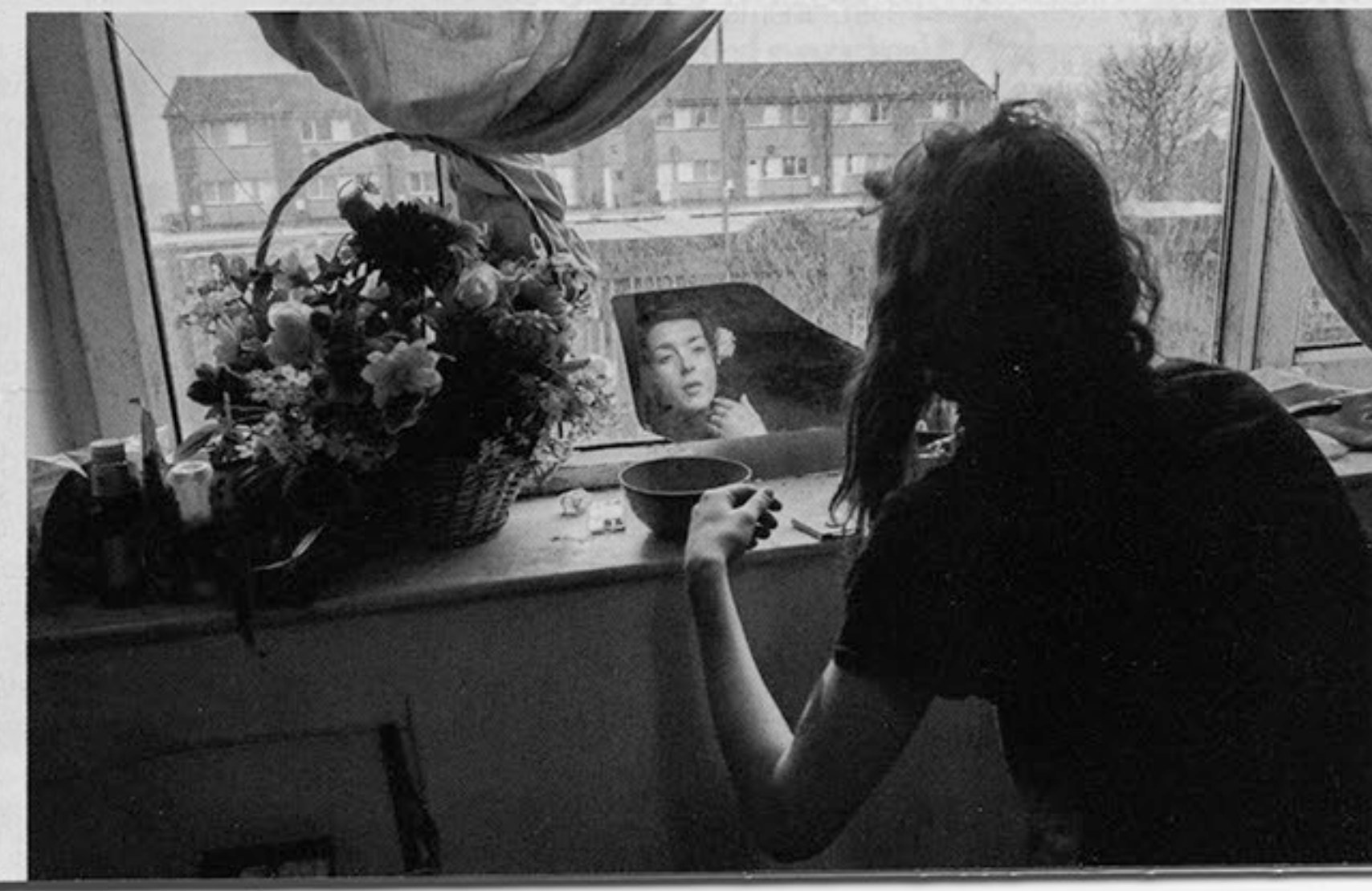


Left: All the images in this set were shot with a Fujifilm X-T1. Always handheld and usually only working with natural light, John mostly shoots with an 18-55mm f/2.8-4 lens

Right: Gary and Maree's relationship can best be described as 'on/off' with periods of intense arguments and break-ups



Below, from left to right: John found the experience of photographing the couple difficult at times. 'Sometimes it would take me a week to recover from being there,' he says



John Bolloten

John Bolloten is a documentary photographer based in Bradford. His latest book, *Love Story*, is available to buy from Fistful of Books (visit fistfulofbooks.com). You can see more of John's work at johnbolloten.co.uk.