The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists in 2020

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. George Orwell said it was a book that everyone should read. Published in 1914, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists detailed crushing poverty, squalor and inequality in the UK. Cut to 2020, the sisters, Sophie and Scarlett Rickard, have rewritten, illustrated and rereleased the book because sadly, today, it's as relevant as it was in the early 1900s.

Ross Sophie and Scarlett Rickard, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Sophie Rickard Thank you for having us.

Scarlett Rickard Thank you very much.

Ross Your book, a graphic novel, the best selling graphic novel, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, originally written by Robert Tressell. And you've decided to bring the book out now specifically around this sort of political and economic climate. Why is that book so relevant today?

Sophie Rickard Well, it was Scarlett's idea to make a graphic novel adaptation of this book because she could see that it was full of detail and it was a great story with some really fabulous ideas. But it's actually a tricky read because it's so dense with detail and in places not terribly careful. So it's not on a whim that it has come out into this particular political climate. In fact, when we started talking about doing it, we were looking at bringing it into an atmosphere of a socialist revival in the UK and a groundswell of young people who were very excited about a new kind of left wing politics. It takes quite a long time to draw that many pages. And so what's happened is it came out in September to a very different world where there's impending Brexit and a pandemic and a government moving further towards the right, I think. But there are still those people that are still interested in left leaning politics and the ideas and still interested in having that conversation, not just about what things could be like, but why it isn't so easy to make it happen. And there are interesting parallels in the story that you could apply to what happened last winter in the last election in the UK.

Ross Scarlett, what is the story?

Scarlett Rickard It's sort of often spoken of as the first working class novel. And it was written by a painter and decorator, Robert Tressell, who lived and worked actually in the town of Hastings on the south coast of England as a painter and decorator. And it's kind of semi-autobiographical about him working with his workmates and the conversations they had and how living with things like the equivalent of zero hours contracts and, you know, all the stuff that a lot of people are very familiar with today. But this is set in 1910. It's sort of exploring how the system works and how the system works against working people. And Tressell was using his protagonist, or one of the main protagonists, Frank Owen, to try and explain how things could be different. And it's very well written because he sets it up so that there's actually arguments between Owen and his colleagues at work in the tea break and things, looking over the problems of the capitalist system and arguing about it at length in the original. And also one of the things that's really clever about it is that he is a sort of fly on the

wall. It's kind of kitchen sink drama really. And one of the really clever things about it is that he explains a sort of economic situation in words when they're talking and they chose to explain how the system works. And then you see it played out in the people that you've got to know. And so it really helps you understand what he's trying to say.

Ross It's also referred to as the Building Worker's Bible. Has it has the book alleviated some of the sort of guilt that people who are impoverished often feel because they think it's their fault, when actually what the book's getting out is saying, no, it is the system that works against the interests of the workers?

Sophie Rickard It's an interesting question. And yes, it's quite often known as the Painter's Bible. And the original was passed around on building sites and with tradesmen, I think, in the 60s and 70s a lot. That guilt about it's my own fault. I'm poor. I'm not sure how much of that exists. I think what there is a shame and I think there's a big difference between guilt and shame. I think there is shame in being poor because of the capitalist ideology that suggests that you're just not trying hard enough if you're not making enough money. Whereas this book points out that the reason that you are kept poor is that it suits the capitalist class. The whole system depends on you being kept poor. And this is how and why. And this is what you could do about it. Whether that helps with that feeling of shame that people live with, I don't know. But that feeling of shame is definitely illustrated in the book, particularly in the way the women cope with poverty.

Ross Amazing that 1910 the thinking first arose, and in 2020, we're pretty much still here. David Cameron famously said to Jeremy Corbyn at the dispatch box, I'll tell you what to do, put a suit and tie on and go do some work. Norman Tebbit famously said, Get on your bike. If putting a suit and tie on is akin to somebody saying just try harder, than we wouldn't have this structural problem when it comes to inequality. Which of the bits in the book, Scarlett, from an animation point of view or from a pictorial point of view, depict that we haven't really moved on from 1910?

Scarlett Rickard Oh, so many, so many things like that. People having to pawn their possessions when they're basically down to the last few objects that they have to pawn to pay the rent. The fact that the rent always has to be paid, whether you're in work or not, whether you have any money or not, that's one thing that always has to be paid. And the landlord is just sitting their benefiting from that when people are really struggling. In fact, there's a bit in there where Owen says that the rent accounts for a third of the income of a working person. And when you say we're still there in 2020, we're not in a sense, we've gone back there because in the sorts of the Labour government of the 1940s and from that point onwards, there was a massive sort of regeneration of this old political thought and going much more towards a sort of social justice. And now we're losing all of that stuff. And so at one point, people's rent was a lot less than their earnings in the third. And now it's back to being about a third, exactly the same as it was in 1910. The soup kitchens, people having to go and get tickets from the Board of Guardians, which is basically the same as getting a voucher for a food bank from the DSS. You know, there is all this stuff, which is very, very familiar.

Sophie Rickard There's a lot of examples of private ownership of things that should belong to the community. And quite often when Owen is talking, he uses examples - a bit like Jesus - of allegories to describe his points. And he describes the idea that, well, you know, what's the

difference between privatising water and privatising air? And, you know, one day when there's an air baron that's got all the air and you're gasping for breath and you can't afford any air to breathe, if somebody was to come along with a hammer and chisel and make a hole in the air tank and let it all out, you'd be the first to take him down to the police station to report him. And I think that's so powerful and just so apt for today.

Video clip Poverty is not caused by marriage or machinery or overproduction. It's not caused by drink or laziness or overpopulation. It's caused by the private monopoly, the present system. They've monopolised everything possible. They've got the whole earth, the minerals in it, and the streams that water it. The only reason they've not monopolised the daylight and air is that it isn't yet possible. And if it was possible, you'd see people dying for want of air as thousands now are dying for want of the other necessities of life.

Ross So let's just talk about the privatisation of rent a little bit. Insofar as Monopoly, the game, the board game, a board game that nobody, I don't think ever in the history of has ever left a Monopoly board without a massive family argument. Invented by a Quaker woman, Monopoly is all about demonstrating the teachings of Henry George, the Economist, when it comes to privatisation of rent and what happens. And guess what? You end up with a one percent and you end up with the ninety nine. Are we anywhere near with the work that you're doing, getting back to talking about the potency of socialising rent?

Sophie Rickard I'm not sure that we're getting much closer. I feel like in society now, Britain, in general, has a real preoccupation with property as an investment as opposed to somewhere to live. And I think until we undo that nut, it's going to be very difficult to change things. And I think that reading a graphic novel version of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists might start to make people make small behaviour changes like, you know, supporting small businesses and noticing how the capitalist machine is operating. But I'm not sure it's going to start a social housing revival that we could really do with.

Ross But we live in a progressive property owning democracy, no less, where we've associated a democratic right with buying a house, even 10 houses if you're a Tory MP. How, from a pictorial point of view, do demonstrate these economic ideas so man/woman on the street can pick them up and really absorb them?

Scarlett Rickard There's lots of different ways, actually. But in the book, there's a sequence where Frank Owen's actually talking about landlordism as one of the many causes of poverty. And he's explaining about how people just own land because their parents owned land and their parents parents owned land. And that's just why. And there's no real explanation of why those people should have it when all of us are born onto the earth and all of us should have equal access to all the sorts of necessities of life which come with being born into the earth. So it's quite interesting because, I mean, in the bit about landlordism, he says about, you know, these people have basically got this land from fighting with other people or a king has, you know, given a tract of land to somebody to shut them up because he's bored with his mistress. So visually, it's quite good because, you know, I use little bits of the Bayeux Tapestry, and you know, a few sort of, not diagrams, but when he's talking abstractly I sometimes have used the sort of abstract of the proletariat as being stickmen being forced from one place to another.

Sophie Rickard The other thing that's possible in the graphic version, which I think is really striking, is that we see inside people's home. It's really personal. You feel that you know the characters really well and you see how bare and scraping by some people are and how rich other people's lives are. And it's, of course, a very simple and worthless way to show the difference between the way people live. And I think that's something that equally is applicable now and you see it when you turn the telly on.

Ross Sophie and Scarlett Rickard, welcome back to Renegade Inc. Your book, The Illustrated Ragged Trousered Philanthropist is out and it's our book of the week this week. Pitch to us why we should go out and buy a copy.

Sophie Rickard So The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist is the original socialist novel. It's a brilliant human story about what it's like to be living in poverty and working hard to try and keep your family together and the system that makes you have to live that way.

Scarlett Rickard Well done. Follow that. I knew this would happen. In graphic novels, people often think that comic books are for children. And although there's nothing inappropriate for children in this book, it's actually written with adults in mind. And it's a really engrossing, filmic way, of absorbing a story similar to watching a film. But you can watch it all in your own time.

Ross Congratulations on the book. You've done a top job, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists is our book of the week. I just want to ask you about your working relationship. Two sisters. When did you first start talking about doing this because, Sophie, you write, Scarlett, you draw. How does that work and how does that process sort of unfold?

Sophie Rickard Right from when we were really small children, Scarlett would like to be told what to draw. She always had a pen and paper and was always saying, tell me what to draw. And so it's a relationship that kind of started probably before I could hold a pen. And we haven't worked together our whole lives. We found each other again, maybe in our thirties. And we've made one other graphic novel together called Man's Best Friend, which is about a man who has an up and down relationship with his dog. And so this is our second graphic novel that we've done together. So the process works something like, I make a script which is not unlike a film or TV script.

Ross Right.

Sophie Rickard We discovered afterwards that other writer and artist pairings working in comic art work very, very differently. I don't tell Scarlett exactly what to do or in what panel. That's her job. I tell the story and create the dialogue and the pace, the tension and the words. And then I would hand over the script to Scarlett and she would make a kind of storyboard, a rough storyboard. You explain from now, Scarl.

Scarlett Rickard Yeah, I make a storyboard on paper with just the pencil and we put code letters in for all the speech so I can set out the panels and what I want to go where. And then we sort of code the speech bubbles in. And so we kind of generally know what people are going to say on each page. When we're happy with that, we know how many pages it's likely to run to, then I start drawing.

Ross As we all know, the creative process sometimes has a little bit of tension in it. Basically, have you ever fallen out throughout this process or are you harmonious sisters all headed in the same direction?

Scarlett Rickard We're boringly harmonious I'm afraid.

Sophie Rickard We bickered like mad. And I can't believe how bad we were at squabbling when we were children. But I think we got it all out of our system early. We don't disagree. It's quite easy for us to defer to each other in each area because I'm wet and she's pictures. So if there is the dispute, we just go with who is in charge of that bit. But we rarely disagree. I like the decisions Scarlett makes.

Scarlett Rickard I like the decisions Sophie makes. I think that there's often times where I draw, like I'm just drawing at the moment the first few pages of our next book. And I started drawing one of the main characters. And what I do is - the modern world is amazing - I draw it all on the iPad which means that every day I can draw a page, send it to Sophie and Sophie and I can have a chat about it and make sure that I'm going in the right direction. Because where Sophie works out the pace and the styling with the words, I work out the pacing, visually. So I'll set out the the panels and work out what goes in them and you can slow the reader right down or you can build up the tension. And so Sophie and I collaborate every day. I'll send a page and then we have a look. And she said the other day that the character that I'd drawn wasn't quite how she thought of her. And she said, you know, this woman is going to be starving later and I hadn't made her fat enough to be able to take some weight off. So there's things like that, you know, where we work very much together. So occasionally, Sophie will say, oh, I think if you just did that, that would make it more like what I was thinking.

Sophie Rickard But having said that, Scarlett is location director. She does all the costumes, all the props, all the camera angles. She gets to decide what people are wearing. And so often she draws things that I wasn't expecting, which makes that great. I think you can probably tell when you read our pages that we go out of our way to try and make each other laugh. There's all kinds of things going on in the background on some of the pages that definitely weren't in the script.

Ross What a wonderful partnership. You also had a very experienced and deft editor, didn't you?

Sophie Rickard We had so much help from our editor. Self Made Hero, our publisher, put us together with David Hein, who has a lifetime of experience in comics, and we would submit each chapter to him as we thought it was finished. And he would give us notes and we learnt a lot. And we definitely are better at making sequential art than we were when we started. And that's down to him.

Ross And Self Made Hero, the publisher - I don't mean this the wrong way - but are you surprised that they took this book on at this time, or do you think it was actually a really good decision, specifically with what's going on, not least the raging inequality?

Scarlett Rickard Honestly, I think there couldn't have been a better moment for this book to come out. We several times thought we'd missed the boat, politically, with Labour losing the election and everything that was going on. But actually, I think it's because it's so relevant, it's actually far more important in this political landscape with Covid really highlighting inequality and, you know, everything being very polarised, it really is the moment for this book. I mean, the original book, they say, helped swing the 1945 election because it was passed around building sites and people's places of work and through trades unions and things. And people sort of got hip to the idea of socialism and it kind of needs to happen again. And so I think a lot of people are hungry for it.

Ross When people in the past of the original read this and the light bulb went on, it's very, very difficult for people then to sort of go back to the original bit of thinking, the original state of mind, if you like, because once you've seen this stuff, it's impossible to unsee it, especially when it affects you every day. With a graphic novel you can also appeal to the dyslexics and the neuro diverse, if you like - the people who may have been at school, not as academic, didn't thrive, but still know intuitively there's something wrong and they want to understand it. And I also know that you want to get into education and also into prisons and young offenders institutes, because an awful lot of people in those organisations are dyslexic, but they're smart. Is that an aim to get it out there so people understand what's really going on?

Sophie Rickard Yeah, there's there's no doubt that the graphic novel version is so much more accessible for people with dyslexia, people with ADHD, people who would never dream of picking up a 255,000 word Edwardian novel that might have a look at what is now 23 chapters of sequential art of people having conversations. It's much more accessible for people who wouldn't consider reading an old and difficult book, but they may well consider looking at this one. And the ideas are still there. And the feeling and thought in the original book is still there. But it's something that is more available, I think, to, like you say, young people, but also people who don't consider themselves politically active.

Ross Famously, the actor Ricky Tomlinson, when he was in solitary confinement, was thrown the original version of the book by one of the guards. The guards said to him, you shouldn't be in here. What he'd done is he counted the bricks in his cell for weeks on end and counted the windows a trillion times. Then he got this book and read it and he claims that it totally, utterly changed his life. Do you think that that would also be the case with the graphic novel for people who are incarcerated at the moment?

Sophie Rickard I think that the ideas are potentially life changing. And I think that when that guard said to Ricky Tomlinson you shouldn't be in here, I think that's probably true for the vast majority of the people who are incarcerated. We have the highest rates of incarceration in Europe, in this country, and there isn't a good reason for it. It's not working. And perhaps reading books like this might help those people to realise that they are potentially the victims of a system as opposed to unlucky.

Ross Individually, I'm going to ask you this question. Often people ask authors and artists about, you know, 'explain the book in a sentence'. And they say, if I could do that I wouldn't have written the whole book, right? But you must have had favourite bits. Do you have a bet

that really resonates with you, that really touched you? What are those bits? Sophie, I'll start with you.

Sophie Rickard I think I would highlight the women's stories. When people talk about the original, they often talk about this group of men at work talking about politics. But that's only half the story. The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists is a book about a community of people who are working hard to stay alive. And that includes the wives and families. And they're very important to the part. And I think that the part of the plot that really resonates with me is the story of Ruth Easton, who - I mean, I don't want to give any spoilers. I know it's been out for 100 years, but still - gets into a bit of bother and has so few options of how to deal with it. And that is something that's probably still quite true now too.

Scarlett Rickard The thing that really resonates with me. There's a whole chapter, which is just a two hander, also including Ruth Easton, actually. It's between Ruth and her husband William. And all it is, is just them in their kitchen trying to work out what they owe, how they're going to pay the bills. So they're going through everything that they've got on tick. You know, she's got slates with the butcher and the baker and the grocer. And Easton's writing them all down, trying to keep tabs on everything. The baby's sick. And and it's all very familiar. You know, I mean for anybody who's lived in poverty trying to work out what you can do away with in order to pay for vital things, it's just so difficult when it's down to the last pennies. And at the end of that chapter, Easton's alarm clock breaks and he knows if he doesn't go to work on time in the morning, he'll lose his job and then where will they be? And so it's an example of how being poor is more expensive than being rich. It's that whole idea of, you know, if you can afford to buy a really good pair of boots, they'll last for 50 years, but if you only can buy Poundshop boots, they are not going to last five minutes. And that is the problem. You know, what it comes down to is just for the sake of an alarm clock that his whole family is at risk of becoming homeless or going into the workhouse.

Ross Yeah, right. And in today's terms, going down to Cash Converters or selling drugs or whatever it might be, but because you're pushed to do that. You didn't go out and do that because it's a lifestyle choice.

Sophie Rickard I think that Covid has only made those kind of things even more relevant because that question of what is useful work and what is less useful work is a conversation that Owen has in the book. And we have just been through a summer where essential work and what those kinds of trades that the wages is subsidised by tax credits because they're paid so badly. If that's a Venn diagram, it's basically a circle. You know, all of the health care assistants and cleaners and teaching assistants that have been going into work, no matter what, are some of the lowest paid in our community. These people are essential and they still can't recognise properly.

Ross Sophie, Scarlett Rickard, congratulations - massive contribution. Wonderful news that the book is selling and selling and selling. It makes a spectacular Christmas present, not just the young socialist in your family but to everybody else.

Sophie Rickard The old one's as well.

Ross And can we just say from all of us here at Renegade Inc., congratulations and thank you very, very much for your time.

Sophie Rickard Thank you for having us.

Scarlett Rickard It's been great.