

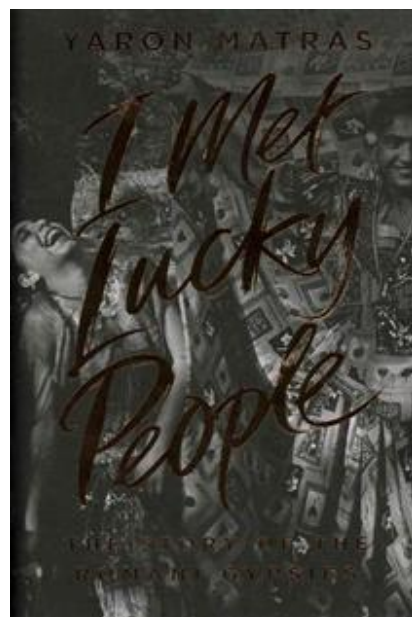
Book Review: I Met Lucky People: The Story of the Romani Gypsies by Yaron Matras

*As one of the last remaining societies in the Western hemisphere with a strictly oral culture, the Romani people have no written record of their history that can be consulted. From the early 1990s, linguist Yaron Matras has been working with these groups, one of a handful of people to have done so. Travelling widely in central and eastern Europe, studying their language and learning their dialects, he has witnessed their campaign for recognition. In **I Met Lucky People** Matras aims to give readers a comprehensive account of their culture, language and history. It is great to see a book that offers in-depth information about the customs and traditions of Romani Gypsies as this may contribute to dispelling negative discourses which continue to socially exclude different Traveller communities, writes **Kate D’Arcy**.*

I Met Lucky People: The Story of the Romani Gypsies. Yaron Matras. Allen Lane. February 2014.

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In the media in the UK we experience mainly negative press about gypsies and travellers. We hear about exaggerated ‘invasions’ of Roma, which are used to further embed moral panic about immigration and welfare issues. Stories of illegal encampments or village protests about site proposals fill rural newspapers and illuminate the way in which Traveller communities are unwanted in society. It is for this reason that Yaron Matras’ recent collection on the lives of Romani gypsies *I Met Lucky People: The Story of the Romani Gypsies* is a welcome addition to the wider literature and current thinking on the topic. It is more important than ever to have positive texts available – those that can provide accurate information about Travellers and Gypsies, and those that can begin to dispel some of the negativity that surrounds the mainstream literature and enable people to appreciate and celebrate Travellers’ cultural diversity.



For readers unfamiliar with the topic, traveller communities – which include English, Scottish and Welsh Gypsies, Travellers of Irish Heritage, Roma, Showmen, Circus people and Bargees – all come under the term ‘Travellers’. Some groups are ethnic minorities, whereas others are grouped under this category because they remain highly-mobile or travel for work purposes, such as showmen and Circus communities. All groups have historically travelled but many Gypsies and Travellers are now more settled due to legislation which criminalises groups of people stopping in public places.

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Matras approaches his role, as [Professor of Linguistics](#) writing about Romani people, with great care. He acknowledges his position as an academic and uses his expertise to produce a compelling book which offers us useful insights and better understandings about Romani communities and cultures, collected from the author’s experiences working with and studying Romani communities.

Matras covers the entire European context along with some reference to the United States, which is ambitious as the stories of Gypsies are very diverse. Elaborate descriptions of different ways of life are offered and these give readers an opportunity to really understand the diversity of customs and the ways in which Romani language survives to the present day. Two chapters that are particularly enjoyable and thought-provoking were those on “Customs and Traditions” and “Romani identity in the 21st Century” and these are discussed briefly in turn.

In “Customs and Traditions” Matras highlights that Romani culture “is not uniform and that customs practiced by Romani people have different sources and origins”. Nevertheless, there are some practices that are typical of a

large number of Rom (the term used between Romani people to refer to others in the Romani culture) and the author goes on to discuss these. For example, Matras refers to the display of prosperity and the generosity among Romani to other members of their community, and also discusses the way in which Roms are recognisable to others in the community worldwide through language and clothing: women traditionally wear long skirts and gold jewellery, with men also often wearing jewellery with hats, scarves and suits, looking very smart at all times. Across the world Romani community and Travellers have high a regard for cleanliness and hygiene – even though the opposite tends to be reported in media – and Matras reports on the rules the community have about washing the body and ensuring this is kept separate from the washing of pots and pans and food items: “Caravans are also considered cleaner since they enable a clearly visible separation [between] ... spaces that are used for washing and cooking, and this prevents any suspicion of contamination that might arise in a house through the adjacency of toilets and kitchens”.

In this chapter Matras also discusses rituals around death and marriage. Funerals and weddings both in the East and West are big, important events: “Marriage celebrations often go on for several days. Fancy cars and horse-drawn wagons are used in the West and brides have extravagant dresses”. Some media coverage, such as Channel 4’s *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* series, has portrayed some of the customs around weddings of Irish Travellers families in the UK. Although such coverage offers a window into the customs of the community, they also reinforce stereotypical assumptions about travellers as lawless and as the social outcasts of the community. Hence this book and particularly this chapter are helpful as they provide much more detail about customs, music, religion and celebrations.



Dancers of the Esbart Manresà performing “Lleis de l’Univers”. Credit: [SantiMB](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The “Romani Identity in the 21st Century” chapter begins at the point of the end of World War II when Romani survivors of genocide and persecution were rebuilding their lives. Matras writes that although Jews were granted prima facie recognition as victims of persecution, “Roms were denied such recognition. A history of persecution that depicted Roms as engaged in criminal and a-social activities gave rise to the view that their incarceration by Nazis was justified.” Matras highlights how post-war policy in different countries did start to consider the needs of Romani although many were based on assimilation within mainstream society: “The assimilation plan for Gypsies in Slovakia enforced resettlement and encouraged employment opportunities”. The [Roma Rights Centre](#) emerged

yet issues of persecution continued and Matras describes some of the ongoing incidents of racist violence in Poland, Check Republic and [France in 2010](#).

Looking at education, the author points out how improved access to education for the Romani people has led to the emergence of some Romani professionals. This also started up community-led activism against their communities' social exclusion. When the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed in 1989, Roma were then able to become involved in democratic processes. However, many feel that Traveller voices are still not adequately heard in political processes today.

The language aspect in Chapter 4 is particularly interesting as the Romani language originates from the Indian language (especially Punjabi) but has been transmitted orally over time. There is no evidence of it being documented or passed on within the community in writing. The book is therefore likely to be of special interest to linguists as here is a language which has survived – despite the migration of much marginalised communities – and transmitted from India across the world. It will most certainly be of interest to sociologists, anthropologists and those interested in the history and culture of Traveller communities.

In telling the history of the Romani Gypsies, Yaron highlights both the persecution and the fascination of the Gypsy community. It is great to see a book that offers in-depth information about the history, language and customs and traditions of Romani Gypsies as this may contribute to dispelling some myths and negative discourses which continue to socially exclude different Traveller communities.

Dr. Kate D’Arcy is Acting Principal Lecturer in Applied Social Sciences at the [University of Bedfordshire](#). Her research interests include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities and Education; Race, Equality and Education; Practitioner-led research and Digital technologies and learning. [Read more reviews by Kate](#).

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