

Read all about it!

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Unless it's the trial of Rosemary West....

Chris Goddard

Self-censorship is not a quality usually associated with the British tabloid press. The trial of Rosemary West, it is reported, led to a change of perspective, with sanitisation of the court-reporting being decided upon for commercial reasons. A recent book, on another widely-reported British case of child abuse and domestic violence, is reviewed to suggest that an understanding of the effects of violence on victims will be achieved only if we allow the whole stories to be told.

British newspapers are not usually associated with restraint. The smaller the paper, the greater the excess, appears to be the general rule, or was until recently. Even the British tabloids, however, can suffer from too much of a bad thing.

The Guardian Weekly, itself a tabloid (in size, at least) summary of a broadsheet, reported that the case of Rosemary West has changed the tabloids' appetite for 'sexual detail and intrusion into personal lives' (October 22nd, 1995). James Lewis, writing 'The week in Britain' column, describes how the case in which Rosemary West denies murdering ten young women and girls (including her own step-daughter and daughter) was described in detail as the trial commenced. As the evidence became ever more 'grisly', the reporting was 'scaled down and sanitised' (Lewis 1995: 8).

Lewis reported that the BBC ordered that the detail be kept to a minimum after listening to 'the horrendous nature of uncensored evidence', and that BBC reporters in court were being offered counselling. Lewis challenges the appropriateness of the media doctoring accounts of what happened, and puts the other view that the public should know

what horrors are alleged to have occurred rather than allow the media to 'play nanny'. Such decisions, Lewis alleges, are made on commercial grounds:

To exceed the bounds of public taste and decency could mean the loss of readers. (Lewis, 1995)

The notion that there may be some events that are too horrible to write of or read about is a dilemma that is at the heart of some child protection practice. Some stories are almost too awful to tell. Perhaps, if they are told, social workers risk losing support. Yet, if they are not told, it may not be possible to understand what victims have undergone.

I was reminded of these problems when reading Alexandra Artley's (1993) book *Murder in the Heart: A True-life Psychological Thriller*. Artley tells the story of how, one night in 1988, a woman rang the police in Lancashire and reported that someone had shot her husband. When the police arrived at the house, they found three women sitting beside the dead man. For the past 15 years all three, one elderly and her two middle-aged daughters, had worn the man's wedding rings.

Later that year, June and Hilda Thompson were convicted of killing their father, Tommy Thompson, with a shotgun. They received a two-year suspended prison sentence. The judge stressed that, in view of the evidence that had been presented, the women had been punished

enough. Artley's book provides the awful detail of some 40 years of punishment.

To quote from Brian Masters foreword to the book, this is a story of 'incest ...daily humiliations ...beatings, manic regulations, tyrannical restrictions and systematic degradation'.

I have to declare at the outset that I did not think that I would respond positively to Artley's book. The story is told in the style of a thriller:

Suddenly he was standing very close to her in the kitchen and, inwardly knowing what she had already secretly and illicitly spent that day in the corner shop...Hilda braced herself for the onslaught of the almost toddler-like explosion of fury which flared up with a terrible internal logic of its own into twenty-minutes of punches to her painful breasts, face-slapping, thumping, head butting and kicking. But on this occasion something seemed to draw Tommy back. Looking very acutely at her eyes, rabbit-pink with suppressed crying, he had begun to smell the heady mixture of death and money on the air. 'The old bitch has insurance policies, hasn't she?' (Artley, 1993: 27).

Artley, a journalist, dramatises (if that is possible) the story of Mrs Hilda Thompson and her two daughters, June and Hilda. The book is based on their notebooks, family letters, and diaries, and on legal files on their cases. Artley also interviewed the Thompson family and

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others involved, and has done a great deal of reading on child abuse and spouse abuse.

At first, scenes like the one I quoted seemed over-written, even melodramatic. But when I reflected upon them, I started to wonder if I wasn't being too critical. The scene that I have just quoted describes Hilda's feelings after she asked her husband's permission to go and visit her dying mother, Ellen Hartley. Hilda has promised to visit her mother that evening but Tommy Thompson would not allow it. Hilda never saw her mother alive again. When she arrived at her mother's house the next morning, after her husband had gone to work, Ellen Hartley was dead. This was just one of the cruelties that the women of the house suffered.

Tommy Thompson was as cruel to animals as to the humans in his power: '...small animals were always an irresistible invitation to creative cruelty' (1995: 149). Hilda junior was forced to assist in the drowning of a cat, and ordered to smile while the creature fought for its life. June and young Hilda were glad to go to school, to escape from the violence at home. Once in class, however, they were frozen at the thought of what might be going on at home. They wanted to make sure that Hilda senior was safe, but didn't want to go home to find out. Hilda junior even wrote about this:

I think I was a poor learner because of dad's temper at home. When we were at school we were always thinking about mum.

On the outside, to other people, this appeared a happy, close family. Indeed, Tommy insisted upon it. Artley (1993: 159) describes how the children led two lives, retaining minimal but apparently 'normal' relationships with outsiders, while guarding the secrets of the sadism at home. There were always excuses for not seeing their school mates once school was over.

June, when she was about 11 years old, became the 'principal woman' in the family (1993: 164). June's memory was that at some time in 1964, she was taken upstairs and raped by her father without warning. In fact, as she talked to Artley more, it became clear that he had prepared her for this. One day, while she helped her father chop bones in the shed – her job was to hold the board, even the bone, while her father swung at it with an axe – her father told her:

'Ye know I have sex with your Mam, June?' She said nothing and just held on

tightly to the bone... 'Well, now I want it with you as well.'

Tommy did not seem so intent on smashing up the bones that time and in the shadows of the shed, June began to feel, in some new form, the grey pressing down which happened inside her when she was waiting for punishment. (Artley 1993: 167)

June believed that if she were able to suffer the sex without complaint, her younger sister Hilda would be spared. She learnt to keep her eyes shut and to send her mind elsewhere while the act took place (1993: 185).

If either of them made a sound, then their mother would suffer more punishment. If there was blood everywhere as a result of an assault, June and her sister were expected to clean it up. When Mrs. Thompson was admitted to hospital after attacks (she made up stories to explain her injuries) she was expected to write loving letters from her hospital bed.

Darling Tommy, June and Hilda.
Here's a few lines, love, to let you know
I arrived at hospital safe and sound...

There were House Rules that had to be obeyed. Written 'House Rules' were posted up: all ornaments have to be kept in exactly the right place; when drinking, cups or mugs must be placed exactly five inches from the edge of the table; the prongs of forks placed upwards and the bowls of spoons downwards; and no click must be heard when the light is switched off (1993: 222-223).

In the midst of all this, Hilda junior was treated for depression. Anti-depressant drugs did no good and she repeatedly told the doctors that there was nothing troubling her; she was eventually treated with ECT.

Tommy Thompson had a gun. He told the women that he had bought it to protect them if anyone broke in. If a House Rule was broken, however, one of them would be sent upstairs to fetch the gun:

Slowly and lovingly loaded and then pressed to her head for quiet minutes at a time, young Hilda found that the metal muzzle gradually warmed against her scalp. (1993: 193).

Young Hilda wrote in her notebook what would happen if anyone found out what was going on: 'If anybody got to know about what was going on in this house, we were all dead. Even if he had to go to prison, if anybody did find out, he would serve his time in prison and he would be all nice as though he had changed to a mild person. Then he would dedicate his

life to finding us all (wherever we went) and kill us all.'

I have not described the full horror of what went on in this family. There is much worse (see, for example, 1993: 178-180), but I am practising self-censorship, not deletion for commercial reasons. This is an extreme case, perhaps one of the most extreme cases imaginable, and because it is so extreme, it can be dismissed as an isolated example with little to offer those who work with more 'ordinary' violence. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

The stories of these three women tell us a great deal about psychological terrorism, sexual abuse, domestic violence (and the co-existence of child abuse and domestic violence), systems abuse, and the inability of women and children to protect themselves in the face of such violence and terrorism. For me, the book provided further evidence in support of hostage theory, my proposal that victims act as helpless hostages have been observed to do (see, for example, Goddard [1988], Goddard and Stanley [1994] and Stanley and Goddard [1995]).

Artley recognises this and calls it what it is:

Tommy Thompson ran a hostage system, allowing two women out of the house at any one time but always keeping back the third. (Artley 1993: 192)

Such is the power of these relationships:

...although killing Tommy had removed his physical presence, who he was and what he had done to them would continue to live with them... (1993: 256)

Even if they had been found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment, prison would have represented their 'first true freedom'; when they were held on remand, being taken through the gates of the remand centre was like passing through 'the gates of heaven' (1993:245).

Sometimes messages are only heard if they are shouted or if they are written large. Child death inquiries are given little weight by some because child deaths from abuse represent only a tiny fraction of all child abuse referrals. Yet, in those inquiries, there may be glimpses of the truths that affect all children. The stories from the inquest into the death of Daniel Valerio, for example, were too painful for some to read. Others wrote to me saying that a feature piece I contributed to *The Age* (Goddard, 1993) reduced them to tears. Perhaps, just occasionally, tears of sorrow (even anger) are necessary prompts to action.

As I have written elsewhere (Goddard, 1996), there are pointers in the story of Daniel's life and death about how we regard children and the value we place on what they have to say. When asked what had happened to him, Daniel's brother took the police to retrieve the tree branch his step-father had used to beat him (and Daniel). This boy, in effect, was reporting a crime. He identified the alleged assailant, produced the weapon, and pointed out the injuries caused. The police removed the stick. As far as we know, no crime report was ever made (Goddard, 1996).

Such violence (and such responses) make us feel uncomfortable. Dramatisation, of the kind used in Alexandra Artley's book, makes us feel more uncomfortable still.

So it should. Discomfort, however, should not reduce the experiences suffered by the victims in either quantitative or qualitative terms. It is important that the whole story is told and recorded somewhere. Censorship only serves the interests of the perpetrators of violence.



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