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Title: Mothers accused and abused: addressing complex psychological needs

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I must confess to an uncomfortable sense of voyeurism and anticipation in opening this book to start my read. There is something about the nature of the topic, about mothers who harm or are accused of harming their children, that is emotive in a raw and primitive way. The book consists of a slim volume of essays by a range of authors, including eminent speakers on the topic such as Estela Weldon and Helena Kennedy, psychotherapists, and other front line practitioners who provide specialist services.

There is a neat structure that leads the reader through their read, beginning with the changing context around how women are perceived ('mother, Madonna, whore'). This leads to an exploration of how the painful nature of their own relationships can lead some women to harm their children. Part three offers three essays on the experience of mothers in prison. This is followed by a look at the different interventions and programmes that may be available to mothers following childcare proceedings. Part five looks at the way forward.

I am guessing that most readers interested in this book will, like me, be looking for insight and understanding, rather than a need to cast blame on mothers who may harm their children. As Angela Foster eloquently puts it in the introduction, 'When motherhood is idealised there is societal reluctance to face the reality of harmful mothering; consequently those who blatantly fail to live to the ideal are viewed as individual aberrations, vilified and marginalised'. For me, the need to understand is two fold: it enables the appropriate support to be given to the mother, but also provides an opportunity for healing the narrative of abuse for her children.

Each essay is short, and succinctly written. This makes the book easy to read in stages, especially where the subject matter is hard to digest, such as the chapter four, by Carine Minne, which is about 'infanticide, matricide or suicide'. Minne discusses her work with a young mother who killed her nine week daughter, and later also stabbed a nurse.

There is an uneasy sense of voyeurism in being let into the therapist-client relationship, as the most personal details of a vulnerable woman are laid out for

public scrutiny. But it is this very scrutiny that throws the spotlight on what psychoanalytic approaches have staked their hard-earned reputations on - their ability to get below the surface and to shed light and make sense of what appears senseless. The reader travels the journey with the therapist, learning the facts that formed the troubled history of this young mother. Then there is the inner journey, the descriptions of the therapeutic processes spanning five years. This makes for painful reading, as the reader shares the frustrations of the therapist. The conclusion is sobering, if expected.

As can be seen here, I found the individual case studies powerful - like the work of Pamela Stewart - who discusses forensic psychotherapy with a young mother who is caring for her baby in a prison mother and baby unit. I found the reference to the principles of forensic psychotherapy, as set out by Stewart, helpful in making sense of the description that followed. The frustratingly slow therapeutic gains are more than recompensed by the note from the mother at the end of the chapter describing how she experienced the sessions.

There is hope too, as in Fiona Henderson's powerfully named chapter 'last chance saloon' which explores a young mother's progress whilst experiencing time limited psychotherapy.

The book is a moving read. For me, it was helpfully interspersed with more factual chapters that discussed important associated themes such as treating violent men, the work of family drug and alcohol courts, and group work for mothers who have had their children removed into care.

I found the chapters well written and thought provoking. The book would be a helpful read for front line social workers, and professionals who work alongside such mothers - such as drugs and substance misuse workers. Its strength lies in being able to offer windows into the women's wounded-ness. As Minne comments in her chapter, such insights enable professionals to develop a degree of empathy that can help them to continue working alongside women who otherwise may appear difficult to like or engage with. This is not a book for the faint hearted, or for those looking for quick fixes and easy 'how to' guides.

I began this review with a confession and I find myself ending with another: I was relieved when I came to the end of the book. I was relieved that help is available for such mothers; relieved that there are professionals courageous enough to stay with them through what is undoubtedly slow, and excruciating work. The women seemed less 'other' to me. For this alone, it is worth a read.

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