

Book review

SERIAL SURVIVORS: WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF SURVIVING RAPE

Jan Jordan

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In *Serial Survivors*, Jan Jordan presents the stories of a remarkable group of women. Through a series of meticulously recorded interviews, sensitively retold, we encounter the women who survived the horrors inflicted by serial rapist Malcolm Rewa in Auckland in the late 1980s to mid-1990s.

The research on rape trials in Western judicial systems makes it clear that myths and social stereotypes profoundly influence the progress (or the lack of it) through the corridors of “justice”. Some of these include the belief that women are usually raped by strangers, that they are “hysterical” in the aftermath, and they report rape as soon as is practical. Some research suggests that the presence of these factors is a predictor of a successful conviction at trial, because in these circumstances women are considered less likely to be “making it up”. The women Jordan interviewed fitted the stereotype of a successful complainant whose story is likely to be believed, but even so, their accounts are harrowing.

There is yet another “rape myth” that Jordan succeeds in discrediting through her sensitive and perceptive study – the myth that women who have been raped are helpless victims. Her analysis of these women’s stories of the actual rape draws out the strategies they used to both resist the rape and re-assert their own power - by physical resistance, by yelling for help, by talking to Rewa, by doing something unexpected (two women faked losing consciousness), and by summoning their not inconsiderable inner resources.

But the emphasis of the book is on “the processes involved in surviving rape” (p. 203) and thus she draws out the sad fact that the ordeal does not end with the rapist’s departure from the scene. Throughout the book Jordan highlights the women’s aptitude for survival as she describes the ways these women managed not only the police reporting processes and Rewa’s subsequent trial, but also their relationships with partners, relatives, friends and work colleagues – and their needs. For these women, too, there was huge public interest and media attention to cope with. A major strength of the book is that Jordan underlines the multi-faceted coping strategies these women needed to survive.

The chapters on reporting the rape to police and on the trial process are of interest for the contrast with previous research Jordan has undertaken that classifies the difficulties women face in seeing their complaints through to trial. In earlier studies she found that a culture of disbelief and victim-blaming, in the tradition of old-fashioned rape myths, was endemic in police culture (Jordan, 2001). In the Rewa case, however, because a serial rapist had been identified in the area, later complainants in the series were more readily believed when they contacted

police. In fact, as more women came forward and the impetus towards a trial grew, the women found that the police officers involved became increasingly responsive to their needs. Jordan notes that large-scale complicated cases such as this one provide fertile ground for police learning processes, in terms of discerning women's needs and how to best meet them. This proved to be the case here, as some officers involved revealed to Jordan afterwards (p. 73).

In spite of this learning process, there were mistakes and shortcomings in the treatment the women received from police. The interviews revealed a number of issues: the inexperience of some officers, a lack of understanding of the trauma of the medical examination, the unsuitability of interviewing rooms, the lack of continuity with the officers the women had to deal with, and, critically, the lack of follow-up in the days after the rape and again in the lead-up to the trial.

In terms of the ensuing trial process, themes often identified in the research literature emerged. The women were critical of the lack of explanation about the process, including the role of the prosecutor, who in fact acts for the Crown against the defendant, not for the complainant. The horror of their rapist being present in the same courtroom is starkly captured, as is the lack of privacy in waiting rooms. But Jordan also captures, again, the ability of these women to find ways to re-assert their own power. One woman tells of asking for permission (which was granted) to "sprinkle the 'glitter of courage'" around the witness stand to give her spiritual strength (p. 95). Others ensured they had supportive people with them throughout the trial. Some women used the strategy of distancing themselves, only going to court when required, while others felt the need to know everything that was going on. Whatever strategy they chose, Jordan identifies that they were doing what they needed to manage their own safety and well-being.

Jordan includes a useful chapter covering the impacts on the partners, families, friends and workmates of rape survivors. Typical reactions include guilt, anger and blame. Partners particularly reported feeling guilt for not being there to prevent the rape. Others wanted revenge. One woman noted that there appeared to be no support in place for families and partners of rape survivors. Many of the women felt burdened by the need to reassure their families that they were coping, when what they needed more than anything was a sense of safety for themselves. They reported feeling isolated by friends and neighbours seeming to ignore the fact of the rape, through embarrassment or just not knowing what to say. Too often they encountered societal rape myths expressed in blaming or otherwise negative responses.

This is a valuable book. It illustrates feminist research principles by giving the women interviewed the opportunity to be heard, to re-assert their power and courage. It educates, with a clear exposition of the process rape complainants need to endure to seek justice. Most of all, it honours the courage and determination of an extraordinary group of "serial survivors".

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