

Book review

Julia Braggins reviews *An Ordinary Murder* by Lesley Moreland. Aurum Press, 2001

“So it was just an ordinary murder”. Thus one of Lesley Moreland’s acquaintances, whom she met on a train some years after her daughter Ruth’s death at the hands of a young man she knew slightly. Their children had gone to school together, so some family enquiries were expected. But not this response.

Shock and embarrassment can make fools of us all. Few of us can bear to imagine, let alone have to live with, through and beyond such a catastrophe. That thoughtless remark, however, provided the title to an extraordinary book.

Ruth’s murder, and Lesley’s struggle to cope with that dreadful fact, are the subjects of this book. I would urge all with even a nodding acquaintance with the criminal justice process to read it. It prompts difficult thoughts, about how very far we are from truly recognising, and finding a place for, the suffering of those closest to the worst of all crimes, the taking of a life. It prompts (painfully for a card-carrying liberal penal reformer) a recognition that the rights of the offender, once the machine of justice takes over, are still accorded far greater status than the rights of the

members who allowed each other this much space to cope with their grief - especially when their ways are so different.

For Lesley wanted answers. She wanted information about Ruth’s death. How had it happened, exactly, and why? What injuries had she sustained? How much pain and distress had she suffered before she died? This latter question haunted her. One of the most damning indictments of our current process, for me, was that she had to wait until the trial, a full year later, to find an answer.

The pathologist who gave evidence told the court that “ ‘there were no defence injuries and therefore consciousness would have been lost very quickly’ . If someone is being attacked from the front, they will instinctively put their arms and hands over their face. There were no injuries on Ruth’s forearms. Why couldn’t someone, anyone, have explained this to me months before?” asks Lesley. Why indeed.

It was only a chance meeting with a magistrate who happened to also be the parent of a murder victim that gave Lesley some of the ammunition she needed

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bereaved at all points of the process, despite the valiant efforts of Victim Support. And that the wheels of the state can grind exceeding slow, and exceeding inflexible.

Lesley’s daughter was murdered in the early morning of Friday 2 February 1990. The unravelling of what happened took many painful days and weeks. Her killer was a man she knew. A friend of a friend, he was an LSD user, and had taken drugs that night. His motives for travelling across London in the night to see Ruth at her house in Enfield, and stabbing her repeatedly when she came downstairs to see who was there, remain unclear. The trial didn’t seem to help much in establishing why he had killed her, though there was never any doubt that it was he. But it was murder, rather than manslaughter, for he was convicted and sentenced.

This book feels like a necessary part of the mourning process, for Lesley. Her husband Vic dealt with his own grief differently, wanting no part in the book, and finding it hard to talk about what had happened, and what he felt. Ruth’s sister, Catherine, felt similarly. One can only feel admiration for family

to apply for seating in the well of the court, rather than being left to find a place for herself in the public gallery. She had to fight to get a copy of the coroner’s report listing her daughter’s injuries. She did not want to learn of these for the first time in the court room.

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Crucially, she wanted to meet her daughter’s killer. “ ‘I needed to understand why he had killed Ruth; he was the only person who could tell me.’ ”

The meeting did eventually happen - though achieving it was the biggest struggle of all. How much it helped is unclear. One motive, for Lesley, was to let him know how his actions had affected her and her family. She told him, in no uncertain terms. He confessed that he would never forgive himself; that he cried every night.

“ ‘You and me both, sunshine.’ I thought’ ”.

Particular acts of kindness by individual public

servants, friends and family, are the bright spots in a sombre tale of anguish, bureaucracy and skewed official priorities. The investigating police officers, for instance, came out of this story very well. One helped tremendously by offering to sell Ruth's car. He brought a bouquet for Lesley on the first anniversary of Ruth's death. But surely these things serve only to highlight

impression. The book provides powerful ammunition for the restorative justice movement. In the final chapter, Lesley writes of a visit from the probation officer from the 'Victims' Service, triggered by the first parole review for her daughter's murderer. As usual, the arrangements were confused, months went by without official action, and Lesley had to take the final step to

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the poverty of official structures. We can do better than this.

There is much more in this book. An important part of it is Lesley's correspondence and growing friendship with a death row prisoner in Texas and his family. Connected, but separate, is her struggle to find it in herself to forgive her daughter's murderer. In the light of reactions to, for example, the release of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, the ten-year-old killers of James Bulger, such courage provokes the deepest respect.

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prompt the visit herself. But someone did at least turn up, in the end.

"After the probation officer left, Vic and I agreed that it had given us an opportunity, as was our right, to talk to someone from the criminal justice system. But I couldn't help reflecting that ten years was a long time to wait".

Julia Braggins was Director of CCJS, and editor of CJM, until 1999. She is now a trainer and consultant.

Notes for Contributors

- 1 Each quarterly issue of CJM focuses on a special area of criminological interest. CJM 46 will be **New Developments in Criminal Justice**. Contributors are advised to discuss their ideas with Valerie Schloredt before submission. We also welcome articles written in response to any articles in this issue. Copy deadline is **8 November 2001**. Please send hard copy + disc in text or Word format or e-mail to: valerie.schloredt@kcl.ac.uk
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CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS ISSN: 0962 7251

Number Forty Five, Autumn 2001. Copyright 2001 CCJS.

Criminal Justice Matters is published by the Centre for Crime & Justice Studies, King's College London, 8th Floor, 75-79 York Road, London SE1 7AW. Tel: 020 7401 2425 Fax: 020 7401 2436
E-mail: ccjs.enq@kcl.ac.uk Web-site: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/ccjs> Registered Charity No. 251588

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Typesetting and production: Amberwood Graphics. Printing: Anglebury Press Ltd.

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