

Are You There Alone?

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Book Review: Malley, S.O. (2004). *The Unspeakable Crime of Andrea Yates*. NYC: Simon & Shuster.

“*Are you there alone?*” asked the dispatcher who answered the call at 911 when Andrea Yates called the police after murdering her 5 kids. Suzanne O’ Malley a journalist was at the eye of the storm, she covered the murder of Andrea Yates’ 5 kids Noah, John, Paul, Luke, and Mary on June 20, 2001 in Houston Texas as an investigative reporter. The mother (Andrea Yates) was pronounced guilty by the court in 2004 but acquitted later in 2006 because she was found to be legally insane when she committed the crime. The author believed that the intricacies of the deadly event goes well beyond what has been heard and told in the media and can only be captured in the form of a book. According to her, the facts of the crime can be known with precision, but it was Andrea’s mind, that was the lesser understood entity and hence, the book. Thus, the author very methodologically, at many instances in the book “*Are you there alone?*”, published in 2004 in New York by Simon & Schuster, quotes the excerpts from the actual interviews and dialogues with Andrea Yates. For a writer whose subject is crime, exact details become important to gain credibility and create an impact by reminding the readers that the event being written about happened in real time.

This is a meticulously written book where the writer interviewed over 100 people involved with the case. She personally corresponded with Andrea Yates and her husband-Rusty Yates-more than 30 times. The treatment of the subject in the book is well-rounded as the author delves into the psychiatric, legal as well as the religious aspects of Andrea’s life. The initial portions of the book discusses in details the backdrop of Andrea’s life until the day she commits the murders. Her thoughts, behaviour patterns, medical history and the course of treatment (which was rather inadequate) are presented in sufficient details for the reader to identify with her as a person. Simultaneously, by using Andrea’s case as an example, the author also raises concerns over the lack of awareness about the issues related to maternal mental health, especially, post-partum disorders.

Through this discussion with help of the necessary evidence from Andrea’s case, the author makes the readers question that, ‘is Andrea is a criminal or a victim who did what she did as a result of a failed system of care?’ This is an important book as besides telling Andrea’s poignant story, it also serves a larger purpose of creating awareness among people about the struggles of mental health that are outcome of the postpartum conditions such as postpartum depression. The book also presents much needed statistics and figures related to these conditions which establish that there are many women who suffer in silence and guilt. It is important to note that what Andrea went through is rather common as one in five women develop mental health problems during the pregnancy or during the first year after the birth of the child (Russell K. , 2017). These problems can range from prolonged low mood to psychosis. The book can be thus seen as a much needed step in the direction of clarifying the clinical picture of a long ignored and misunderstood disorder.

While one of the foremost challenges that the author takes up for herself is understanding and bringing forth the intricacies of Andrea’s mind, the book in some ways fails to meet this challenge. The author, being trained as an investigative reporter and not as a therapist, ends up focusing more on her observable behaviours, psychiatric facts and her medication etc. She does not bring out the lived experience of what it meant for Andrea to live through the gloomy, dark life of post-partum depression and thus, what it meant to her subjectively to cross the line, where she took the lives of her own children. Andrea Yates was a deeply religious individual. Her psychosis was also intertwined with her religious beliefs. It is highly appreciable that the author cognises and explicates the religious references that Andrea gave during her psychosis. It is indeed interesting to note the subtle ways in which the author communicates to the readers that religion could be seen as a collective delusion. The point where to draw the line of differentiation between delusions and religion also becomes contentious in Andrea’s trial. In this pursuit,

the book also presents the views of one of the most controversial persons associated with the case-the religious teacher of Andrea.

The most gripping segment of the book describes Andrea's trial at length starting from selection of the jury to the final verdict. The attorneys' approach and arguments on either side of the defence and prosecution are used very artfully to build suspense around the final verdict. The idiosyncratic canons within the Texas legal system for deciding whether a person can be acquitted on the grounds of legal insanity are also presented in detail. However, the legal jargon in this section goes well beyond the understanding of an individual who is not familiar with the legal system in USA and hence, the readers may find themselves losing connect with the text at many places.

Finally, the book sheds light on Andrea's relationship with her husband post the pronouncement of a guilty verdict where she was given life imprisonment. The book also paints a poignant picture of Andrea's psychological condition as she spends months and years in the jail. It is noteworthy that the book was published in the year 2004, i.e., two years after Andrea was pronounced guilty by the court. However, in 2006, an appeal was filed against the

verdict and this time, the jury declared Andrea not guilty due to the grounds of insanity. The credit may at least partially be given to the impact the book might have made. It would also be extremely interesting if the author were to revise her book to extend the story of Andrea's retrial leading to a non-guilty verdict to complete the story that she started narrating.

Overall, one may convincingly propose that the author does a brilliant job of placing Andrea in her life context wherein her actions become understandable for the readers. The book achieves a greater goal of bringing forth how the medical, legal as well as social-support system had failed a suffering mother. The book also appraises the reader that this tragedy was entirely avoidable had Andrea's disorder received proper care and treatment. The rigorous research over the years from thousands of sources makes the book impactful indeed. Although, I really wish the facts were also supplemented by Andrea's voice which is largely missing. Nevertheless, the book is a good read for anyone interested in suspense, law and psychology. It is also a recommended reading for scholars interested in taking a peak into the disastrous consequences that may be associated with disorders related to disturbances of maternal mental health.

Reference

Russell, K. (2017). *Maternal Mental Health – Women's Voices*. London: Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

MY VOICE: REFLECTIVE NARRATIVES