
Book Reviews

Violence Against Women

XX(X) 1-3

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Jan Jordan

Serial Survivors: Women's Narratives of Surviving Rape. Annandale, Australia: Federation Press, 2008. 246pp. \$35.00 ISBN 9781862876798.

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DOI: 10.1177/1077801209347607

In *Serial Survivors: Women's Narratives of Surviving Rape*, Jan Jordan, a criminologist and feminist social researcher in the area of women and crime, examines women's experiences of rape and the survival process. Jordan details the inner strategies of women's survival of the initial physical sexual assault as well as mental and emotional effects and revictimization through the justice system. Jordan, using the survivors' unedited narratives, allows the reader to not only observe themes of victimization and survival but also feel the pervasive effects of sexual assault. This book presents the experiences of 15 victims of a serial rapist in New Zealand over a 12-year period. Jordan utilizes primarily qualitative research to detail the inner strategies of the women she interviews. However, she never presents the survivors as "research participants." In providing a true respect for their experiences and value as respondents to the study of sexual assault, she is consistent throughout her work. Jordan presents a picture of rape that does not end in a onetime event, but rather occurs as a continuous process.

Jordan is very careful throughout her text not to shift attention away from the victims and focus on their perpetrator. She intentionally refers to the rapist by his initials as not to give him any more power or notoriety. It is through such a writing style that Jordan's purpose is reflected. Her intent is to give voice to the survivors. Details that expose characteristics specific to the perpetrator are often revealed in the women's narratives only when they are pertinent to the women's experience. For example, MR (the rapist) suffered from erectile dysfunction and was at times unable to successfully penetrate his victims. Many of the women, and often justice officials, therefore did not recognize or identify these particular women as "true" rape victims. Although the book only reflects the narratives of victims from one serial rapist, their responses and experiences are applicable to all women victims of sexual assault.

Jordan begins with an introduction of each of the women who were willing to participate in her research. The organization of her book reflects her explicit goal of giving authenticity to the women and their narratives. The rapist is only discussed in the appendix of the book, again underscoring her commitment to writing for and about the women. In the introduction of these 15 women, the reader is shocked by the very raw accounts of

violence perpetrated by one person. The female reader identifies with the fear reflected in these women's stories. Jordan, at the start of her work, establishes the human side of the pervasive social epidemic, sexual assault.

Jordan illustrates the rapist's consistent and methodical behavior and the victims' unique survival strategies. Within each of the 15 survival stories, the reader is able to identify with an intimate aspect of the victims' attacks. For example, a mother could empathize and grasp the fear of Karen, one of the survivors, when she recounts in her rape narrative, "I didn't put up any struggle. All he said to me was, 'be quiet or the kids will get it' and that was enough for me" (p 17). It is the intimate details exposed throughout the book that reinforce the fear and bond women share around sexual assault. So although Jordan recounts a single rapist, her book speaks to all women and victims of sexual assault.

Jordan suggests that there needs to be more consideration of victims of sexual assault within the police process. Consistent with her other research in *The Word of a Woman? Police Rape and Belief* (2004), she holds that, "police response to rape victims has been identified as a critical component of the recovery process" (p. 45). It is from the women's perspective that continued victimization is brought to light. The women's need to regain a sense of personal safety and validation is heard throughout each account. Jordan's obvious goal is to identify how the women survived the initial attack and later the police interview and process. It is within this section of her book that explicit procedures helpful to the police process are disclosed. Women either openly or unintentionally give suggestions for policing strategies. Gabriel suggests, ". . . Being in an unfamiliar environment can probably stop a lot of people from giving really good evidence in their statement because they want to get the hell out of there [police headquarters] really quickly" (p. 44). It is through the women's perspective that the justice system is seen. Women discuss details important to them that may seem insignificant or irrelevant to police (e.g., the sex and gender of medical personnel) and their evaluations of these factors should serve as a resource for justice officials.

Jordan extracts themes from each of the women's accounts and validates them by briefly referring to supportive research. Again, she identifies these women as experts in the survival of rape or sexual assault. She exerts no apparent or stated thesis other than the value of these women's survival stories. She carefully organizes the experiences without communicating any sense of judgment on any of the parties involved. It is clear that she respects the resiliency and strength of those interviewed. A possible agenda of the author is to educate or enlighten justice officials about the effects of their behavior and general police or medical procedures.

Jordan asks the women to describe their experiences of the trial. It is within this particularly important part of the book that the recovery process for these women becomes clear. It is also when the pervasiveness of victims affected by sexual assault is made obvious. Gabriel describes the experience of the verdict being read, "It's like it doesn't matter where you are or where you came from and what your age is. Everybody was there for the one thing and it was all good" (p.109). Several of the survivors express a bond they felt between the women raped and those officials fighting to protect them from the

perpetrator. It is unusual to read about positive emotional connection women have with justice officials. Although Jordan's work reveals the often negative effects of others' behaviors and attitudes toward victims, it is helpful for others, especially justice officials, to read how their behavior can positively influence the recovery process and experience posttrauma.

Interestingly, social changes are reflected throughout the narratives because of the length of the rapist's violence. When MR, the perpetrator, began his crimes in 1987, there were no female police officers within the jurisdiction. By the end of his criminal career and detention, there were trained female police officials on the force within a sexual violence unit, which changed the experience of survivors. It also becomes apparent that although policies and procedures may have evolved, the rape myths of the 1980s have remained consistent. Throughout the book, several examples of rape myths projected or applied to these women are demonstrated. Insight into the social, legal, emotional, psychological, and sexual harm perpetuated and reinforced by such myths or victim blaming is expressed in all of the women's accounts.

Overall, it is the women's narratives that demonstrate the many diverse ways sexual assault can affect not only the victim, but also her intimate relationships, friends, neighbors, the community, and those involved with her case. Jordan provides insight into the pervasive effect of rape. It would be interesting to hear also at times how extraneous victims, such as prosecutors and police, were affected by this particular case. Clearly, this is a one-dimensional examination of a serial rapist. Also, only at the introduction of each chapter is other research presented. Jordan interjects occasionally, citing other studies. She identifies herself not as a "remote distant recorder," but rather as providing an "arena within which women could tell their stories" (p. 205). Jordan is careful not to suggest psychological or psychiatric diagnoses of the women's responses.

Because of the unique circumstance of a serial rapist, similar violence and its various and diverse responses from victims is illustrated. The women's narratives challenge our conventional views of survivors of sexual assault. Jordan's research highlights the recovery of rape and illustrates the shared themes and diverse survival techniques women utilized throughout their journey. The profound ripple effect of rape in a community is echoed within each account. Evidence of secondary victimization and traumatization serves as a support not just for victims but for their loved ones as well. With that said, I plan to use this text next semester in my Violence and Victims undergraduate course. Jordan will provide students with information that other texts and research cannot—a human side to the recovery process from sexual assault and rape. Her work will supplement the valuable information often lost in quantitative research and statistics. In addition to classroom use, *Serial Survivors* should be read by officials who work with victims of sexual assault and rape. Police, medical personal, prosecutors, and other justice officials would be enlightened by the narratives of these 15 survivors

Reference

Jordan, J. (2004). *The word of a woman? Police and rape belief*. London: Palgrave Macmillian.