

Book review

Fulcher, L, and Moran, A. (2003). *Sisters of pain: An ethnography of young women living in secure care*. Cape Town: CYC-Net Press, 262 pp., ISBN 978-1-928212-01-0.

The title, *Sisters of Pain*, invites the reader from the onset to be aware that the content of this book will not be a good choice for bedtime or holiday reading. Leon Fulcher and Aliese Moran take us on a journey into the lives of young women who spent time within a secure facility in the USA, and the voices of the girls who share their stories is without doubt powerful and thought provoking. I approached reading this book through the lens of a practitioner/manager within a secure facility, but I was only too aware that a professional perspective was not to be in isolation of a personal one and this will be reflected in the review.

I am always humbled when young people allow us insight into their lives and this book was no exception. The courage shown by the girls should never be underestimated and if the reader does not approach this book with this in mind, then perhaps an alternative should be sought.

Professor James P Anglin, PhD who wrote the preface, sets the scene for this book and his words let readers know that they are to embark on an emotional journey. He advises against reading it if they are 'not prepared to accompany these girls, their family members and their workers into the "heart of darkness"(pg. viii). Having worked with vulnerable girls in residential children's units and secure facilities for over two decades, this 'heart of darkness' was all too familiar. Anglin also promises a message about hope, and this piqued my interest. I approached this book looking to find that hope that too often evades us in residential/secure care.

This book does not gradually take you on an emotional and powerful journey; it takes you there very quickly. I found myself having to re-read sentences or paragraphs as I tried to grasp the message given by the girls. This was not a bad thing as it is not a book that should be skimmed or flicked through like some romantic novel or psychological thriller that the reader can try to guess or work out the ending quickly. This is the story of real lives and the girls, their workers and families take you into an emotional vortex that brings about self-reflection and challenges you to understand the causation of their behaviour. Understanding how the residual effects of trauma manifest in behaviour is absolutely crucial in working with girls in particular. If, as professionals, we only look at behaviour then all we will see is behaviour. Girls use relationships to convey many different messages about their experiences and it is in building and sustaining these relationships that we are able to understand the message the behaviour is giving us. Anglin refers to this as 'pain based behaviour'. This book encapsulates this point extremely well.

With excerpts from professionals and families woven throughout the book, I couldn't work out if they came as a welcome respite from the girls stories and allowed me to have some breathing space from the intensity of the words, or if they actually served to distract me from the emotional journey of the young girls. I concluded that they interrupted my

journey and I felt that they quickly brought about a change from reading with my heart to reading with my mind. Critically reviewing professional interventions and approaches without doubt has its place in professional development and is integral in developing reflective practice, but I felt they intruded into something very personal. Perhaps to place the reflections of workers at the end of the chapter would have been more appropriate. There were useful tips that could be used in training of staff and therefore this content has its place; I just question where it was placed rather than why.

There was one key theme that was consistent throughout the book and that was the use of relationships. Noted theorists such as Professor Nicki Crick have said for decades that understanding girls through the use of relational theory is fundamental if we, the professionals, are to effectively intervene in their lives. The girls, the workers and the families all identified this as being crucial for them. You could feel them begin to engage in relationships and clearly benefit from the interactions of staff. These relationships and benefits developed despite, I have to say for many of the girls, the fact that attempting to sabotage them was very much a goal on their mind. The 'stickability' and commitment of staff won the day. This will be all too familiar for many residential /secure care staff.

Some of the most powerful messages given by the girls are contained within poetry. The rawness of the emotion and the sadness of the words are thought provoking and at times overwhelming. The pain being felt by the author is in itself enough for a worker to read, as it tells so much of the journey of the girl who wrote it. I was pleased that professionals included and encouraged girls to use letters and poetry to express their emotions and experiences; there was not only the expectation that only face to face work with professionals will suffice. This is an important message for workers.

As I neared the end of each girl's journey, my expectations were high as to what the next stage brought. What happened to them? Are they ok? Did they manage to move forward? Was there hope after all? Sadly, I found too many times that once the young girls left, the professionals could not say what happened to them and I was left feeling incredibly sad. This as it is all too familiar today, decades on. Once or twice we were to be informed of the tragic death of some of the girls and those girls who successfully made the transition from secure care to the community were in the minority. Sadly, as I finished reading the book, I didn't see the message of hope that Professor Anglin alluded to. It is clear that staff were committed and passionate about instilling this in the girls but as is all too often the case, it is what happens when they leave the facility that determines their outcomes and for many, they are often left with little or no hope.

When we read a book, people will ask 'did you enjoy it?'. Enjoy is not the word I would choose to describe this read as it was a harrowing account of an all too familiar experience(s) of vulnerable and high risk girls. It was, however, a very worthwhile read in that it provides invaluable insight into the lives of young girls and perhaps most importantly helps professionals to understand that behaviour has meaning. Some of the activities outlined in the book would not be out of place in a training programme for staff, but for me the learning comes from the girls' stories. For this reason it is a must read for those professionals who work directly or indirectly with vulnerable and high risk girls.

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