Review of "Murdering Stepmothers - The Execution of Martha Rendell" by Anna Haebich

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Abstract
Stepmothers have received a bad press over the centuries. They are the cruel replacement mothers of fairytales, women who may not have children themselves and whose relationship with their new offspring is hostile or neglectful. Stepmothers usurp another woman's role, generally that of the idealised, biological mother who has died tragically and can never be replaced in her children's hearts. This antithetical role plays out in folk narratives such as Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Cinderella, which offer murderous stepmothers and absent fathers who are blind or indifferent to their children's peril.

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Stepmothers have received a bad press over the centuries. They are the cruel replacement mothers of fairytales, women who may not have children themselves and whose relationship with their new offspring is hostile or neglectful. Stepmothers usurp another woman’s role, generally that of the idealized, biological mother who has died tragically and can never be replaced in her children’s hearts. This antithetical role plays out in folk narratives such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella* which offer murderous stepmothers and absent fathers who are blind or indifferent to their children’s peril.

While folk tales have their origins in ancient times, the trope continues to play out in narratives about stepmothers in divorced and blended families. In films like *Stepmom*, it is implicit that the stepmother, if she is to be accepted at all, must overcome a series of obstacles - rejection, challenge, triumph, and acceptance - before her new children will call her ‘Mum’. If a Stepmother does have children of her own, the adopted one is reviled or relegated to a Cinderella role. These stereotypes offer a complex psychopathology of anxiety, splitting, rejection and gender identity. No wonder stepmothers have found themselves the objects of suspicion or resentment, not just because they might manage their new roles badly, but also because they are invariably seen as murderous or vindictive. It’s what centuries of folklore have told us, after all, creating a very dangerous ground for a woman to inhabit.

Anna Haebich examines this social relationship in her book, *Murdering Stepmothers: The Execution of Martha Rendell*. Rendell was the last woman to be hanged in Western Australia. She was found guilty of murdering her three small stepchildren who died shockingly by what appeared to be poison delivered directly by Martha. As well as examining Rendell’s case in detail, the underpinning question in Haebich’s book is how hard is it for a woman to escape the imprisoning prejudices of stepmotherhood – those anthropological, mythologized constraints of fairytales.

In responding to this, Haebich constructs her narrative in four chapters through the eyes of four men – *The Photographer*, *The Detective*, *The Doctor*, *The Reverend*, all of them products of their gender and times. It is only in the fifth chapter, *The Researcher*, Haebich’s reflective exploration of her role in the story, that the feminised/feminist voice enters the story. By creating a multi-voiced narrative as she has, Haebich offers a fascinating array of perspectives about the case. Her male narrators move between outrage and sympathy, complicity and guilt, naivety and awareness as Martha makes her relentless way towards the gallows. It’s a very interesting cultural exploration of a time when it was far too easy to become a stereotype. Once caught up in the judicial system, escaping her stepmotherhood was well nigh impossible. It bound Martha to her guilt in far more complex ways than her accusers could reckon. Being a woman who maintains her innocence, her composure, and refuses to break down in public adds further to the risk. Just as women similarly accused decades later would learn, silence and dignity are associated with hardness, complicity and guilt. By maintaining composure, Haebich suggests, Martha inadvertently ensconced herself in the wicked stepmother role. The most moving
elements of the story are the later ones as Martha awaits her end, especially the realization that comes too late. She should perhaps have spoken earlier, behaved differently, asserted her knowledge more loudly. Instead she awaits her end with a quiet dignity, which is reflected through the voices of the narrators, they too transformed by the experience of Martha’s death.

The book offers the story in a tight and suspenseful way – though the reader knows the outcome of the tale – like all good fairytales one keeps reading to the end in the hope of salvation. Haebich’s only faults are that sometimes the male narrators sound a little too alike, although this shifts once they find their narrative stride. This is a fascinating book which chronicles Western Australia’s criminal and judicial past yet resonates with the way in which stereotypes can ensnare us still.

Catherine Cole