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ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

Offla's Children: A Family Memoir

Book Review

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Helena Wilson, Paul Ban and Liz Ban
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In the book, *Confronting Cruelty, Australian Perspectives on Child Protection*, which Shurlee Swain and I co-authored, the final page has this passage:

> There are many different types of child protection stories ... there are the individual narratives told by the child rescue movement, tragic narratives of childhood innocence and adult betrayal. The voice of the child in these narratives always remains silent. Typically hidden from these narratives are also the voices of parents – these are rarely heard, partly because there are few brave enough to speak and perhaps because there are few prepared to listen with compassion.

I wrote those words in 2002. The zeitgeist has changed and, in the past two decades, we have heard many of the voices of the Stolen Generations, British child migrants, Forgotten Australians and those affected by forced adoption. We have rarely heard accounts by, or about, the parents whose children entered the out-of-home care system. For most, it is now too late for their stories to be told.

Offla's Children speaks to the present and not just the past, about family identity, loss and love. This book has important implications for current policies and practices, the preservation of bonds between siblings being the most obvious. *Offla's Children* is distinctive in that the central narrative is about the authors' father, nicknamed Offla, while also offering three individual perspectives on being in State care at Silky Oaks, a Brisbane residential care facility, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Helena Wilson, Paul Ban and Liz Ban have written a powerful and poignant account of the struggle of their father who, without any extended family support in Australia, attempted to care for his young children in the aftermath of the death of their English mother, Jean, from breast cancer in 1963. One of the most confronting parts of the book is when Paul, Helena and Liz each recall coming into the care of the child welfare system. Written from a child's eye view, the vivid and detailed descriptions of entering care are evocatively captured.

Their father, Zoltan Ban, was a Hungarian refugee burdened by the trauma of the Second World War and mental illness. After the children were taken into care, he valiantly fought against great odds to remain connected with them, going to extraordinary lengths to do so. The book draws on extracts from the files of child welfare services, the Immigration Department and the International Red Cross, as well as newspaper articles, family letters and photographs. These are skilfully integrated with the unfolding narratives of Helena Wilson, Paul, and Liz Ban. The three accounts of their childhood in care, and the period of leaving care, highlight significant differences between them, giving the book a rich complexity.

Silky Oaks provided a form of congregate care with children separated according to age and gender, which was typical in the 1960s. When the winds of change arrived in the 1970s, there were attempts to create a more family-like model of care. A conservative Christian organisation, Silky Oaks offered stability but from the accounts of Helena and Liz, one is struck by the pain of their unmet emotional needs. These surfaced in adolescence in ways that made adjusting to life in a foster family, for example, especially difficult.

Written with strong emotion leavened with warmth and humour, each of the authors takes us into the inner world and the outer world of their childhood and adolescence. Their father remained a central figure in their lives despite official attempts to thwart this.

One of the key messages for those who work in the child and family welfare field is the enormous difference to the future of a child which an individual can make. Paul Ban describes how the young man who was his child protection worker went to great lengths to argue successfully that the entitlement of Queensland public servants to financial support for tertiary education should be extended to Paul as a young person under State guardianship. This enabled him to go to the University Queensland and study social work.

Today, the support available for young care leavers to undertake vocational and university education remains woefully inadequate. This is not just a huge, lifelong disadvantage to the young person, but it also robs the wider society of their potential contribution. Paul Ban, for example, went on to make an outstanding contribution to child welfare in Australia and elsewhere, pioneering the "family group conferencing" approach which had originated in New Zealand.

The adult impact of childhood experiences in out-of-home care is also well captured. Helena Wilson writes with honesty, insight and deep feeling about how her attempt to foster a troubled adolescent girl fell apart. Understanding how the adverse childhood experiences of a foster carer may pose complex challenges is crucial if we are to avoid hurting both the child and their foster family.

One of the most moving parts of the book for me was when Liz Ban, also a social worker, recounted her experience of working in the child welfare system. Her emotional reaction to very young children removed from their family at a similar age as she was taken into care, was profoundly painful.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that her later practice as a counsellor has been greatly influenced by her understanding of attachment theory, which for Liz Ban would appear to be more than "just a theory". In providing workforce development and professional supervision in the child welfare field, I have become increasingly aware that it is not unusual for social workers and others to come to this work with similar experiences from their own past. The depth of the commitment, empathy and understanding they can offer children and families is a precious gift, but it can come at a personal cost. Services need to offer additional support to their staff where this may be required.

Offla's Children is a most valuable resource for professional education. It is high time that the lived experience of children and families is given a more central place in social work and social welfare education. Those teaching students need to facilitate the exploration of such personal content in ways that are highly respectful of, and acutely sensitive to, those who have courageously shared their experiences.

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