

Interview with John Bryson, author of 'The myths of Azaria, so many'

From Griffith REVIEW Insight: In the mind of the writer

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John Bryson is a former solicitor and barrister, now journalist, lecturer and fiction writer. His best-known work is *Evil Angels* (Penguin, 1985), chronicling the trials of Lindy Chamberlain over the death of her daughter Azaria, snatched by a dingo from a campsite near Uluru in 1980. He discusses his essay in *Griffith REVIEW 42* which deals with the myths and superstitions which have attached to the Chamberlain case, one of the most divisive and disturbing in Australia's recent history, with Madeleine Watts.

You've been covering the Chamberlain trial for almost thirty years now, through Evil Angels as well as other articles and essays, like this one in Griffith REVIEW, over the years. What has kept you returning to the case?

Several circumstances. First, the Chamberlains were not yet publicly restored to a state of innocence. Authorities in the Northern Territory, including much of the sub judiciary, were continuing to block their efforts to have the coronial finding brought into line with their innocence, despite, or to spite, the Royal Commission. The authorities' recalcitrance was encouraged by Northern Territory politicians and News Limited editorials. Second, public fascination with this case remained high. For example, *Griffith REVIEW* asked me to write this piece on this subject, of a happening more than three decades ago.

How have the myths surrounding Azaria's disappearance changed – or not – over the years?

This is the very subject of my piece: what were the first myths, and how they changed to fit with current expectations. Let's begin with the understanding that, at the time of Azaria's disappearance, everyone present knew what had happened, the folk eating at the barbecue with the family, the Rangers, the police, the hundreds of searchers, the black trackers, everyone at Uluru knew a dingo had made off with the baby. The first myth arrived with the early journalists, who were sceptical, and whose scepticism infected some police and then the nation at large. The first myth had Pastor Michael Chamberlain sacrificing baby Azaria on Ayers Rock. The second myth moved the accusation to the mother Lindy Chamberlain. By the time of the second inquest, and of the trial, this had become overwhelmingly the belief of the nation, so the prosecution had won its case well before any evidence was given. I recall the myth attributed to the belief of Prime Minister Hawke and Minister Bowen, that the baby had been dispatched by one of her brothers.

One of the key ideas your essay raises is the fact that what people believe has only a tenuous relationship with the truth. What kind of implications does that have for the justice system?

This case is a vivid example that humankind believes as we wish to believe. Let's acknowledge here the Chamberlain's innocence was believed by the rangers especially chief ranger Roff, by all the campsite witnesses, by the trackers, by the first coroner Barritt, and by the trial judge Muirhead. This is the only case, ever, where all the eyewitnesses banded together after the conviction to give public road-shows of protest and, after his retirement, the trial judge campaigned for the abolition of the jury system.

One of the things your essay reminded me of was of all the 'lost children' stories that exist in the Australian cultural imaginary, whether from real life – like the Beaumont children disappearance – or in fiction, like Picnic at Hanging Rock. It seems like those stories make Australians very anxious, because they signify something about our sometimes powerless position in the Australian landscape. But the anxiety was misplaced in the Chamberlain case – from the dingo, to Lindy Chamberlain. I wonder what your thoughts are on that, and why people were so reluctant to believe the story that a dingo would snatch a baby from a tent.

Yes. For example Fred McCubbin's 'Lost', painted in 1886, mirrored a general fear of losing children and, not long before this was painted, the girl Clara Crosby was found three weeks after disappearing in the bush. We were all disinclined to the belief in a dingo making off with Azaria, because most Australians are city folk, unfamiliar with dingoes, and the white population of the Northern Territory is overwhelmingly city folk from other states. The trackers knew dingoes would filch small children, and said so, but were ignored, as were the Rangers, who had already warned their Department of it.

One of the things made clear in your essay is the role the media played, first, by encouraging the initial disbelief in the story that the baby had been taken by a dingo, and then later on, promulgating the rumours by phrasing them as questions to the police. I'm interested in what role you think the Australian media has in effecting legal outcomes, particularly with a case like the Chamberlains.

Clearly pivotal. In the USA the first reaction of a defence lawyer in a celebrity case is to hire a public relations operator. And in this country we have just witnessed a media baron effect a change of national government. I cannot any longer take seriously the contention that we live in a democracy. Misinformation disables individual and collective judgement, and therefore puts the goal of a democracy beyond our reach. National media are now lobbyists for national political interests. International media are fairer and more truthful, it seems to me, because they are no use to political interests which wish to influence national governments. See the readership growth of *Al Jazeera* and *The Guardian*, for example, and maybe *The Huffington Post*, perhaps *Truthout*. But when I read an article in the domestic news-press, I like to repeat for myself the sentence 'I have no information about this topic.' Of all the six culpable professions here-politics, media, police, law, forensic science-media was the first to change its stance to accord with the facts. And other blameworthy forces should not be protected from view. The Chamberlain case casts incidental light on the way a handful of lawyers from other states were able to occupy politics and authority in the NT, then do as they wished with it. And, though this hurts to note, the feminist movement failed Lindy Chamberlain, when Drs. Greer and Goldsworthy dealt with

the book *Evil Angels*, harshly as they were entitled to be, then left this bereaved and miserable mother to her gaol-time.

Towards the end of the essay you raise the idea of witch-hunts, and the hysterical belief in evil women, as a way of thinking about the public's attitude towards Lindy Chamberlain. What sort of cultural conditions open up the door to belief in witch-like figures?

The propensity to believe in witch-like figures has ever had a religious base, necessarily because its foundation relies on the adoption of a superstition. This is a remarkable intellectual activity because it is unempirical, which is to say the observer's own experience belies it, the observer does not share it, so attributing the hidden power to another. It is also contra-realistic, in that direct evidence is not to be found, so an alternative structure of reasoning must be used. Often the path to that alternative leads through a culture of belief that must not be questioned. I found belief that the Chamberlains had slaughtered their baby was religion-unspecific, but those who believed Mrs Chamberlain may have been a witch were mostly Catholic, some lapsed. Joy Kuhl, the laboratory technician who wrongly identified blood in the Chamberlain car was one, then providing us with the conundrum of a highly educated science practitioner also believing in a superstition.

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