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Event: Launch of Evil Angels.

Address to Penguin Books Staff Meeting 1985

There is always a promise made to the reader at the beginning of every suspense story, and the promise made by Evil Angels would run something like this: however much you've read already about the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain and the trial of her parents for murder, you don't know the half of it.

Although we know how it ends before we begin, Evil Angels is a suspense story, a narrative - a documentary to be sure, but a narrative documentary - and with the advantages of a novel, which means, here, that the reader will know the characters well enough to judge the value of events all the way through. I can't tell you much in a few minutes, but I can give you something of the action.

The real story began back in 1844, in the north-eastern states of America, where Adventist families gathered together on open spaces, anywhere they could see the sky, where they had come to witness the end of the world, the return of the dead, and to ascend, between Jesus and the Almighty, into heaven. It was a long night. That time, if Adventists speak of it at all now, is called the Great Disappointment. But it marked the beginning, not the end, of an unshakable faith in Advent, their belief in the Heavenly Plan, their belief that the adversities of life are more numerous, and more terrifying, the closer they are to redemption, the horrors increase, the sneering of the misguided and of the Evil Angels is louder and more terrible, and to survive all this with purity of soul intact, they must respond with joyful prayer and with glad faces. And this was the sort of people the Chamberlains were.

The journalists who get to Ayers Rock on the 18th of August 1980, the day after Azaria Chamberlain vanished, know nothing of Adventists, except that the child's father is

a minister. The lead reporter is Geoff DeLuca. DeLuca knows a good story when he sees one. He knows there is something excitingly wrong here. He doesn't believe the parents, or their stoic fatalism for a moment. He doesn't believe a dingo could carry off a child. He finds that the local rangers do. The rangers have been warning the Tourism department that something like this might happen any time now, unless the dingoes are fenced away from the tourists. DeLuca thinks this altogether too convenient a conjunction of events, but it looks as if he is the only sceptic around, until John Lincoln, a detective, flies in from Alice Springs, tough and practical, and together they stage a demonstration of the impossibility of it all, for the others.

The scene is the bar of the Red Sands motel. DeLuca is drinking with the police. It's late, and they've been arguing. Everyone has had a good deal to drink. Gilroy, Lincoln's inspector, believes the Chamberlains are honest and sorrowful parents. Lincoln storms off. He comes back through the bar-doors carrying a bucket full of sand, and insists that everyone hold it by the handle, between the teeth. No one can. That's ten pounds, Lincoln says, the weight of a baby.

Now, that's not the story the press gave out, but the Chamberlain investigation was born right there in the motel bar, and so was the tenor of disbelief in the Adelaide News, and in every news report from then on. The police didn't know it then, and neither did DeLuca, but rangers and Aboriginals and zoologists had all seen dingoes carry far more difficult loads, three times the weight, head-up, at a run. DeLuca didn't know either that black-trackers had trailed a dingo from the Chamberlain tent to three locations on the dunes where the animal laid a bundle down on the sand, leaving the imprint of the baby's clothing.

The Chamberlains weren't told anything of that either. They asked the rangers to fix things so nothing like this could ever happen again, they asked the news reporters to publicise it, they went home to Mt Isa, Michael Chamberlain to his Adventist parish, his boys to school, Lindy Chamberlain to re-arranging the depleted household. But there were rumours around town now: that the baby was malformed at birth and murdered by her parents, that she was a devil's child and ritually slaughtered, that she was the issue of an adulterous union and put down by a shamed father, that she was sacrificed to atone for the sins of the world. The first newspaper to get this into print was the Melbourne Truth, front page.

At headquarters in Alice Springs, the police case was building up fast. The way the police figured it, the baby was slain earlier in the day she disappeared, perhaps days

before, the parents had produced an effigy, a small impostor they would later claim was taken by a dingo. The police did not know yet about the Wilkins family, or the Eccles, each of whom had nursed the child when she was alive and squawking, or about Judy West who saw her just before dark, or about the Lowes who saw the baby and heard her crying.

And it mightn't have altered anything if they had. By now, whatever was in train had a momentum of its own.

Here is something else I should tell you. The real business of Evil Angels is with the voices of superstition. The Chamberlains' own preposterous religious beliefs are a good example, a good starting point, but I am really talking about the superstitions of others. That a forensic scientist who was on the prosecution team might believe Lindy Chamberlain to be a witch, and one did, is getting closer to the real story, but is too narrow, too much a particular. Superstitions of one kind or another, our superstitions, are the looming presence behind every scene.

There is no defence against superstition, no light will blind it, no truth will wound it. Fact simply makes no difference. You will remember one of the very earliest examples, it happens when a poisoned-pen letter notifies the police that Azaria means, in Hebrew, Sacrifice in the Wilderness. The letter is leaked to the press - a letter, as it turns out, from a medical practitioner in Mt Isa - and it will make no difference that Sacrifice belongs to the name Azala, which the doctor has read from the wrong entry in the Dictionary of Biblical Names. To this day you can find people who remember the rumour but not the truth.

To this day you can find people who believe that the baby's blood was found in the Chamberlain car. The fact is quite different: A biologist called in by the police finds the remnants of old blood, and she identifies it as human foetal blood - rather than what the Chamberlains say it is, the blood of an injured adult - and it will make no difference that the testing solution she, the biologist, uses, is the wrong one used in the wrong way, so wrong for the identification of this blood that when a defence scientist - Professor Boettcher from Newcastle - goes to the German manufacturers of that testing solution, and opens up a vein in his own arm and pumps his own blood into a tube in front of those astonished Germans, whose solution then shows his blood to be the blood of a new-born baby, it will all make no difference. But no-one knew it, right up to the end.

The prosecutors will, by the end of the trial, privately concede defeat, the defence lawyers

will assume victory, the Trial Judge will make it clear to the jury that it should acquit, and the reporters will pre-prepare their copy so that the morning headlines can read: Chamberlains Not Guilty. But they know better, the people in Darwin, all the way through. Outside the courthouse, girls walk the footpath in t-shirts which read: The dingo is innocent. Bumper-stickers say: Save the dingo. Someone leaves a doll, headless and bloody, on the courthouse steps.

When the Chamberlains are convicted, there are celebrations all over town. The sort of people, the characters we follow closely, who see the events coming out this way are the bystanders at the campfire, the Lowes and the Wests, the Chamberlains at home in Mt Isa, or on the run from reporters and press photographers, or in sanctuary at Avondale College, scientists in their laboratories, the lawyers, in preparation for the defence and again in the courtrooms, the judges in chambers, reporters covering the greatest event in their professional lives, Lindy Chamberlain, in prison, writing poems to her dead child.

And the Adventists, for whom the Great Plan has again gone wrong, disappointed as they seem to be all their lives, holding rallies in city and town-halls all over the country, preaching not now the gospel of Advent but the gospel of the Chamberlain trial, and not understanding much of it themselves, but joined suddenly in a unique and astonishing happening, the defection of every one of the campsite witnesses from the ranks of the prosecution, the Lowes, Wests, Whittackers, Haby, Goodwin, all of them united now in protest, speaking out, with a sudden chill understanding that they had all been hoodwinked one way or another, that they had not taken part in a courtroom trial but in some sort of theatre of illusion.

So keenly do those prosecution witnesses feel this that three have suffered psychological breakdown. So troubled are they over the conduct of the trial that each one of them imagines some measure of personal blame: because they did not see early enough what the prosecutors were making of them, because they did not think clearly enough in the witness-box, because they did not give their testimony well enough. They are quite wrong about that. What we know when they leave us, when their voices are gone, when the book is closed, is that the world doesn't work that way at all.

Mrs Chamberlain has now completed two years in Berrimah prison. I wish you Good Speed in your efforts to disseminate this book.