

BOOK REVIEW

UNBROKEN: ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY TO REBUILD A LIFE SHATTERED BY VIOLENCE. A TRUE STORY OF SURVIVAL AND HOPE

Madeleine Black

London, UK: John Blake, 2017. 276 pp.

Madeleine Black, an integrative psychotherapist, offers a valuable contribution to the personal/political field of "coming out" as a rape survivor (see also Brison, 2002; Douglas, 2016; Freedman, 2014; Raine, 1999; Sebold, 2003; Spring, 2014).

In 1979, aged 13, Black was raped by two boys in the bedroom of a friend's mother, while neighbours nearby were enjoying the everyday summer activity of a garden barbecue. Black shows the mind's ability to detach from the absolute horror of this by clinging to the mundane:

I noticed there was a border of wallpaper around the room at the top of the walls. It had pink and grey bows. I counted them over and over again. Each wall section had eleven bows; there were four walls in the room: forty-four bows in total (p.13).

The forty-four chapters of *Unbroken* chart Black's long journey from the terror of that night to forgiveness, to when "sharing my story wasn't about helping me anymore, it was about helping others" (p. 262).

As a psychotherapist and psychotherapist-in-training respectively who are rape survivors (one of us "came out" in writing in this journal [Lee, 2017a] and has also written here about processes of "coming out" [Lee, 2017b]), we recognise that it is rare and important for psychotherapists to self-identify and self-disclose as Black has done; and we decided to share our thoughts.

Frances: It's a powerful book; it takes you both to the depths of depravity, and to the dawning of much hope and spiritual awakening. Whilst it is graphic (there are warnings for those who might be triggered), I agree with Black that this is needed so that people can try to understand the reality of rape. I particularly appreciated the messages that healing takes a very long time; that good therapy cannot be rushed; and that the author's transformation takes place not by changing her behaviour as such, but by becoming more of who she really is. Black's experiences of self-blame and blame from others, troubled eating, taking an overdose, being in a psychiatric hospital, the challenges of marriage and motherhood, and an epiphany when she recognises herself in Rape Crisis training materials are all important topics. Shamanic healing, hypnotherapy, breath and bodywork, and endorphin- and confidence-boosting sports are all well described. I was pleased that spiritual healing is not overdramatised. I imagine that some readers might be put off by the forgiveness theme, which gathers momentum towards the end; forgiveness worked for Black, but other survivors may not wish, or indeed be able, to take this approach. For some readers, too, knowing that the perpetrators have never faced justice and are still at large might be disturbing.

Deborah: I agree it's very powerful. I appreciated the starting point that: "for decades, I shut the memories out" (p. 1). People often think that rape happens, the victim/survivor identifies it as such, accesses help, and that recovery (whatever that implies) soon follows—meaning that the victim/survivor can fit neatly back into society, and society doesn't have to worry unduly, if at all, about the ubiquity of rapists and rape culture. Black also details three more rapes she experienced before the age of 17. I didn't like the back-cover blurb that "Madeleine has experienced more trauma in her life than most ever will"—it made her testimony sound unusual, when in fact statistics show the high prevalence of sexual violence; but in the book itself, the unacceptability of a male sense of entitlement to women's bodies, and male disrespect for the bodies of women rape survivors ("he'd heard I liked it rough", p. 41), is clear; they're messages that need repeating.

Frances: Yes, absolutely. I struggled for 10 years without support, attempting to shut out the experience. It wasn't until a serious physical illness pulled me up short and made me rethink my whole lifestyle that I started seeing a psychotherapist. I didn't know it at the time but this was the first step on my journey to eventually training as a psychotherapist.

I also listened to Black being interviewed by Trevor McDonald (Radio 4, 2017), and was interested to hear that anger was a destructive emotion for her. Part of my own healing process has involved an ability to get directly in contact with the energy of anger and use it in a transformative way to allow me to speak out, assert myself and my boundaries, and to alert me to take action. Black does not appear to discuss her reaction to anger in the book and this left me curious and wondering about its role in recovery from violence.

I noticed I had a strong reaction to the therapist who also was in charge of the centre where the author did her psychotherapy training. I experienced him as quite egotistical and I disagreed with the way he pushed Black back into her traumatic memories: "he said it would be a good idea if I could tell him what they did to me since I hadn't mentioned any details yet" (p. 131). At times I felt she was being retraumatised unnecessarily.

Deborah: That struck me, too. Elsewhere, the therapist "suggested it would be a good idea" (p.168) for Black to tell her partner the details of the rape. Both interventions seem directive, and made me uncomfortable—as a person-centred practitioner, I want survivors to do what's best for them, to be their tendency to actualise, to work at their own pace; but I appreciate that Black sees her personal therapy positively.

I was pleased that Black feels so content about "going public" (p. 252); her sense that "I didn't have anything to hide anymore" (p. 252) resonated with my own experience of "coming out" (which also included my full name and photograph), but I also wondered if Black had encountered any negative feedback. I have experienced some people stepping around my writings; and, while I draw on my internal locus of evaluation and keep writing, sometimes that hurts. I'm not sure society is yet ready to always listen to rape survivors.

Frances: I agree that people are not always ready to listen. For example, during my psychotherapy training, when I shared details of what happened to me, I was horrified to be met with some hostility and a lack of understanding. I ended up feeling shamed. In many ways though, Black's book mirrors my own recovery process through therapy training—a process of awakening to greater understanding of self and the desire to help others. I, too, feel no desire to hurt my attacker but the circumstances were different in that he served a gaol sentence. I was, however, severely shocked when, some years later, it was reported in the papers that he had raped again, being sent to prison for a longer sentence.

Deborah: I also feel no desire to hurt my attacker, who I never reported. Therapy training has been pivotal for me in confronting what happened, even though I, too, have felt shamed there at times. I feel very strongly that it matters that Black is a psychotherapist. She's engaging in something political; it's not just an accessible and uplifting memoir she's written; it's a means of closing the distance between clients and therapists, people who have lived experiences of trauma and those who seek to help. Books like this can, if we let them, influence psychotherapy training.

Frances: Yes. My experience of rape and my recovery journey influence my therapy work. I hope that my clients who have endured sexual assault and abuse can experience that I have empathy with their experience although I seldom share my own experience and do so only if it feels entirely relevant and helpful for the client and not for myself. To a certain extent, I have always been “out” about rape. I was somewhat “outed” from the start as my case was covered extensively in the local press.

It was also valuable that Black pointed out the failings of mainstream mental health services: no mental health professional even asked Black what had happened to her; instead she acquired labels—eating disorder and depressive personality.

Deborah: And when Black talks about her meetings with the psychiatrist “he kept going with the same theme from before, that my overdose was due to my difficulty in the direct and open expression of my feelings. . .because of unresolved conflict at home” (p. 29), it seemed that having decided upon a position, no further exploration was sought. It was also deeply troubling that, when Black took an overdose, a nurse called her “selfish” (p. 24). We hear these sorts of responses still today.

Frances: It is poignant that those treatment approaches that were most helpful were led by the author herself, thus strengthening the importance of self-agency/empowerment. Empowerment is a key word here. I congratulate Madeleine Black for the power in this important book. Each individual's story is, of course, unique and it is important that stories are told and can come together so that by speaking out as survivors we can collectively strive to change attitudes and spread awareness.

Deborah: It's been wonderful reading this book together, Frances, and talking about our responses to it. I feel a sense of community.

Frances: Yes, I feel that, too. I'm feeling excited about the possibilities opening up from this.

Frances Basset¹

Deborah A. Lee²

¹Basset Consultancy Ltd, Brighton, East Sussex, UK

²Department of Sociology, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

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Frances Basset is a transpersonal psychotherapist and supervisor and is also a Director of Basset Consultancy. She is accredited with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. She trained with the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust and then set up her private practice on the South Coast in 2005. Previously she was Senior Lecturer in Health Care at the University of Brighton. Her original training was as a nurse, working at St James's in Leeds, St Bartholomew's in London, and the Royal Sussex County Hospital in Brighton.



Deborah A. Lee is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Nottingham Trent University, and an existentially informed, person-centred psychotherapist-in-training at the Sherwood Psychotherapy Training Institute (SPTI) in Nottingham. Deborah's current research interests include critical analysis of psychopathology and creative approaches to psychotherapy case studies. She is an associate editor and co-editor for reviews of *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, a steering group member of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR), and a member of the ethics committee of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP).