

BOOK REVIEW:

Frances Griffiths¹

Let me tell you: Mending a broken childhood

By Anthony McCabe, Auckland: Reed, 1998. 208 pp.

In 1978, lying in a Coronary Care Unit, Anthony McCabe was overcome by “*savage revelations*” as “*unbidden, unwanted and profoundly denied memories flooded back*”.

As more and more memories returned, he eventually decided to deal with the rage and hatred they engendered by writing his story, even at the risk of damaging his heart still further.

He writes for his wife who, he thinks, suspected but wasn't sure, and for his sons who must have wondered but never said. “*I'm not writing a book as such*”, he says, “*I'm trying to dispatch some demons and set the record straight.*” He remarks that he did not have the courage to face a counsellor – counselling would have been too much of a strain because he no longer had the control over his emotions that he used to.

In Christchurch, in the 1930s, Anthony McCabe was abused by his mother and by Uncle Fred from the age of three to five and a half. He wants to be honest in recording what happened. He recalls the small child's innocence and initial enjoyment at playing tickling, laughing and tumbling games with his mother, until he reached the point of realisation that something was not quite right. His experience of Uncle Fred's games was quite different. He was left sobbing and sore and with a terrifying, bewildering dream that recurred throughout stressful periods of his life. He describes how Uncle Fred “*groomed*” the little child patiently and slyly over time

with the magic of his watch and butterfly book and magnifying glass. He writes that even at that young age, he was able to calculate his worth: 3 pence for a matinee and aniseed balls; 6 pence meant an eskimo pie and a bottle of fizz as well.

His neglect and ill health eventually led concerned neighbours to call the “*Welfare Lady*” who became a mainstay for Tony throughout the following years. Orphanages, foster homes, and a series of different schools followed. He tells his story of constantly wetting his pants, hair falling out in clumps, sores, unable to take criticism or discipline, having to move from school to school because of disruptive behaviour; similar behaviour through young adulthood: hair loss, loud mouthed and fighting, moving from job to job, weight loss, and bad dreams as he moved from farms to working on the Lake Pukaki power project in the 1940s.

He paints a grim picture of life during the depression, interspersed with occasional episodes of kindness and friendship. His marriage to Reen and the birth of their sons finally bring some stability to his life, and setting up his own business allowed him to be his own boss at last.

This is a powerful account of a life damaged by sexual abuse and of the healing that occurred as a result of the writing. The descriptions of events and the expression of emotions are interwoven with the agonising over how to find words to express the experiences – a familiar client situation.

I was reminded of a number of disruptive, needy students I had encountered when I read the descriptions of classroom and playground scenes. The sense of isolation, of not being

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aware of siblings and their experiences in the family, of being “*on the fringe*” of other people’s lives, the huge sense of abandonment, physical as well as psychological in Tony’s case, will all be familiar themes in stories heard by counsellors.

The book is aimed at the general public. From this point of view it is helpful in a number of ways. It is written by a New Zealander, by a man now in his seventies – experiences of the depression years will be familiar to many and his courage in speaking out after all this time may well be a support to others.

It shows clearly how a child can be groomed by adults, how aspects of abuse can in one situation be initially enjoyed by an innocent child and also be horrific; the effects both long-lasting and destructive. This is a courageous book. It speaks of mother/son abuse as well as adult male/child abuse. The former is so not commonly acknowledged among the general public, and the consequent sense of shame and betrayal are all the greater. Anthony McCabe emphasises the fact that while abuse may occur before a child can talk, the memories do not fade with time.

In spite of its topic, this is a highly readable book. There are times when I was not entirely clear whether we were in the past or present. This was not a hindrance, rather an example of the reality of the author’s difficulty in dealing with the erratic nature of traumatic memories.

“*Let me tell you*” may be helpful to others wondering whether to write their own stories or how to get started.

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