

When it is vital for a journalist to offend: Gitta Sereny

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2012-6-19



Gitta Sereny: looking at evil

Gitta Sereny who died this week, was an extraordinary journalist who wrote books about horrid people. I say 'extraordinary' because during her working life it was unusual for people to write about 'evil' people in a way that sought to understand rather than simply condemn.

Her interview and biography of a Nazi concentration camp commandant Franz Stangl and leading Nazi Albert Speer were particularly challenging because those events were still part of people's lives, as they were of hers, growing up in Nazi Germany before fleeing to America before the Second World War.

Likewise, her book on child killer Mary Bell in the 1970s shocked a British public who still want murdering youths to be punished for their whole lives.

I wonder if we would still find this kind of journalism shocking? It seems that nothing is taboo. Yet look at the problems faced by journalists trying to understand 'terrorists', for example.

I have always been sure that we need journalism like Sereny's that forces us to look in detail at the people who transgress our social norms in the most disturbing ways. They may be exceptional but we can learn both about what conditions those individuals as well as society as a whole. It may reaffirm our values as well as challenge them.

This should not be left to historians. I am currently reading [Keith Lowe's Savage Continent](#), the deeply disturbing account of the appalling and very widespread atrocities and suffering in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. It has great lessons for anyone interested in the future of our continent and the nature of Western civilisation. But its main insight is how little we wanted to know about evil at the time and how quickly we want to forget. Journalism must sometimes be about telling us very nasty facts about what is happening now as well as what motivates nasty people.

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