

# book reviews

**Shattered lives: children who live with courage and dignity**  
By Camila Batmanghelidjh. Jessica Kingsley Publishers,  
London 2006. 176 pp. £13.99.

Inner-city violence is in the news day by day. It wounds our people, and at the same time preys on our social conscience. Drug abuse and rape abound. We are shocked to read of feral gangs, and murders such as those of Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor. We are appalled by the fear of local terrorism engendered in the 'no-go' housing estates. The public generally do not understand the underlying causes, and few have any concept as to how to prevent the problems or care for these young people in our society.

*Shattered lives* perceptively describes the cycle of tragedy which is created in shattered homes. Batmanghelidjh gives a vivid description of deprivation and filth, the lack of food and the physical and sexual violence, which are profoundly shocking. They are compounded by the absence of a father who is replaced by a steady stream of other men. There is no love. The young are deprived of their childhood by parents from similarly violent, loveless backgrounds. So the inherited cycle perpetuates itself. Scarred, depersonalised and emotionally numb young people emerge from this scenario. Their sense of self has been eradicated. The 'pathetic victim becomes the powerful perpetrator' such that their pre-programmed minds make them well adapted for violence. Tenderness and sensitivity are perceived by them as weaknesses. They are fearless and willing to harm themselves or die.

Rejection of these young people increases their aggression. Perversely, even attempts at care and treatment are often perceived as abuse. And punishment is not a good learning tool: they are emotionally too disorganised to learn from the infliction of punishment, which leads to further resentment and rejection. It follows that anti-social behaviour orders or custodial sentences in either prison or psychiatric care can have the opposite effect of that intended, a view shared by Shaun Bailey who addresses similar issues.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the young people are even rejected by psychiatrists and undergo compulsory incarceration by section under the Mental Health Act. They distrust and fight the law as well as public figures who have been recipients of the drugs which they peddle. Further violence is engendered when they feel 'dissed' or in other words disrespected. Batmanghelidjh comments on the unacceptable levels of failure of conventional custodial sentences, and also suggests that many who are subjected to youth offending programmes would be better served by inclusion in the child protection register.

Batmanghelidjh has established, against much opposition, a remarkable charity, The Kids Company,<sup>2</sup> to support these young people, and it is from her experience that she has tried to understand and help them, aware that many conventional psychiatric diagnoses are inappropriate. These sanctuaries offer love and gentle care, warmth, food and some education. She preserves their dignity, and offers compliments on their attributes and achievements – their beauty or their intelligence, their sense of fun or their A level results.

They receive much personal attention from her, and in one instance she spent a whole week away with one of the young people to try and 'detox' her. She attempts a range of interventions with varying success – physical activities, massage and other calming therapies, appreciation of the arts and drama, and sometimes includes pharmacological treatment for depression as well. It is now important that Batmanghelidjh should make an assessment of the long-term outcomes of her own regimens as a yardstick for comparison with more conventional views.

Care-giving to these young people has vocational and spiritual elements: it is tough. The children often torment and alienate their carers. Offers of love can alarmingly have paradoxical consequences, and carers become damaged and disheartened, requiring perseverance to reap a reward. Carers themselves need guidance and, at times, therapy as well.

Our society is ashamed at the existence of these appalling homes yielding generations of abuse and violence. Batmanghelidjh wants us to understand the causes of failure, and reinterpret the violent behaviours, in order to revise methods for prevention, care and treatment. She would like the social workers to comprehend the issues, to visit the homes at an earlier stage, and to avoid bureaucratic approaches which, for example, regard those over 16 years of age as no longer children. During a 2006 radio interview ('Desert island discs', BBC Radio 4, 22 October 2006) she despaired over the failure of social workers to refer most of these children to child protection orders, observed that their support systems are financially starved, and described as cowards the politicians who agree with her in private, but will not speak out in public.

This important and disturbing book asks society to re-examine these issues. Once there was Dickens, and then Lord Shaftesbury. Reduction of violence in society now requires multiple approaches – environmental, social, cultural, interpersonal and personal. Batmanghelidjh, appropriately named Woman of the Year for 2006,<sup>3</sup> reminds us that there has to be a 'central agenda for which we all take responsibility'. It is, she writes, 'no longer justifiable to blame traumatised children for what in effect is adults' failure to deliver good quality care'. She may have some unconventional views, but they have a powerful logic gained from first-hand experience, and ones which certainly require serious attention.

Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in his comment on this book, commended the urgency of Batmanghelidjh's arguments, which should at last make an impact on the public and on government.

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## References

- 1 Bailey S. *No man's land: how Britain's inner city young are being failed*. London: Centre for Young Policy Studies, 2005.
- 2 Kids Company. [www.kidsco.org.uk](http://www.kidsco.org.uk)
- 3 'Angel of Peckham's gift of giving', 17 October 2006. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6056196.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6056196.stm)