

Seen But Not Heard

The Rochdale and Nottingham cases have revealed widespread sexual abuse of children based on satanic practices. Yet the children are still not believed. **Beatrix Campbell**, presenter of the recent *Dispatches* programme on the Nottingham case, explains why

The politics of childhood denotes party, political, class and cultural categories like no other cause could. The phenomenon of children as an endangered species has simultaneously animated and immobilised all political tendencies. The politics of childhood has oscillated between the Right and Left. The genesis of the Hell's Granny, the law and order freak who stalks the corridors of Conservative power with a hankie and a noose, lies in her ferocious resistance, *on behalf of children*, to liberal law reform. The hanger and flogger has lived in the child molester's shadow. A politics of punishment is produced here as a response to the failure to protect.

For liberals and socialists, for whom revenge and the culture of legitimate brutality is part of the problem not the solution, the abuse of children has often seemed adrift. It is precariously anchored either in a politics of class and poverty (when it comes to economics, children are *always* innocent) or in the fact that childhood is the paradigm of the problem of power, children are literally powerless.

But these political traditions carry their rhetoric before them - it does not fall to them actually to take care of children, and so their interventions are framed by ideology rather than practice. Which often means they don't know what they're talking about.

Not surprisingly, and sometimes despite their ideology, voluntary agencies, together with state specialists, pioneer new consciousness about children's oppression because it is they who do the work, they are the *public parents* of children at risk.

Feminist politics has always linked the empowerment of women with the empowerment of children. But there's a flaky, nay rather fundamentalist feminism around, which has found it as hard as everyone else to cope with the latest discoveries about the oppression of children. To defend the discovery that the biggest single category of child abuser is the child's father within the family, they and others deny the significance of new evidence which locates child abuse not only within the family but without. Their alibi: it's all a diversion from the real culprits, the father and the family. This complaint is ideological and unencumbered by empirical engagement, and thus it encourages the dread that child abuse will once again be allocated to the weird and the wacky, to the random, the inexplicable and the unpredictable. This defence hasn't been hearing what children have been trying to tell.

Workers responsible for children have had to turn themselves inside out to assimilate the phenomenon of child battering, and then that of widespread sexual abuse within the family. Once the appropriate structures of care were in place, they uncovered evidence of *organised* abuse of children, like sex rings which depend on children 'recruiting'

each other for perpetrators whose protection is not so much family as the community. And now they have to contemplate the latest horror story, ritualised sexual abuse, a culture of sexual terrorism, power and sacrifice.

I well recall when someone said to me a couple of years ago, 'you know what'll be next? Satanism and witchcraft.' 'Oh no,' I thought, 'that's for the *News Of The World*! I didn't know anything about it, and didn't want to, because like many, I'm aware of a tendency to only ask questions for which there's an answer to hand. But ritual abuse of children pushes the boundaries of all our beliefs. It is a real measure of the balance of power in society, not only between adults and children, but between the institutions and the children's advocates. It puts to the test our promises to protect children. What has been arresting about the last few months and the Rochdale row has been that it has once again become respectable to call children liars.

Organised and ritualised abuse of children depends, if not on the family, then on the community. We have come to share a sentimental view of the *community* as a social structure somehow immune from the problem of power and oppression. We see the community as an open secret. Like the family, it becomes an icon of collective hearth and home. Unlike the family, we seem to think it can be called to account because it is a public, rather than a private place. But what the expansion of our knowledge about child abuse reveals is that the community is complicit, that the community, like the family, is where child abuse lives. Bizarre and bloody things happen there. So the problem is not, as some suggest, that the stranger in the park is being resurrected in a new moral panic. The problem is that unless and until some equivalent communal resistance is mobilised on the side of children and their advocates then their disclosures will always be disavowed.

A growing archive of children's evidence is telling us something complex about the geography as well as the demography of child abuse. But we are also now having to learn something new about the *culture* of child abuse. 'Satanic rituals' in a secular culture like ours simply aren't taken seriously, and anyone who respects children's accounts of 'satanic' or ritualised abuse aren't taken seriously either.

It has seemed easy enough for newspapers like the *Independent On Sunday* to target evangelical Christians as the creators of a new witch-hunt. That's what has happened in the Nottingham controversy. A rumour that the foster parents are evangelical Christians has powered a new myth that reports of 'satanic' rituals have been induced from the mouths of babes by the foster parents themselves. Without ever asking them their beliefs, the media, professors and the police casually dismiss the children's advo-

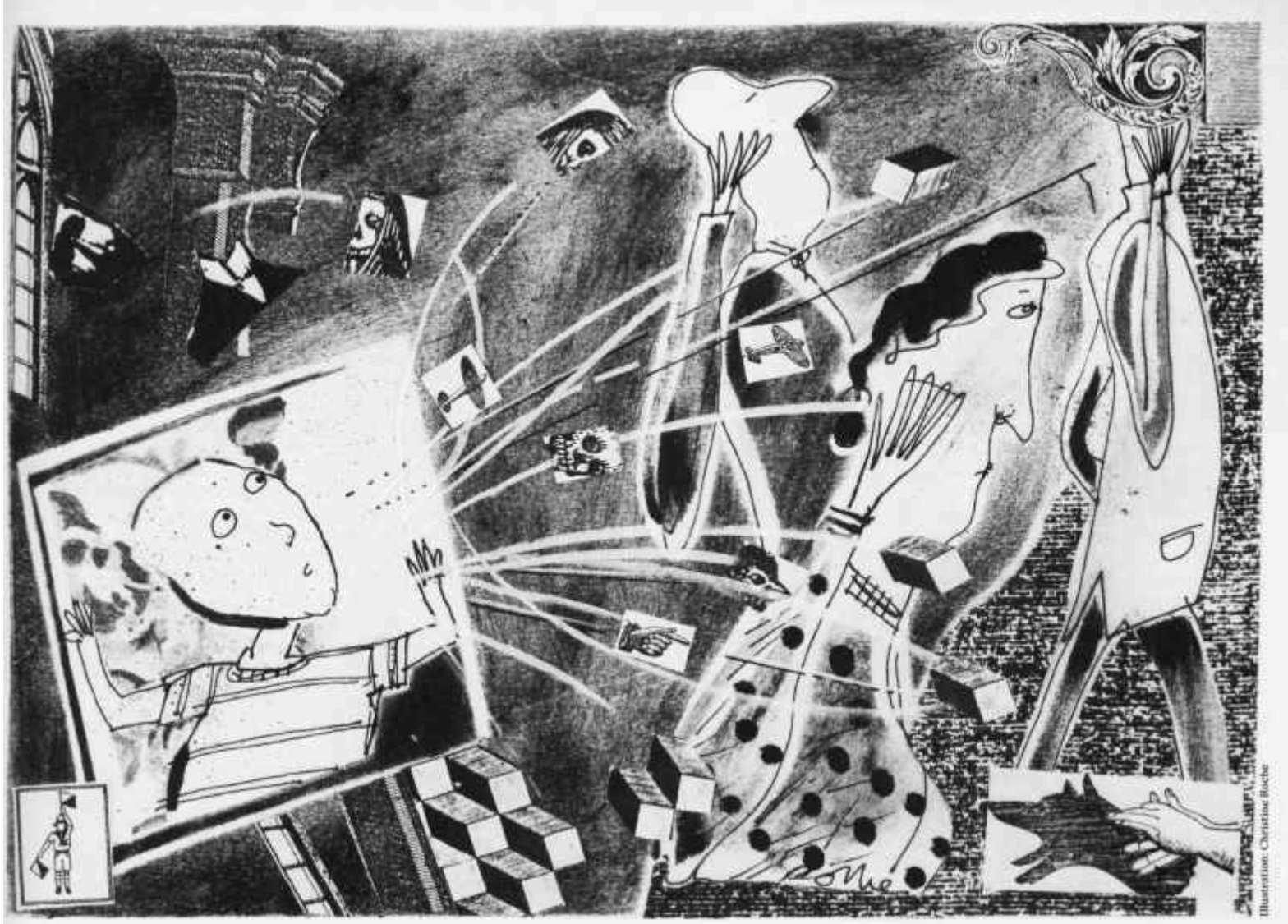


Illustration: Christophe Roche

cates as born-again evangelicals who pour their own devilish fantasies into children. Anyone who believes children when they say they're terrified of witches (even when they know they're Uncle X or Auntie Y) is designated as someone who believes in witches. None of the carers involved in the Nottingham case believes in witches. But they believe that the children believe. They believe the children because they've lived with their dread of the terrifying power of people who led them to believe they were witches.

Behind the Nottingham case is an inability to imagine that 'satanic' practices actually happen. But why? The secularism of our society is infused by ambiguous tendencies toward transcendental powers which ought to help us think afresh. Hands up all those who never look for their horoscope when they find *Woman's Own* at the doctor's. When we do that, aren't we searching beyond self-made destiny? Don't most sizeable towns have New Age shops and alternative networks which inhabit the boundary between the material and the mystical? Search any record shop and won't you find pseudo-satanic heavy metallers? All this stuff is *inside* our society. And should we be surprised? Isn't politics itself a wish to transcend the limits of the self by the strength not

of the cosmic but by civic collectivity?

Some of the resistance to the phenomenon of the ritual abuse of children balks because it appears to challenge what we've learned about 'ordinary' sexual abuse. For ritual abuse is about spectacle. It is about children in a theatre of sexual terrorism. Ritual abuse challenges the residual wish to believe that sexual abuse is like rape used to be (before the women's liberation movement told it like it was) - an excess of desire, and impetuous combustion, rather than strategic sexual subordination.

If perpetrators are properly understood as planners of sexual abuse, then the fiction of the ceremony is actually a form of coded coercion. Ceremony and ritual can be seen as merely the context in which a sub-culture is shared, the victims' subordination is secured and the power of the perpetrators becomes manifest. It is about the etiquette of oppression. Sub-cultures are no more or less characterised by ritual than any other social formation. It is worth asking when routine becomes ritual in daily life. Routines get us up in the morning, get us fed, watered, washed, waged or whatever. But rituals and ceremonies are the condition of social congregation, whether on the terraces, in traffic, at the tea table, or at prayer. They see us through summit conferences and love

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affairs, birth and death.

After all, people pray in front of grown men wearing frocks, and presumably to find both peace and power, they consume, metaphorically, the body of a man. So is it so difficult to believe that inversions of that established religion are to be found at large? If grown men are capable of dressing up in pinnies and sharing secret signs with each other in masonic lodges up and down the country, what is so hard about contemplating the prospect of grown men dressing up in daft costumes to invert the meanings of the dominant faith; organising rituals to penetrate any orifice available in troops of little children; to cut open rabbits, or cats, or people, and drink their blood; to shit on silver trays and make the children eat it?

Is the problem really implausibility, or is it that the consequences of these practices are unbearable? After all, to *conceive* of the consequences for children, we have to perform an act of imagination: we have to picture it, and perhaps once we do that we have to put ourselves in the picture, either as perpetrator or as victim. Both are intolerable. But if we don't we can't make sense of it. Who knows what it's all about anyway? Are the rituals described by children designed to confuse the victims? Or to terrify? Is it all part of the belief system, which aims to bring transcendental power to the per-

petrator? Or is it to guarantee that the victim will be disbelieved?

When the director of social services and the chief constable in Nottinghamshire last year appointed an internal inquiry into persistent allegations by many children of exactly such rituals in several locations, ranging from a council estate to major public properties, the inquiry convinced itself that satanic subcultures in Britain were both disorganised and harmless. What is interesting about that is how they come to that conclusion, and why.

They claimed to have scoured the satanic literature and found nothing to support sexual abuse or sacrifice. Oddly, they didn't discuss that standard text, *Magick*, by the great British satanist, Aleister Crowley, alias the Beast. It is a book that has recently been dropped by its publisher because it was felt to be dangerous. And you only have to turn to the chapter on sacrifice to find out why: it recommends that practice and identifies the perfect victim, a young, innocent, male child.

The inquiry's historical survey, apart from showing shoddy scholarship, simply endorsed the inquiry's prior dismissal of the children's experience. The next question is why: why did the inquiry need to believe that there is no satanic sub-culture of sacrifice and sexual abuse? That the children *must* be wrong? The inquiry's perfectly proper scepticism became a mind-set, a belief, a faith, a compulsion to scorn the only evidence we have: the mortal fear and the heroic efforts of more than a dozen terrorised children to share their histories with their new carers, a group of ordinary and simultaneously extraordinary foster mothers.

The inquiry never bothered to meet these women. Nor did it bother to interview women in the special social services unit, Team 4, set up to organise the children's protection. In their absence the inquiry decided that children's stories, meticulously recorded by the foster parents, were induced or invented (brainwashing, according to Professor John Newson, an inquiry advisor). Had he bothered to meet them he would have found a largely secular network of skilled women who lived and worked with these children, day in day out, for more than two years, and who concluded that although they didn't - and still don't - entirely understand the children's evidence, they appreciated that they were trying to share something dreadfully important.

The inquiry chose instead to believe the police, who concluded that the children's allegations about rituals would ruin an impending sexual abuse trial. In the current controversy, much is made of the allegedly uncorroborated nature of the children's statement. But this is not true. The Nottingham children were corroborated by three adult women in the family. Much is made of the argument that there is no evidence of ritual

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abuse. But what are the children's experience, and the efforts to explain, if not evidence?

The police came to believe that what the children were saying was *impossible* and set out to prove it. There's a problem here. Facing up to the unknowableness of what these children actually endured is one thing. Transforming uncertainty and scepticism into a belief in impossibility is quite another. The inquiry and the police abandoned respect for their one source - the children - and came to *believe* in the impossibility of what they did not *know*.

If the police refuse to believe the evidence of children, then they cannot be protected. Indeed, what has become clear in the Cleveland case and in Nottingham is that the police are producing a crisis in child protection work. Politically, the policing of child abuse, like the policing of Northern Ireland, is creating a crisis of democracy. To whom are the police accountable for their failure to carry out not only their statutory obligations but the public's mandate?

We must share some of the responsibility for the crisis, for it derives from the difficulty of detection, from panic in the face of the problem, from resourcelessness. But all that masquerades behind a refusal to do their job. In Nottingham the police seem to have failed to have investigated even the corroborated allegations of organised sexual abuse. It is their job, and theirs alone, to find evidence. What they have done in cases is to squander evidence, ignore it, or demand that the children themselves provide the proof.

We should sympathise - police culture doesn't support individual officers' commitment to children. Police priorities would put resources into surveillance of receivers of stolen goods or cocaine smugglers, but not into strange statements by junk kids from a junk family on a junk housing estate.

Another instrument of the inquiry's repudiation of the children was the notion of innocence and thus corruptibility. The myth of childhood 'innocence' was mobilised against these children by means of a disingenuous rehabilitation of Freud. The children's stories were reinterpreted not as representations of a reality, but as a response to their 'childhood fantasies'. The inquiry capriciously deployed incompatible notions of childhood (not surprising - none of them were specialists in children). If not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page easily filled by videos.

They used the very notion of innocence to deny children's experience, to deny that these terrorised children had a history, something real, something to say, which, when they became safe, they risked sharing - despite a dread that they or their carers or their cousins would die.

The inquiry concluded that the children's pace of revelation was proof of

their unreliability. They were either making it up for carers who wanted to hear it, or that the carers themselves imported their own imaginings into innocent, and therefore empty, vessels. But because the police and the inquiry didn't believe the children, they didn't apprehend the sense of danger that surrounded these children, and thus they didn't grasp the necessity, yet the difficulty, of disclosure. Nor did they appreciate, therefore, the children's tactics of telling, or their courage in telling.

The children took their time, they made it clear to their foster parents when they had said enough and when they wanted to say more. Reading through the foster parents' diaries of their children's 'disclosures', what becomes clear is that children were sometimes desperate to talk, almost as if they had an agenda: sometimes they were desperate to stop speaking, as if death was never far away: and that and the evidence of their experience got worse as the children got better, especially after they knew that their grandfather and their parents were going to jail. They did their best to make the adults understand. But their *escalating* efforts were mobilised against them. Why hadn't they said it all at once, the inquiry wondered. When did the inquiry last know a child, we wonder.

Because these children were respected by their carers, who endorsed their struggle for survival and selfhood, the carers, too, came to be dismissed by the police and the inquiry as either dupes and suckers, evangelists, or brainwashers. All the progress of the 1980s in transforming the way children and women witnesses alleging sexual crimes have been treated by the police has been undermined by the notion that child witnesses should be treated as if they were the culprits and not the victims.

The discourtesy displayed by the inquiry and the police veil something much more serious. Failure by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to mobilise prosecutions has left the burden of the evidence with the wardship judges, social workers, foster parents and children themselves. It has encouraged the notion that there is no evidence. That, of course, discounts the children's evidence.

Once again, the problem of policing has confounded the struggle for children's rights. The police defend their practices by weighing children's right to safety against parents' rights to possess their children. And so we have the spectacle of a Labour councillor becoming son of Stuart Bell, crusading for parents whose rights have been curtailed not only by the social services 'gestapo' but by the courts. And yet in Nottingham the chairwoman of social services, also Labour, is endorsing the foster parents and social workers. What divides them is not whether or not they believe satanism exists, but whether or not they respect children. And that's the bit we don't know how to get right.