

Aberrant Behaviour

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Conspiracy of Silence, a book written as a piece of investigative journalism by Lisa Priest, and published in 1989 by McClelland & Stewart Inc., acknowledges mistakes of an undetermined kind might be in the book or omitted altogether. The mistakes perhaps so heinous in nature have been shrugged off by thousands of people as “none of my business, just another dead Indian; so what, who cares? Just good old white boys having some fun, leave the poor boys alone.”

I was raised ninety miles upriver from The Pas, Manitoba. I was warned as a young person to avoid that town like the plague. The white people there, though they did speak to you if they had to, carried on as privileged bumpkins. In our own way, we described the majority of them as having just fallen off the turnip truck accidentally and found cheap land to grab. That was our attitude.

Their attitude during the crisis of an ugly murder committed by their own “good boys” allowed the men, all four, to walk in freedom. Their victim, Helen Betty Osborne became the icon by which we measure our entire social, economic, and justice systems. Everyone who could have made a difference froze. In 2011, in Canada, the settler state of imported taxpayers, this attitude prevails. So what, we are okay!

However, in there is the sinister underbelly of self-loathing and the desperation to pass for white at all cost of human decency. A practicing liar, a drug dealer who used up his won profits to support his own habits was granted immunity provided he prostituted himself in court. Might as well, he did it for sixteen years already. Then there is a set of lawyers who admire each other's handiwork in keeping their clients out of jail. By all accounts, their clients are afraid of the Indians crammed into jail cells next to them.

Then there is that common case of my first cousin Norman Manger who I shared a meal with at our Aunt Kate Dubinak's home in Creighton, Saskatchewan in 1955. In the book, his parents were described as alcoholics, and he had never experienced familial caring.

Before his mother's untimely death, my mother Agnes McKenzie-Carriere, Aunt Margaret McAuley, my three siblings, and several cousins made the sad trip to Creighton to visit Aunt Mary McKenzie-Manger just before she passed away. My cousin Anne Manger had been pulled out of her convent school to help look after her siblings with a great amount of help from Aunt Kate McKenzie-Dubinak.

Who was Aunt Mary Manger anyway? She was the second oldest daughter of Dougal McKenzie and Virginie Jourdain. From my mother's memory, we have bits and pieces of what she was to her family. When grandpa Dougal took his entire family to the Sturgeon Weir it was a wilderness area. When they moved to the reserve at Denare Beach, she was already away at work and remained a member of the family. But the years prior to that, it was Aunt Mary who taught her siblings to read and say their prayers. She made an altar in the bush where they repeated the prayers that they knew for a Catholic mass. When she started working, she sent them books to read. My mother never forgot her generosity. She died a Catholic, and was buried according to that funeral rite.

When we visited Creighton, they lived around the hill from the Dubinak's house where everyone was welcome. The Mangers lived in a regular home maintained by Uncle Tom Manger. It was his decision to send the boys away to school. I know for certain one boy went to Notre Dame College in southern Saskatchewan.

One of the characteristics of those northern towns, whether you were Métis or Indian, was the racial slurs and the indifference for the commonwealth that existed everywhere. Survival with any kind of dignity is extremely difficult. No love is lost between town people and the original inhabitants. Norman's life becomes as hazy as his habits. Though he had Indian relatives in town, the company he kept did not make him a long-welcomed guest. His passing himself off as white would be looked on as

aberration of behaviour by those relatives who publicly celebrated their Indian and Métis heritage. His lineage shows hard working people who made lives for themselves no matter what short straws life gives out. His narrative of his family is non-existent. Unless someone tells me otherwise, I do not believe corrections were made on the book after different revelations moved the story forward.

Ultimately, this book is about untrained police persons, a town's tolerance for the nefarious shenanigans of its youth, the introduction of gross substance abuse, the glorification of hard drinking, and ha, ha, we killed somebody who no one will miss. I have used this book as an example for students who have to write reports, and may not fully appreciate how important good writing is needed in so many vital services. Social workers in particular are sometimes reluctant to pay attention to their writing. Police officers can lose a case that they worked on very hard because their narrative becomes unglued because of sloppy writing and thinking. Nurses better write their observations with clarity and sign them off with the date. For Aboriginal students, it is important to know how people express themselves in the English language. Though we seem so far away from 1971, indifference still is the hallmark of many hostile towns. Helen Betty Osborne may have had a thick Cree accent in her speech, but she knew she did not want to be with those horrible men. Those men are the products of their society, and they are no good for even themselves.

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