Mother or Monster? Véronique Olmi’s Beside The Sea: An Interview with Ruth Cain

By  Nanci McCloskey  | October 26th, 2012 – 11:00 am



I love Véronique Olmi’s [*Beside The Sea*](http://www.tinhouse.com/books/fiction-poetry/beside-the-sea.html)and I’m in good company: *Beside The Sea* has been hailed as a masterpiece wherever its been published. Translated into all major European languages, it is a bestseller in Germany and France. Long-listed for the 2011 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and named one of Booktrust’s Top Five Translated Books of 2010. Adriana Hunter’s stunning translation won a Scott Montcrieff Prize.

Now there’s no use in obscuring the fact: *Beside The Sea* is a startlingly dark and disturbing book. A single mother takes her two young sons on their first vacation to the seaside, and it’s clear almost from the start that it will be their last. Fear of an unkind world gets tangled in her mind with the love for her children and her need to protect them. You’re forced to read, through the cracks between your fingers, as a tragedy unfolds: In an act of love, she kills her children.

*Beside The Sea* is nothing if not provocative. In the office we have two distinct camps—those who feel sympathy for the mother, and those who find her irredeemable.  During our debates we stumbled upon a youtube video, [Veronique Olmi’s Beside the Sea: Law, Psychiatry and the Moral Dilemmas of Filicide](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=6eN5bQ_JtCk), a lecture delivered by Dr. Ruth Cain from Kent University.  At one point in the lecture Dr. Cain addresses the class, stating: “Literature brings us to an acknowledgment of situations which I think that legal reports, media reports simply don’t do. This has really reinforced my impression that we need to engage on a literary level with these tragedies.”

I couldn’t agree more. Dr. Cain and I began corresponding over e-mail and she was kind enough to answer a few of my questions.

**Nanci McCloskey:** If Veronique Olmi’s novel, *Beside The Sea* were presented as a case in a court of law, what do you think would be the verdict?

**Dr. Ruth Cain:** I am not a scholar of US law, but I find it likely that the mother would be convicted of murder or voluntary manslaughter given her clear intent to kill the boys. If her mental state were taken into account she may be ruled not guilty by reason of insanity and given psychiatric treatment. Sentencing patterns have been historically variable, but are recently showing an increasing tendency to punish filicide and infanticide as murder and with penal terms.

In most countries, ‘insanity’ requires a state of mind where the defendant cannot recognise that her actions are wrong. [Andrea Yates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea_Yates)‘ case illustrated this: the fact that Yates expressed a sense of ‘sin’ and guilt despite also appearing psychotic and delusional at the time of the act meant that she was initially convicted of murder and only received into psychiatric care following a retrial 5 years later.

**NM:** Is the mother in *Beside the Sea*legally culpable? Personally, do you feel the same?

**RC:** The acts she has committed are undeniably homicide, specifically filicide: the non-accidental killing of a child. Even if a concept of diminished responsibility or ‘involuntariness’ is accepted in the case of a woman who is clearly suffering from enormous mental, emotional and social problems, the charge would be likely to stand unless the court were to be convinced by psychiatric reports that the mother was indeed insane, and unable to recognise that her actions were wrong. Given the motivations and thoughts which the novel describes, this is indeed a possibility; but it is not clear that the mother’s ‘madness’ would meet the legal definition of insanity in most jurisdictions, as her act is well planned and she has functioned relatively normally up to the moment of the act, etc. The mother believes herself to be saving her sons from poverty and misery, and sending them together into a better afterlife; these motivations which include the effects of social exclusion and pressure on the mother as well as psychiatric delusion may not be recuperable into a narrative of legal insanity.

In my own view, as a feminist scholar of these types of crimes, I simply cannot separate the awful nature of the act from the clearly horrendous personal suffering and rock-bottom social position of the mother. As stated in my lecture, the snuffing-out of the boys’ promising lives demands recognition: but when I look at the mother’s life in poverty and isolation, subject to judgment from a social structure which has left her without any real assistance in bringing up her children alone, I cannot separate these dehumanising and maddening pressures from her terrible and irrational decision to end their lives. The mother’s suffering combined with the damage she does to those in her power forces us to confront the ramifications of social damage and the ways in which psychiatric ‘disorder’ masks social injury and neglect such that families are literally left to rot. In the increasingly punitive neoliberal climate of ‘personal responsibility’ for poverty and failure of any kind, these questions are central and will never be easily answered. Who or what might be called to account for neglect or abuse of the mother here? Responsibility for this act is in my opinion diffuse, spread over a variety of institutions and endemic within an unequal social structure.

**NM:** Culturally, legally, and medically, we have, as a society, constructed an image of the perfect mother. Does this construct fail the mother-narrator in *Beside the Sea*?

**RC:** Clearly this mother has never had a chance to embody the ‘perfect mother’. In rough terms, the ‘perfect’ mother of media, cultural, political and legal mythology is resourceful (that is not poor), all-giving to the point of self-sacrifice, devoted to her offspring 24 hours per day, and (crucially) compliant with broader social imperatives to make the ‘right choices’ for on and on behalf of her children and bring up the right kind of citizen: a good worker, healthy and well-nourished, personally responsible, productive and law-abiding. She also conforms to highly traditional gender norms, in that her devotion is usually carried out within the context of economic support by a higher-earning man. (The moral position of the working mother remains crucially uncertain even in the 21st century).

The mother in this novel fails on almost all points: she is unmarried, without the support of another parent (in traditional discourse an economically supportive male). She is apparently unemployed and under the surveillance of social services. She lacks the material resources implicit to the construct of all-providing motherhood. In her confusion, depression and distress she makes clear mistakes such as leaving Kevin uncollected at school and relying on Stan, still a child, to undertake his basic care. Fundamentally, the construct of the good mother as eternally self-sacrificing excludes a mother who kills: implicitly, a good mother would suffer any privation or pain rather than kill her own children. She is however devoted, caring, inventive and attentive to her sons, as the novel frequently attests: she has brought up polite, interesting, intelligent and loving sons. Her sons are her whole life, as the paradigm of loving motherhood would demand. This is one of the greatest tragedies of the book: that the achievements of the mother are lost both to her (as a depressed and deprived woman suffering shame and low self esteem) and to the outside world, even before she commits her final act of despair. She has been written off already, it seems, by herself and others.

**NM:** There was a lot of debate around our office. Some felt pity and sympathized with the mother’s situation. Others felt like she was a monster. How can a character like the mother in *Beside the Sea*and mothers in popular culture guilty of filicide inspire such separate (and strong) reactions?

**RC:** Precisely because of the centrality of the construct of selfless mother-love to our culture and indeed to our Western concept of subjectivity- increasingly fraught with anxiety, now that we are constructed as a society of fundamentally self-interested individuals- and because of the historical polarisation of mothering into all-good/all-bad. Ambivalent actions or feelings in mothers are socially and culturally unacceptable, despite the fact that they so obviously occur and exist.

The construct of the ‘monstrous mother’ has deep cultural resonance and is even argued to be the basis of many horror narratives; it combines the inevitable vulnerability of the child-subject we have all once been with the low social status and ‘abject’ sexualised/pathologised nature ascribed to women, to create a potent image of the truly unnatural and evil monster (there are many references for these points; I can supply on request). The sensationalised fetish of the monster-mother helps to draw attention away from the social determinants of child cruelty, murder and other tragedies, allowing collective rage and fear to be targeted at an apparently ultimately and solely (ir)responsible individual.

**NM:** How do you respond to the fact that mothers who commit filicide will almost always receive different sentences than fathers who commit like crimes? When mothers are granted leniency in court, do you see this as a result of the increased medicalization of maternal depression and mental illness or is it more of a defense for society’s ideal of the mother?

**RC:** I would suggest that since such women have crucially failed to embody a maternal ideal, the lower sentencing of women offenders is more likely to be due to a certain (and limited) recognition of the hugely difficult circumstances in which mothers tend to kill. The fact that women are usually primary carers and are generally (particularly if lone parents) in poverty or suffering from mental distress and/or confusion at the time of the offence is still taken into account in sentencing. The medicalised view adopted in the UK infanticide legislation, that women may be somehow biologically affected by childbirth or lactation for up to one year (a medically unproven claim), does not apply to filicide convictions for the killing of older children: evidence of long-term depression or other mental illness, which may sometimes be inferred from the circumstances of the act, may allow for a medicalised verdict of insanity or diminished responsibility for filicide as mentioned above. The social and to a lesser extent medical factors more rarely apply to male offenders. Women falling outside the normative specification of the ‘vulnerable’ or mentally-ill offender are more frequently given penal sentences, as in the case of [Theresa Riggi](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1363755/Theresa-Riggi-admits-killing-3-children-locked-custody-battle-husband.html), a woman who was not in poverty and appears to have killed her children as a result of a high-conflict separation from their father. She received a sixteen-year sentence for ‘culpable homicide’ (an offence equivalent to manslaughter). Evidence of ‘personality disorders’ did not significantly lessen her sentence and her ‘glamorous’ appearance was frequently and disapprovingly noted in media reports of her trial. There is also, however, evidence that women from working-class backgrounds and with long-term histories of mental distress, criminality or addiction may also be more likely to be incarcerated, showing that class is an issue in sentencing, as with all crimes.

**NM:** Although we never actually see the social worker or the psychologist in *Beside the Sea*, we are aware of the burden of their presence on the narrator-mother. How do the roles of the social worker and psychologist factor into the final crime, if at all?

**RC:** The social worker and psychologist’s ineffective ‘support’ is, I think, an important way in which the author draws our attention to the matrix of control and surveillance within which the mother is forced to live. Implicitly, the attention of the professionals is upon her because she has already been seen to ‘fail’ her sons and has been classified as mentally ill and thus abnormal. Her abnormality is clearly also economic: she is being treated as one of an ‘underclass’, and any support she is offered combines with injunctions to improve herself, and to behave as if she were not suffering deprivation and despair. The general patronising disapproval of the social worker and her inability to understand the positive ways the mother in the novel expresses love and care for her sons (for example the provision of an entire wall for Kevin to draw on as he wishes!) suggest that real, personalised support for the mother’s clear difficulties in caring at all times adequately for her sons and for herself is lacking. She is instead enjoined by the psychologist to think positive and control her feelings and reactions- an illustration of the depersonalising kind of medicalisation and subsequent individualisation of personal distress frequently caused by socioeconomic and gender factors.

**NM:** When reading was there ever a moment where you felt if someone had intervened, if someone had offered help the outcome would have changed?

**RC:** Clearly anything to relieve the mother’s isolation and emotional pain would have helped her: but whether this is friendship, state-sponsored childcare or home help, better medical treatment, more money, or all these things, is impossible to specify. Personally I was struck particularly by her isolation as well as her poverty. The boys were literally all she had. This made it easier for me to understand, for example, her jealousy of the teacher of whom Kevin is so fond, and her wish to stop Stan from growing away from her. Clearly she was a woman neglected in many ways (the social worker seems more concerned to criticise her or give her instructions than to help; she has missing teeth, implying a lack of access to health care, a poor diet, or subjection to violence; she is quite clearly very poor). While friendship, family support or a partner might have helped at some point, the fact that this mother is already an ‘outcast’ at the beginning of the book suggests that she may have become isolated as a result of her needs, illnesses and losses, since the weak and needy are socially excluded: another point of unbearable pathos in the book.

**NM:** It is shocking to search these crimes on the internet—there are many examples, just from the past few months. Why are acts of filicide on the rise?

**RC:** I am not clear that filicide is rising.  I cannot find anything in my research to suggest a very clear upward trend. It is probable that reporting has increased in frequency and luridness, as social anxiety about the family and mothering have spiraled. I predict a rise in my lecture, but this is based on my own ideas that in the age of Western austerity, social instability and increasing isolation will lead to an increase in crime and domestic violence of all kinds. There is no proof as yet that I am correct, and indeed I hope I am not!

**NM:** In the context of our current politics, culture, and lifestyle, why is reading and talking about a book like *Beside the Sea*so important?

**RC:** For the precise reason that such crimes are considered and classified as unthinkable, unspeakable, and yet still happen and will continue to happen; and because anything beyond a cursory or sensationalist analysis makes clear that the people who commit them cannot be simply stigmatised (and thus cast from public view) as ‘monsters’. The social determinants of infanticide and filicide are very clear and are also consonant with those of all crime and violence: poverty, low social status, isolation, resultant mental distress and inability to access help and support. In the case of maternal filicide, the female perpetrator represents a limit-point for sympathy and advocacy: this is precisely why she is such an important figure. Denial of the context of her crime simply creates an ultimately meaningless narrative of personal evil (or alternately, a simple medicalisation of her ‘madness’) which negates the clear impact of mothering in conditions of severe deprivation. In a time of increasingly harsh and reflexive moral judgments and shrill public blaming, of which ‘imperfect’ and particularly poor or lone mothers receive a disproportionate share, attention to the context of the crime and the story of the perpetrator is not simply fair but politically necessary.

***Dr. Ruth Cain****‘s primary area of research is the regulation and representation of reproduction and parenting, especially maternity. She is interested in tracking relationships between law, literature, popular culture and the media, and how these shape perceptions of gender, sexuality and embodiment. Other major interests are health care law, including mental health law; the gendering of capitalism, neo-imperialism and post 9/11 trauma.*

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**(1) COMMENT**

1. [*Lynne*](http://yahoo.com/) says:

[February 26, 2013 at 1:33 pm](http://www.tinhouse.com/blog/19449/mother-or-monster-veronique-olmis-beside-the-sea.html#comment-51554)

I personally seem to go along with all the things that is
put into writing in “Mother or Monster? Véronique
Olmi’s Beside The Sea | Tin House” [http://scotchandcode.com](http://scotchandcode.com/) .
Thanks a lot for all the details.Thank you,Thelma

**(1) TRACKBACKS & PINGBACKS**

1. [*France: Beside the Sea by Véronique Olmi « Around the world in 80 books*](http://aroundtheworldin80books.wordpress.com/2012/11/05/france-beside-the-sea-by-veronique-olmi/) says:

[November 5, 2012 at 2:34 pm](http://www.tinhouse.com/blog/19449/mother-or-monster-veronique-olmis-beside-the-sea.html#comment-22013)

[...] In further exploration of “Beside the Sea”, the blog stumbles upon a lecture about how we can use literature to explore real-life tragedy and discuss it in a way that cannot happen otherwise. There is this quote by the lecturer that says: “Literature brings us to an acknowledgment of situ… [...]