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Arms-length ethics a disservice

Maria Tumarkin


MOST books about tragedies and their aftermath are to look at, not to touch. It is unquestionably in poor taste to go tearing into an account of human suffering and loss, no matter who its author and what its motives. With this in mind, I had every intention of writing a respectful, hands-off review of journalist Carol Altmann's After Port Arthur, a look at the legacy of one of Australia's worst acts of brutality since World War II.

Published to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the tragedy, in which 35 women, men and children were murdered by a lone gunman, After Port Arthur is a collection of personal stories of those who, unlike Altmann and myself, were in the firing line on April 28, 1996.

Port Arthur staff, the Tasman Peninsula community, tourists, doctors, psychologists, the well-known and the barely mentioned - they talk about their lives after and despite the tragedy. And, be assured, it's not all about finding strength in suffering and learning to let go of bitterness. All kinds of messy, confronting business is brought to the surface: suicides, marriage breakdowns, friendships undone, insomnia, unemployability and chronic depression. But alongside them, we also encounter the genuinely uplifting stuff: the newly found love, meaning, faith and wisdom.

I have written quite a lot about the massacre and its aftermath and have visited the Tasman Peninsula several times in the past decade. I know the details of what happened by heart. Yet reading After Port Arthur reminded me just how much and how pressingly the people whose lives were transformed on April 28, 1996 deserve our gratitude. They went through hell, yet they are so open and generous with us.

They reveal themselves to a nation that is itching to think that they have all "moved on". A nation that remembers on anniversaries only what they will never be able to forget. Another journalist comes and they patiently, humbly tell their story.

There is no doubt that the stories Altmann brings together need to be told again and again. It is all the "wet" writing around them that has made me want to pick up a sword and start swirling it around. Altmann's writing is dripping with cliches and reassuring blandness. It is "Sunday paper" style: no matter what we write about, we keep it nice and clean. There are no sharp corners, lest our poor, unsuspecting readers get unnerved. And I thought being unnerved was a prerequisite in revisiting a tragedy. It was the least we, as readers and contemporaries, could do.
Altmann is interviewing people who had and still have everything to lose, but nothing seems to be at stake for her. Politely concerned and attentive, she is the absent moral nucleus of the book. What does Altmann think? Why is she writing about this? What matters to her in these stories she polishes up and re-assembles?

I don't believe that journalists can be morally or emotionally absent from their chronicles of human agony. They do not need to become the main characters, but it gets ugly and heartless if they appear to have nothing on the line.

Anniversaries are a big business in the publishing world and books such as Altmann's are a safe bet. Bring together personal stories of those directly affected by a tragedy and smother them with paragraphs on the senseless loss of life, the heroism of ordinary Australians and, of course, the healing, which, we are told, is as inevitable as death and taxes. It looks like a book. It smells like a book. It must be a book.

Yet the genre of "where are they now" sits uneasily with the stories of people who have endured a tragedy. This is not because such stories are not interesting or illuminating, but because the conventions of the genre dictate that nothing too taxing, too confronting and too unpalatable is evoked in the process. It is a kind of easy listening for the bleeding heart.

Writing about violence and loss is an ethically charged process. Not just whose side you take and what interpretation you put forward, but every single thing, down to each word you use. If you choose to touch, to get close to this raw, painful, terrible subject matter, you have to go all out. You can't pick words at random. You have to test and question everything you say. How else do you write about human suffering?

Of course, it is not fair to jump all over Carol Altmann. I have watched countless local and international tragedies being covered in Australia in this generic way.

Huge articles on violence and loss that could have been written by a computer. Books on tragedies that are the very essence of "easy reading". After Port Arthur is a book about a vitally important subject matter, but I wonder whether a simple collection of interviews and personal stories would have been a more honourable way to go.

Maria Tumarkin is the author of Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedies, published by Melbourne University Publishing.