



Hometown Betrayal: A Tragic Story of Secrecy and Sexual Abuse in Mormon Country

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Elizabeth Smart, Contributor

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Flush with primary sources and seeking to hold rapists accountable in the wake of its subject's death, Hometown Betrayal is a passionate true crime story about justice denied.

Through family testimonies and meticulous research, journalist Emily Benedek's disturbing true crime book *Hometown Betrayal* reveals the horrific effects of childhood sexual abuse combined with community denial.

Valarie Clark Miller grew up in Clarkston, Utah, an isolated, middle-class Mormon community operating on the religious conviction that everyone in their town was good. That conviction made it easy for two local men, Robert Dahle and Gary Thompson, to escape the consequences of raping, beating, and threatening Valarie throughout her childhood: it was impossible to imagine such evil existing in Clarkston. The town's belief system, along with the Mormon creed of men's preeminence, later facilitated the denial of justice to Valarie once her memories of the abuse resurfaced during her first marriage.

Beginning with multifaceted coverage of the details of the decades-old crimes against Valarie, the book includes personal notes, Valarie's first husband John's journal, and interviews with her therapist in addition to medical records, family letters, and genealogical documents. The prose is crisp and propulsive, integrating evidentiary sources into its coverage of the pervasive impact of trauma on Valarie and her family. The rest of the book seeks to hold the rapists accountable for the generational trauma they spawned, tracing Valarie's mental and physical illnesses back to the sexual violence she survived as a child and the secondary trauma of being disbelieved by her community. It does so with the inclusion of circumstantial evidence unearthed by a private investigator that is used to draw logical conclusions. Old and new evidence is pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle, creating a nightmare image of callous disregard for survivors of sexual violence within a patriarchal culture.

As kidnapping survivor and activist Elizabeth Smart puts it in the book's preface, "The reason why survivors don't share what happens to them is because they are afraid they won't be believed." The book's central argument in favor of bringing stories of child sexual abuse into the light is challenged by the fact that Valerie was punished for telling her truth. When she decided to "break the silence," she was still a young woman. Her testimony was dismissed by law enforcement, her community, and some family members. As a result, her health and her marriage were destroyed. For decades, vindication evaded her until her death at sixty-two. Several years after her death, two men (Valarie's first husband and her father) received an apology; she never did. It's a disappointing if realistic outcome.

Written with passion for the cause of survivors' rights, *Hometown Betrayal* amplifies a shocking story of child sexual abuse with its clear analysis of how social systems enabled that abuse.

MICHELE SHARPE (September 28, 2024)

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