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BOOK REVIEW

TURNING STONES: MY DAYS AND NIGHTS WITH CHILDREN AT RISK. By Marc Parent. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace and Company. 1996. Pp. 363. Hardcover. \$25.00.

*Reviewed by René K. McCurry**

If a foreign visitor wanted to measure the relative import this society places on the care and handling of children at risk—as compared for example, to the care and handling of a RICO defendant, or an alleged white collar criminal—an instructive lesson would be to visit New York City's courthouses. The new federal courthouse in downtown Manhattan is a jewel. The interior is easily mistaken for an upscale hotel with its shiny marble, high tech elevators and stylish lighting fixtures. The courtrooms are large, imposing, and hushed. This is Justice at her grandest; Justice as perceived by Neiman Marcus. Then there are the family courts of Brooklyn and the Bronx.¹

The Bronx Family Court building is slightly superior, being that it is rather well lit and has windows, but is nonetheless grimy, horribly outdated and, during my visit there, utterly lacking in functional public phones. The anterooms resonate with the screaming of unhappy children and the querulous voices of their parents, many of whom are also children. The courtrooms are dingy and loud. There seem to be at least three things going on in any one courtroom at any one time, and lawyers, witnesses, parties and court workers are constantly running in and out. The Brooklyn Family Court is even worse, a dirty, dark building with narrow corridors, a seemingly complete absence of natural light, and a permeating sense of decay.

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1. I have not had the pleasure of visiting Manhattan's Family Court building, but am told that although it is newer and grander, it is literally a terrifying building, not at all conducive to calming or helping children.

In these less-than-grand courtrooms, decisions of enormous import are made about the lives of abused children. Decisions are made about: whether or not to keep a family intact, which of two or more individuals is a fit, or the most fit, parent—decisions that no one would presumably choose to leave in the hands of a justice system apparently so underfunded and poorly staffed that it cannot even maintain the appearance of cleanliness. But, even before children and parents appear in these depressing courtrooms, someone, somewhere, often a Mr. Parent or one of his colleagues, has made a decision that a child is at risk.

It is these threshold decisions that *Turning Stones* examines. After reading Mr. Parent's book, my concerns about the poor state of the Family Courts' physical plant seem inane. I am amazed that the systems New York City has put into place to protect its children at risk can function at all, and even more surprised that the individuals who are sucked into this system have not risen up in a generalized revolt.

Imagine this: a twenty-two year old city employee shows up at your door and tells you that he has heard reports that you are not treating your Labrador Retriever appropriately—that it is running wild through your apartment and is not being fed properly. He comes into your home, without a warrant, with only a plastic identification card that looks like it could be faked, and searches your cabinets and the living area you have for the dog. He comments on the fact that the dog is pretty old not to be housebroken; that it appears that you do not have any dog-appropriate food in the house, and, finally, that he is going to remove the dog. He may or may not have a police officer with him for this meeting, but he certainly has no warrant, and no need to seek approval from any higher source than himself. If he removes Fido on a Saturday morning, you may well have to wait until Monday to appear in court to get Fido back. Outrageous, right? But Mr. Parent and his co-workers had the authority to do just this with *people's children*. You need a warrant to arrest someone; you have to go through eviction proceedings before you can take someone's apartment away; you can generally get a towed car back in less than twenty-four hours. In New York City though, you can lose your kid for a day or two, *without any court involvement at all*, if a newly minted college graduate,

working for Emergency Children's Services, shows up and decides that your kid is in danger.

That this system of seemingly unfettered discretion is not abused more is incredible; the potential for abuse seems almost unlimited. That people like Mr. Parent are apparently right as often as they seem to be is astounding. *Turning Stones* is about making decisions daily to take people's children away from them in situations where there may be no obvious choices—no clear right and wrong. It is also a book about the horrors of child abuse, but perhaps as importantly, it is a book about the people we entrust to protect these abused children, and what happens to them. I found this book enthralling. It is brutally frank throughout, but beautifully written. Conversational in tone, but ultimately utterly serious, this is an "easy" read that you won't get over for quite a while.

Turning Stones is a story of a caseworker, who, fresh out of college, began working nights in New York City's Emergency Children's Services ("ECS"), an agency that works from 4:00 p.m. until 8:00 a.m. during the week, and all day weekends and holidays, responding to reports of children in trouble. This is a story of what happens to kids in danger before the stories hit the newspapers, before the tedious machinations of Family Court begin.

The book, a compilation of anecdotes from Mr. Parent's four years at ECS, is perhaps to be praised most for its utter lack of moral certainty—and I mean that in the most positive way. Many people who write or comment in this area, from judges, to lawyers, to social workers, tend to propound their views of right, wrong and, of course, how they think things should be done. (Judge Judy Scheindlin's recent book, appealingly titled "*Don't Pee on My Leg and Tell me It's Raining*", comes to mind). It is easy to find a book on the child welfare system that advocates some type of "answer"—families should be kept together, families should be more accountable (this usually means mothers), foster care should be reformed, welfare should be reformed—you name it, somebody somewhere has proposed it as a solution to the problem of children at risk. It is very difficult to find a book, like this one, that simply recounts experiences as they occurred, with minimal political overtones, and no—virtually no proselytizing.

Mr. Parent, while obviously able to recognize depravity and horror he sees, mercifully stays away from drawing conclusions for the reader, or claiming to know of a remedy for the problems he sees. In fact, Mr. Parent's stories are really only snapshots—an attempt to show the reader one or two days in a child's or a parent's life. He does not examine individuals' pasts in detail, nor attempt to divine or keep track of what happens to a child after removal. We last see Mr. Parent's removed children as he saw them; sleeping in the back of an ECS car, or in the arms of an ECS worker. We don't know whether these kids will ultimately make it to next week, to high school graduation, to old age—and neither does Mr. Parent. Making a difference in that one night, and possibly in that one night prolonging a life, is all that an ECS worker can realistically hope for.

Mr. Parent understood his job as being quite simply to protect children from harm, not to make value judgments about the actions or inactions of these children's parents, society at large, or even *other* children. Mr. Parent in fact devotes two chapters to descriptions of children mistreating children. Little children mistreating other children, like Raphael who put his five year old cousin Tony into a coma, accidentally, in no small part because he wanted his room back. Or Sean, an eight year old who had repeatedly tried to kill his little brother, and one night would have succeeded had Mr. Parent not been able to talk him into putting down his knife. Mr. Parent has a keen understanding of children, and does a remarkable job of describing the thought processes of these young aggressors, never flagging in his understanding of their situations, and why they might have done what they did, but never exonerating them either. Mr. Parent also makes clear that these children who commit heinous and adult crimes are not necessarily the children who are the most poorly treated. In fact, Raphael seemed to live what could pass for a relatively "normal" childhood if such a thing in fact existed in Mr. Parent's world.

Even more disturbing than the stories about Raphael and Sean, though, was the story about Delia, a woman who believed she and her sons were under a hex, thanks to her ex-boyfriend. Delia saw blood everywhere, even in the peanut butter. The lights in Delia's apartment didn't seem to work normally, and Delia was sure someone was watching

her. As described by Mr. Parent the cumulative effects of all these of these oddities, plus Delia's matter of fact description of what her ex-boyfriend had done to her, give the story a decidedly gothic tone. It is a testament to Mr. Parent's narrative skills that throughout the story, the reader, like Mr. Parent, is not sure whether Delia is right and she is in fact hexed, or instead, if Delia is completely out of her mind. In fact, I was all for Delia, until Mr. Parent reminded me that she hadn't fed her kids in two days.

Delia is one of the more loving, concerned mothers in the book, who seemingly had done an admirable job thus far in raising her two boys. Yet, she believes the building is bleeding, and the boys can't eat anything because there is glass in all the food. There is no doubt that she is trying to protect her children, trying to save them from an evil even she doesn't understand. But Mr. Parent's job is to protect Ricky and Chucky: "It didn't matter to us if all the toys in the apartment suddenly started playing football, and who cares if Cool Whip sprays out of the shower and the toilet starts laughing, we wanted to make sure Delia wouldn't suddenly lose control of her arms and start swinging kitchen knives at the boys." Perhaps better than any other, this story illustrates the difficulty of making judgments about people's parenting skills—judgments that seem to require perfect prescience. Right or wrong, Delia lost her two boys—at least for that night.

Despite the life shattering authority he has, or perhaps because of it, Mr. Parent has the rather rare gift of humility. He avoids presuming that he can solve the problems of these children, or prevent other children from being similarly mistreated. He happily does not venture to guess what makes adults and children treat each other so poorly, and makes clear that terrible things happen to children from all economic backgrounds, and from all kinds of families—functional or not. Mr. Parent makes mistakes, and admits them. The last anecdote he shares is about a baby he failed to save. He made a mistake, but in his profession a mistake, understandable though it may be, cost a baby its life and therefore cannot be excused. He is also more than honest about how ill prepared and poorly trained he was to undertake his job at ECS. While the final severing of the parent/child relationship will ultimately be made by a judge, with the assistance of

lawyers and perhaps social workers and mental health professionals, the decision at three a.m. about whether to let little Johnny stay with Mom is left in the hands of people like Mr. Parent—fresh out of college, long on naivete and short on experience. Mr. Parent wryly admits that his main question during his initial interview with ECS was how to get people to let him, a total stranger, into their homes. Later, in orientation, when faced with the enormity of his assignment, his basic concern about becoming a Child Protective Worker was, still, how to get people to let him into their homes—"I still hadn't figured that one out and so far no one was telling me." What he almost definitely *did not* realize, (and nor will most readers), was how badly he would later want to *not* get into many of these homes (a necessary euphemism for the buildings in which some of these children were living). Apart from the rats and mice, Mr. Parent talks about making noise and singing so as to avoid surprising a drug dealer on the stairs (a similar theory to wearing bells when hiking in Alaska, to "warn the bears"), carrying a knife to defend himself from pit bulls, and fearing that a colleague would be killed during her last night on the job. This is not an occupation for the faint of heart. Mr. Parent's descriptions of the dangers he faced daily, for what likely amounts to approximately minimum wage, are a potent lesson on the living conditions of adults and children in urban areas.

Turning Stones is finally the story of a young Midwesterner who came to the "Big City" for the first time. Mr. Parent's mixed emotions of exhilaration and fear can only be too familiar to anyone who has moved to the "the City" from elsewhere. Mr. Parent sums up the experience perfectly: ". . . I began to realize how poorly equipped I was for the excursion—suffice to say I had brought too many white sweaters and not enough cool shoes". Mr. Parent relates in great detail the horrors of his own living conditions (overly amorous roommates, pirhana paintings on the walls of his bedroom, and rats, rats, rats). His tone remains at all times, though, relatively light with respect to his own situation, and he never lets the reader overlook the fact that in the world he is describing, he is the privileged, fortunate one.

Turning Stones becomes, then, a story about how children are treated and about Mr. Parent's growing up. I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a well written,

gripping read. The book is an education—about life as an ECS worker, life as a child at risk and of course, about the system within which these two types of people regularly interact. If nothing else, it is a stark testament to how a person with good judgment and a good heart, like Mr. Parent, can make a significant difference even within a system as flawed as the Child Welfare System. This is not a book that preaches, but it delivers, nonetheless, a very powerful message about terrible things we do to children, and, too, about hope.

