

Book Review

Review by David Prescott



David Prescott

My Story

by

Louise Nicholas, with Philip Kitchin
320 pages

Random House New Zealand

(Kindle version available in North America for \$18.99)

The straightforward nature of this book becomes clear even before the title page, where a note states that, “Some names have been changed due to court suppression orders.” It chronicles a woman (and her family’s) decades-long struggle for justice. On its surface, this is a sadly familiar motif. What makes the difference in this book is not only her circumstances, but the humble nature, strength of character, and personal transformation of Mrs. Nicholas herself.

In brief, Mrs. Nicholas was first sexually assaulted by a police officer on a number of occasions in her small home town in New Zealand at the age of 13. She was again repeatedly sexually assaulted by three police officers at the age of 18. When she first sought justice, the person in charge of her investigation, John Dewar, built and then betrayed her confidence; he was friends with the police officers involved, and made a series of seemingly random errors that resulted in two aborted trials. He was subsequently convicted on charges related to his subversion of justice. This element of Mrs. Nicholas’ story would be worth reading on its own, and is instructive as to how those who are entrusted to oversee processes can end up abusing them.



Louise Nicholas

Enter the second author, Phil Kitchin, the journalist who acted on a couple of leads and discovered how those people who should have helped Mrs. Nicholas ended up causing harm to her. He contributes chapters in his own voice and from his perspective as to how he came to be involved, and ultimately exposed the goings on within the police department. One of the perpetrators in this case, Clint Rickards, had nearly become the New Zealand Police Commissioner. Kitchin’s is a story of good, old-fashioned

journalism: get the facts, work nights and weekends to put them together, and be fearless in presenting them. This was one of the most important and high-stakes stories in recent New Zealand history. It is difficult to overestimate the personal risks of so many in bringing this story to the public.

Mrs. Nicholas communicates in a very direct style. She comes from a small town and is no stranger to rural life. Her outwardly brusque writing style does not mask, however, her vulnerability as a human being as she tells her story again and again; She is clear that she wants the truth told no matter the costs. There is an irony to the fact that while she learned backcountry search-and-rescue techniques at an early age, she now comes to the aid of other people who have survived sexual abuse. Unlike other recent publications (e.g., Jon Krakauer's *Missoula*), Mrs. Nicholas never expresses a desire for revenge or retribution. Rather, like so many others, she wants truth and justice, even as she teeters on the edge of giving up.

The book is structured in such a way that the chapters alternate between the voices and perspectives of the authors. For those providing therapy for sexual abuse, it provides a marvelous example of differing perspectives of events. Each player remains strong when others falter, and victory is ultimately the result of actions taken as a team, with Mrs. Nicholas' husband, Ross, providing the ultimate backdrop of support and encouragement. An element that fascinates and yet remains understated throughout the book is in how bystanders respond. Most of the men involved engage in classic patterns of stonewalling and counter-allegations. At least two women didn't step forward with confirmatory information until long after the incidents. One was a police officer aware of the events that had transpired and the other was another person victimized by the police who had indicated to investigators that Mrs. Nicholas had enjoyed her experiences. These kinds of betrayals are known to professionals working in sexual abuse, but would still have been worthy of even greater exploration.

As a result of her grit and passion for justice, Louise Nicholas has established herself as a national treasure in New Zealand. She is a National Sexual Violence Survivor Advocate in New Zealand. She is a survivor of child and adult rape, perpetrated against her by rogue members of the New Zealand Police. While there are many people who have survived sexual abuse and gone on to tell their stories via books and lectures, Mrs. Nicholas stands out. Her presentation was passionately heartfelt and authentic. It was clear that she had come to tell the truth from her first words: "Some names have been changed due to suppression orders by the court." Mrs. Nicholas' persistence in seeking justice for herself and others is remarkable. There is now a wing of the New Zealand police named after her. In April 2015 she was awarded the Governor General's Anzac award and later the same year (June) she was made an Officer of the NZ Order of Merit in the Queen's Birthday Honours.

The circumstances outlined in this book are at once imaginable and unimaginable: crimes committed by those who are supposed to be protectors and instead actively block justice; betrayal by those who might otherwise be helpful; the fear of disclosure lest others become extremely violent; the tragic images and memories (e.g., watching the dress given to her by her boyfriend lying crumpled on the floor during an assault). It is among the best books written on the experiences of those who have survived sexual abuse.

Postscript

Although her book stands on its own, Mrs. Nicholas is a powerful public speaker. I had the opportunity to watch her from the front row at the 2015 ANZATSA conference. Beyond raising awareness of the problems of sexual abuse, her story points to what is possible when one persists in telling the truth. In an unforgettable moment at the end, she left the stage and took her seat in the front row. It was only then, as she took a breath, began to relax, and allowed her emotions to flash across her face, that it was apparent

just how much effort she has put into making the world a safer place. She may have little energy after giving it her all in a keynote address, but she truly has boundless hope.

Should readers be interested, a film version of her story is available and titled, “Consent: The Louise Nicholas Story” and available to view online. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFjDd8CSnqE).

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