

***Serial Survivors: Women's Narratives of Surviving Rape*, Jan Jordan,  
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*Serial Survivors* provides a unique window into the survival journey of a group of women attacked by one of the most prolific serial rapists in Auckland's history. This book makes a significant contribution to understanding the trauma associated with sexual violence and the resilience of victims. Jordan's style, her empathic approach and acute attentiveness to the needs of the women interviewed has produced a dignified monograph through which these women can tell their stories and have their voices heard.

Malcolm Rewa was brought to trial in the Auckland High Court in 1998 facing 45 charges involving sexual violence against 27 different women. The trial lasted three months. Rewa pleaded guilty only to those charges involving women whose cases he was linked to by incontrovertible forensic evidence. As a result many of his victims had to endure the additional trauma of giving evidence at trial. After more than three days of deliberation, the jury found Rewa guilty on most of the charges brought against him. Fifteen of the women who testified against him subsequently agreed to be interviewed by Jan Jordan; their accounts of surviving rape form the basis of this book.

Sexual violence continues to impact the lives of many women. The International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) 2002–03 reported that in Australia 57% of women surveyed had experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence over their lifetime. Eighteen per cent of women reported being sexually abused before the age of 16; 12% of women reported experiencing sexual violence by an intimate partner over their lifetimes and 27% of women reported sexual violence by non-intimates such as other close family members, relatives, friends, colleagues and strangers. Only 1% of the women surveyed, however, identified having been raped by a stranger.

The impact of sexual violence on women is extremely varied and complex; as Jordan notes, a wide array of factors such as age, nature of the assault, relationship with the perpetrator and the support proffered by others, may influence how women respond to sexual victimisation (p 160). A large body of research has examined the effects and impact of sexual violence against women. Nevertheless, relatively little is known about women's responses to attack by a 'stranger' serial rapist. For some of the women interviewed in *Serial Survivors*, their attacker — Malcolm Rewa — was a total stranger; for others, he was someone they had previously met, albeit only once through a mutual friend, and in some instances Rewa had even previously visited the woman's home. *Serial Survivors* is particularly compelling in its contribution to the scholarly field because it is presented through women's own narratives about surviving rape.

*Serial Survivors* is a book about the processes involved in surviving rape (p 203). This book emphasises that the process of surviving is ongoing. Jordan explains:

[The women] endured the attack itself, the ensuing police and court processes, and the various ways in which others around them responded. Their survival journeys will continue throughout the rest of their lives. Irrespective of how fully they may have recovered, the possibility always exists for the memories and feelings of that night to be triggered in other situations. Throughout their lives decisions will need to be made regarding when to tell others that they were among the women attacked by the serial rapist Malcolm Rewa (p 200).

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Ultimately, the women's stories demonstrate that surviving rape is not only the accomplishment of living beyond the attack, but a life-long series of decisions and actions, a series of survivals. These women survived being attacked by one of the worst stranger serial rapists in New Zealand, and their experiences illustrate the complexity and richness of what it means to be 'serial survivors' (p 202).

This journey of survival is not restricted to the victims alone: the 'ripples' caused by rape and sexual violence are often far reaching, 'spreading the damage in waves out from victims to all those with whom they have intimate contact' (quoting Remer and Ferguson 1995, p407). Many women interviewed by Jordan recounted how their partners, family and friends also faced the journey of surviving their rape. Indeed, Jordan herself declares that:

Writing this book has also been a survival journey – negotiating access, conducting interviews, managing the ways the material triggered my own fears, the anxiety of finding a publisher, honouring my word to these women, struggling with how to do their stories justice.

Each stage of the journey presented its own challenges, external practicalities as well as inner fear and demons ... (p 203).

Jordan's 'research' demonstrates that '[g]athering data is not like picking daisies or collecting stamps — it is an interactive process impacting emotionally as well as intellectually on all participants' (p 203).

*Serial Survivors* is, as Jordan had hoped, accessible writing (p 206). The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 presents a brief profile of each woman, focusing predominantly on the immediate circumstances of her rape. The diversity in the issues raised by each woman both here and elsewhere in the book, despite similarities in the circumstances of the rape, reveals how individually each victim experiences a rape and its aftermath. Jordan is strategic in opening the book with a chapter that focuses on the women rather than the rapist. In fact, Jordan largely relegates Rewa to an appendix at the back of the book (Appendix 2). This reflects Jordan's commitment to writing a book about the women and allowing them to tell their stories of how they survived (p 207). Although Jordan was clearly constrained by the detail that she could include in this chapter and elsewhere in the book due to issues of confidentiality (p 207), as a reader, I yearned for a more cohesive picture of these women. I wanted to know more about each of these women and understand who they were and not just as fragmented voices and victims of a serial rapist. I found it frustrating and a challenge piecing their identity and individual stories together from the quotes scattered throughout the book. I would have appreciated more assistance from the author in this respect. Similarly, throughout the book, I would have welcomed the author drawing together more of the strands in the women's narratives. I recognise fully, however, the challenges that faced the author, not only in honouring the women's trust and keeping their authenticity, but also the unenviable dilemma that faced Jordan in not writing herself into the women's stories (p 206–7).

Chapter 2 of the book focuses on three key questions: how do women survive such attacks? What do they think of in such situations? Where do they turn for help? (p 6). Many of the women talked about the internal conversations they had with themselves during the rape (p 17). The women depicted the painful internal struggle they faced as they came to terms with both their acquiescence and resistance to the rape; their accounts revealed tremendous fortitude and courage. The power of this chapter is twofold. First, it emphasises the diversity of women's experiences of rape and their resilience. Second, it profiles the rapist through the women's accounts and experience of the rape. This seems to shift power and control away from Rewa and restores it to the women. In this chapter, as elsewhere in

the book, Jordan nicely interweaves the findings of empirical research with the experiences of the women interviewed. Importantly, the women's narratives in this chapter serve to rebut misconceptions that continue to prevail about how women respond to sexual violence (p 14).

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with the ways in which the women coped with the processes of reporting the rape, the trial process and the women's interaction with support agencies and friends and family members respectively. Chapter 3 is directed towards demonstrating how women coped with and survived police interviews and the processes after reporting (p 30). The women stressed their feelings of vulnerability, confusion and insensitivity to their experiences. Jordan here highlights how police may focus on the collection of evidence at the expense of sensitivity towards women. Arguably, Jordan could have extrapolated the women's stories in order to highlight how the police, in doing so may unwittingly erode the quality of the evidence and how this may later impact on a complainant at trial (p 53). In this respect, and in some other instances, Jordan could have linked chapters together to a greater extent and thereby reduced some of the repetition that occurs in the book. Chapter 4 of the book examines how the women survived the trial process. This chapter points to the fact that these women's experiences of the trial process may have differed from other women's experiences because they were victims of a serial rapist. Indeed, this difference could have been emphasised and explored more throughout the book. In this chapter, I was also seeking more detailed analysis of how the women interacted with one another during the trial process. This relationship was, however, explored a little further later in the book. Chapter 5 is entitled 'Surviving Others; Others Surviving' — a pithy title — however, the chapter seems to try to deal with two very distinct aspects of surviving rape, which arguably warrant separate chapters. First, the chapter considers how the women survived others' responses to the attack including, interactions with support agencies and counselors as well as how the women were affected by media coverage of this case. The second part of the chapter examines how friends, partners and family members were affected by what the woman went through.

Chapter 6 examines how the women moved on after the rape, the trial and Rewa's conviction. One issue that may have been explored more in this chapter was the question that seemingly haunted many of the women immediately after the rape and continued to haunt some women after the trial — 'Why me? Why did this happen to me? Why did Malcolm Rewa attack and rape me?' In exploring these questions in greater depth, the impact of the rapes on the women relative to the lapse of time since their victimisation could also have been explored to a greater extent. One issue raised by some women that was particularly interesting here (and, again, which arguably could have been explored in more depth) was discussion of how the rape, although traumatic, ultimately represented a positive turning point in their lives (p 199). This paradoxical aspect of trauma is often ignored or even denied (Stephen and Alex 2008).

Ultimately, the book achieves its goal — 'it powerfully communicates the main ways in which [these women] were impacted upon and survived' (p 206–7). Serial Survivors demonstrates how an act as 'evil' and as abhorrent as rape can engender courage, determination and even fortify an individual's commitment to survival and self-preservation. Every woman interviewed by Jordan described some form of mental or inner resistance, which she adopted to help survive and manage the attack (p 22). As Jordan asserts:

Their accounts make both their fear and courage palpable, and are a gift to us all as we survive our own traumas or support those around us, personally or professionally, in theirs.

This is unique material, moving, detailed, challenging (p 211).

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## References

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