

Walking the Dark Side

Doc: The Rape of the Town of Lovell by Jack Olsen (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 479 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Linda Sillitoe, co-author of *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* and author of a novel, *Sideways to the Sun*, and *Windows on the Sea*, a collection of short fiction.

AT FIRST THE PREMISE of this true crime book sounds downright impossible as well as distasteful: a small-town doctor in Lovell, Wyoming, rapes scores, perhaps hundreds, of women (mostly Mormons) in his examining room, usually without their knowledge. And if that isn't preposterous enough, when his crimes finally come to light and to court, the town (mainly Mormon) defends him vociferously. The investigators and prosecutors have difficulty finding witnesses and sufficient evidence to build a court case. Even after trial and conviction, half the Sundered town continues its defense of Dr. John Story (not a Mormon).

One might open such a book curiously to see how a rapist could perform such a violent, contemptuous crime so deceitfully for more than two decades. Also, one wonders if the women involved were so naive, repressed, shamed, or scorned that the doctor's secret was secure, how his exposure and conviction took place. Who listened to his victims? Who believed them? How did they find the courage to take a popular and powerful townsman to court? And at that point, did Dr. Story's defenders become another kind of victim? What part did religion play in the community, the crimes, and their unmasking? Those questions intrigued me at the outset, but so did two

others: primarily I read *Doc* for the profile of the perpetrator and the profile of the community that defended him. Both were familiar and enlightening and, I believe, recommend this book to *Dialogue* readers.

Jack Olsen, the author of twenty-four books including *Son* (depicting the Son of Sam murders) set himself a formidable task with *Doc*. Not only is Olsen an outsider to Lovell, but also to Mormonism; what's more, he is a man writing about a crime so intimate that the victims' interviews consisted of painful secrets. One can only imagine the necessary rapport.

Few experiences are so demoralizing as realizing that one has been the victim of deliberate manipulation, fraud, or violation. Olsen constructs this exposé not so much as a handbook for would-be medical rapists as a trail guide along the path of the victims' traumas and triumphs. Girls and women offended in the most vulnerable of circumstances certainly make easy prey for the cynical or voyeuristic writer or reader; yet Olsen elicits not only our sympathy but our admiration for the victims, transforming our initial skepticism or condescension to understanding.

Primarily, Olsen achieves this through shifting points of view, titling each chapter by viewpoint. We see Dr. Story and Lovell first through the eyes of Arden McArthur, a chief victim and defender of the doctor's. Along with two of her daughters, also victims, McArthur initiates and perpetuates the legal process. Because we see from within characters, we sense their individuality and suffer less confusion despite the multiple victims experiencing a similar offense.

Additionally, Olsen draws us into the challenges of investigators and prosecutors as they pursue Story through a difficult

court case. Understandably less successful are the chapters from the viewpoint of John Story and Marilyn Story, his wife; his pathology and guilt and her defensiveness limit the depth of our perceptions. Fortunately, the views of a state psychologist illuminate John Story to a degree, though the source of his deformed personality remains obscure.

Lovell's trauma takes place not only in the examining room but when the victims attempt to report their violation and meet with denial and suspicion. One low point is struck when a bishop patronizingly informs a mortified victim that he's heard such rumors about Dr. Story for five years and (apparently believing the accounts) advises her to keep quiet and get another doctor. Only because the women persist and learn to support and protect one another do they find a measure of success—and that at the cost of civil war within the town and even within families.

The Mormon/religious angle is handled well, overall. To his credit, Olsen takes religion as seriously as Lovell does, not only among Mormons but also Baptists, including the fundamentalist congregation John Story leads. Olsen assumes all Mormons are as provincial as Lovell residents and may overplay the presence of Heavenly Father and the celestial kingdom in his Mormon characters' consciousnesses, occasionally confusing terms, i.e. "Celestial Father." More important, he handles delicately and seriously his characters' sexual experiences and their troubles with Church discipline without judging either the Church or the individual.

The only justifiable reason I know for walking (or reading) the dark side is to find light; and light has its practical as well as its aesthetic uses. One is the realization that the unthinkable does happen. Not only can a doctor who makes house

calls and nurtures premature infants, heart patients, and injured children also deflower teenagers and rape postpartum mothers. We recall the LDS convert and charming University of Utah law student who was arrested on a flimsy suspicion of burglary charge; he had, in fact, raped and murdered dozens of women. First arrested and convicted in Salt Lake City, Ted Bundy became a nationally notorious criminal. And the soft-spoken young man who joined Big Brothers, befriended boys, bought them gifts and took them on trips did, in fact, molest many boys and kill at least five without compunction. Then there's another Eagle Scout and returned Mormon missionary who had a "special relationship with President Hinckley" and a gift for finding rare manuscripts—a master forger and manipulator who became a cold-blooded killer.

Like Dr. John Story, Ted Bundy, Art Bishop, and Mark Hofmann said and did things before they were exposed as criminals that struck people oddly and led some to take precautions. That's the reason hindsight is so good in cases that involve multiple victims—there *are* clues and hints that even the most successful antisocial criminals are not as credible as they seem. But unexpectedness in words or deeds benefits the perpetrator. Victims and their first confidantes dismiss clues because they are often intuitive and easily rationalized. Self-interest, self-doubt, and popular opinion also persuade victims to believe their violators.

Few sociopaths have created a more credible cover than did Story. Not only was he a doctor, but a religious leader as well. Although he abused his office staff in some ways—or perhaps because he did—he insured their turning a blind eye to his lengthy procedures with some patients, his fancy examining table, and even occasional bits of suggestive if not

damning evidence. In addition, Story was protected by the armor the medical community affords its members and by the ecumenical brotherhood of the clergy. Because Story was not Mormon, LDS leaders told Mormon victims they could do nothing to halt or hinder him. Perhaps not. Nevertheless, as one reads their conversations with victims, one seriously doubts that these men would have endangered Story's position or membership if he had been LDS. The McArthur family, for instance, reported a relative who abused all their children, often in the presence of siblings, but who remained in the good graces of the Church and the priesthood. (Similarly, Hofmann remained on Church rolls for months after he pleaded guilty to two murders.)

All of us are susceptible to victimization by the deliberate criminal because the sociopathic personality preys on human nature and creates the very mask a culture, group, or individual wants to see. When the sociopathic person is confronted, he or she responds in ways that justify the moment and divert the questioner either by placing blame or imparting some new knowledge. Unlike most of us, the sociopath need not contend with a coherent sense of overreaching truth and thus lies easily and convincingly. After a confrontation, often the questioner is left adjusting his or her perceptions to fit the new answers. One interesting aspect, in fact, is how, when finally cornered, the sociopath suggests bizarre solutions: "What if I agree not to examine any patient under 50?" (Story). "If sex with children were legal, I wouldn't have had to kill them" (Bishop). "I'll pay you \$174,000 by Tuesday and, if I don't, I'll pay \$4,000 penalty for each day I'm late" (Hofmann).

Our desire to be Christian also works against spotting such people. Not every

neighbor who hangs out at the skating rink and befriends boys will molest; not every manuscript dealer who conducts business wearing thong sandals and complaining about his "bugged" telephone will defraud or bomb; and not every doctor who suggests a pelvic examination when a patient complains of a sore throat is a rapist. Nevertheless, our only defense is to pay attention and wonder, especially since minor sociopathic personalities leave havoc in their personal or professional wakes without ever becoming criminal.

Even the sociopath, this book reminds us, occasionally needs a kind of complicity from other human beings, whether or not there is true comprehension. Risk is a thrill. Story invites discovery on several occasions, even suggesting at times that his victim knows what he is doing and possibly approves. Hofmann flourished Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and George Washington signatures across a tablecloth in a New York City restaurant, showing off for several associates as his eyes eagerly measured their reactions. And Bishop calmly carried the boxed body of his first murder victim past the boy's searching mother.

Finally, *Doc* demonstrates that sexuality is central to human experience whether openly acknowledged or sternly suppressed. Story inherited his abused practice, Olsen emphasizes, from an earlier much-loved doctor who abused boys and young men in his office after he was finally barred from the hospital (but not from medicine). When sex is repressed, when sexual ignorance reigns, when discussion of sexual concerns is difficult to impossible, the most vulnerable members of a community are likely to suffer at the hands of predators, who likely were once victims themselves. And their complaints will often be unheard, if expressed at all.