

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ralph Slovenko,<sup>1</sup> LL.B., Ph.D.*

### A Review of *Evil Angels*

---

**REFERENCE:** Bryson, J., *Evil Angels*. Penguin Books, 40 W. 23rd St., New York, NY 10010, 1986, \$9.95 (Aust.) soft cover, 550 pp.

I was in Australia in late 1987, my first visit to the country, when I heard about the case of Lindy Chamberlain. She was convicted years earlier, in 1982, of the murder of her nine-week-old daughter Azaria. To this day, the case arouses strong, divided opinion among Australians. It has gripped the nation like nothing else. Wherever one would go, people would talk about it. It is Australia's most controversial criminal case.

The facts are bizarre. With her husband, Michael, a pastor of a Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the Northern Territory, sons Aidan, four years old, and Reagan, six, and baby Azaria, Lindy Chamberlain went on holiday in August 1980 to Ayers Rock, the world's largest monolith, in the central Australian desert. The family set up tent in a campsite busy with holiday travelers. The next day, native Australian dogs called dingos were seen by several campers in and around the camping area.

Lindy put Aidan and Azaria to sleep in the family tent that night. Soon after, Reagan said he thought he heard the baby cry. Lindy interrupted conversation with her husband and two other vacationers to go and check her, walked to the tent, then screamed that a dingo had taken her baby. The most frantic of searches in the scrub revealed little, except possibly some paw marks on the sand dunes. Lindy seemed to observers then to be quite composed.

A coroner found the Chamberlains innocent of any involvement in Azaria's death. He concluded, on the probabilities, that a dingo had taken the child. Notwithstanding, the Crown continued its investigations. After some 13 months, a number of items were taken from the Chamberlains; their car was impounded and stripped. Upon examination, a number of stains in the car and on other items were said to contain fetal blood. Another inquest was held. The Chamberlains were ordered to stand trial.

At the trial, the defense vehemently contested that the tests, relied on by the Crown, were capable of showing the presence of fetal haemoglobin in stains some 13 months old. According to the tests, the blood on the clothing (indubitably belonging to Azaria) had hemoglobins in the proportion expected of a 9-week infant. The defense claimed that unless the antiserum used in the tests was monospecific (that is, reacted only with fetal blood), the test results were invalid for purposes of demonstrating the presence of fetal blood.

The prosecution claimed that Lindy slit the baby's throat. No body was ever found. The jury was faced with conflicting testimony by eminent specialists, who came from around the world: namely, whether the antiserum (anti-HbF) used in the tests was or was not monosp-

<sup>1</sup>Professor of Law and Psychiatry, Wayne State University School of Law, Detroit, MI 48202.

cific for hemoglobin. The trial judge offered no assistance to the jury, as is the custom in Australia. He simply stated: "It won't help you for me to analyse the expert evidence. It would take days, and I'd probably fall into the most hopeless error." At the trial Lindy wore a different dress every day, and appeared cold as a fish, according to observers. She was convicted and sentenced to five years at hard labor, but she was freed three and a half years into her term.

John Bryson, a Melbourne lawyer turned writer, authored this best-selling book on the affair, *Evil Angels*. The book is captivating and exceptionally well written. He describes the landscape, the mood of the people, and the proceedings of the trial. He is critical of the forensic science evidence, and he proclaims Lindy's innocence. Reviewers of the book have commented: "I defy any right-minded person to read this book and conclude beyond reasonable doubt that Lindy Chamberlain killed her child." "No one who reads Bryson's scrupulous and disturbing book will ever accept forensic evidence as gospel, or defer to the expert witness." In 1984, 34 Australian scientists signed a joint statement expressing severe doubts about the Crown's evidence on blood. Recently an expert witness in the case is quoted as saying that "the evidence was too complex to leave up to a jury to decide what was fact and what wasn't" [1].

Others say, however: "The book's conclusion is fiction." The Northern Territory Attorney-General commented, "Lindy Chamberlain is guilty. I don't care what Mr. Bryson or anybody else says." Wouldn't the baby's clothes have been torn if a dingo had taken her? Animal lovers are outraged that a dingo would be blamed. "Dingos don't do that sort of thing." Many wear T-shirts: "THE DINGO IS INNOCENT."

Meryl Streep, the superstar, getting a copy of Bryson's book, was both fascinated and disturbed by the story. By happenstance, at the time of my visit in the Northern Territory, she was there to make a film based on the book. At the airport, on arriving, she proclaimed, "Lindy is innocent." For the film, she put on a black wig, and took on a cold demeanor. The director of the film commented, "The story is about something that could happen to anybody, particularly someone who did not have a good demeanor, appearance or a personality that fitted everyone's image of the norm" [2].

The film will likely attract as many, or more tourists to the country than did "Crocodile Dundee." A recent invitation to forensic psychiatrists in the United States from their counterpart in Australia reads: "You will hear of our notorious 'infanticide' case. Was the baby a ritual sacrifice or taken by a dingo?" [3]. Lindy would dress the baby in black but she dressed her in white on the day of the incident.

The case has given rise to a spate of "dingo jokes." Not long ago, an American model was taken by a crocodile whilst swimming off a luxury yacht in a remote part of Australia. The two incidents were combined in the following sick joke—Q: "What is the difference between dingos and crocodiles?" A: "Crocodiles prefer big girls."

## References

- [1] *Daily Mirror* (Australia), 10 Feb. 1986, p. 1. See also Gerber, P., "Some Aspects of the Appeals in *Chamberlain v. The Queen*," *Medical Journal of Australia*, 15 Sept. 1984, p. 351.
- [2] Quoted in Childs, K., "Meryl Streep as an Accused Murderer," *New York Times*, 7 Feb. 1988, p. H-21. See also Childs, K., "Meryl Streep's Trials as Lindy," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 Dec. 1987, p. 71; Brands, J., "Filming Stops at the Rock/Meryl Breaks Down," *Sunday Territorian* (Darwin), 6 Dec. 1987, p. 1.
- [3] Invitation of 10 March 1988, from Dr. Bob Myers, president of the Australian & New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology & Law, to members of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law.

(See Postscript on p. 1547)

## Postscript to *Evil Angels*

*(continued from p. 1514)*

The Northern Territory Court of Criminal Appeal in Darwin on 15 Sept. 1988 overturned Lindy Chamberlain's sentence of life imprisonment with hard labor. She spent about four years in jail. It also quashed the conviction of her husband, Michael, on charges of being an accessory to murder. *AP news release*, 16 Sept. 1988.