Novel questions media hysteria over children who kill

Border Crossing, by Pat Barker Published by the Penguin Group (Viking), ISBN (hardback) 0-670-87841-3 (paperback) 0-670-89315-3

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Border Crossing begins as child-psychologist Tom Seymour rescues a young man from drowning while out walking near a lake. The young man turns out to be Danny Miller, who was convicted as a ten-year-old child of murder and at whose trial Tom had given evidence.

What follows is a series of interviews, which Seymour undertakes partly as a form of therapy for Miller and partly out of a curiosity to find out what kind of man Miller had now become.

Thirteen years before Seymour rescues him, Miller was sentenced in an adult court and sent to a young offenders institution for the murder of an elderly lady. At the original trial, Seymour's evidence had been used to show that although a minor, Miller did understand that what he had done was wrong. There is clearly a parallel with the James Bulger case—in which two young boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, then aged ten and eleven, were tried and sentenced in an adult court for the murder of a toddler. Their release earlier this year—after being imprisoned for eight years—was jeopardised by sections of the press after they sought to reveal their new identities.

Barker's novel is an argument in favour of the concept of rehabilitation and places a question mark over the sort of hysteria whipped up by the media and the major political parties over cases like the Bulger killing, in which the two young boys were portrayed as "evil" and deemed them to have been fully aware of the severity of their actions.

As Seymour pieces together the intervening passage of time, he discovers Miller has grown into a mature but troubled young man. He learns for the first time about Miller's brutal childhood, growing up on a farm with a violent father. Seymour is thrown into increasing doubt about the accuracy of his original evidence. Within his profession, however, he finds only complacency and cynicism towards Millers' case. Miller's new identity is leaked to the press and he is forced into hiding for the second time.

Pat Barker was born in Thornaby-on-Tees, England in 1943. After studying economics, history and politics at the London School of Economics, she taught history and the British Constitution at a Further Education College in the North East. It was in this same region where Barker set her first novel, *Union Street*, in 1982. This story of working class life during the bitterly cold winter of the 1973 miners' strike was told through the eyes of seven women living in a northern English city. The novel went on to win the Fawcett Prize and was later adapted for film, loosely, as *Stanley and Iris*. This was followed by *Blow Your House Down* (1984); *Liza's England* (1986 - formerly *The Century's Daughter*) and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (1989). In 1991, Barker embarked on the highly acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy, in which she followed the lives of young soldiers during the First World War. The first book, *Regeneration*, was followed by *The Eye in the Door* (1993), which won the *Guardian* newspapers' Fiction Prize, and *The Ghost Road* (1995), which won the Booker Prize. The trilogy was also made into a film of the same name. In 1998 Barkers' novel, *Another World*, appeared.

Barker makes a number of arguments against the claim that the actions of those such as her character Danny Miller show evidence of evil intent. She points out that whether one crosses the line between behaviour that is deemed to be "good" and commits an "evil" act often revolves upon a twist of fate, a "border crossing". In a recent interview, Barker states, "I think we are completely obsessed with certain types of crime... I think the child who murders is a very powerful focus for our fears because we are afraid of children, I think, probably for the first time in history."

Barker employed a rather sobering anecdote about one of her contemporaries, Catherine Cookson, the popular author famous for writing working class family sagas set in the nineteenth century: "The example I generally use is Catherine Cookson who, when she was ten, tried to drown another child. And you know she was making a very determined attempt—there was nothing half-hearted about this. A man passing on a tram saw her doing it, jumped off the tram and stopped her... And therefore we have Catherine Cookson, the world famous novelist. We don't have Catherine Cookson the child murderer... It is the good fortune of most of us, I think, never to find out what we're capable of because all the indications are that we're capable of quite a lot we wouldn't want to acknowledge in the lives we actually live."

This is a valid point, but somewhat limited—"there but for the grace of God..."as the saying goes—the implication being that but for a twist of fate, the young Miller would not have been a murderer. Fortunately Barker does not leave the issue at the level of the "single incident". Her story strongly implies that children who commit such acts as murder are often the product of violent or traumatic backgrounds. Something in their past has had unforeseen consequences. Their aberrant behaviour has societal roots. As Seymour assembles Millers' childhood memories, it transpires that he hardly knew the boy at all when he originally interviewed him during the murder trial thirteen years before. Then, it had been a case of fulfilling his role as a child psychologist; to ascertain if Miller was fit to stand trial in an adult court (the arbitrary rule being that if Miller understood the difference between what was "right" and what was "wrong", he was fit for trial).

Seymour slowly coaxes Millers' recollections of his family life out of him. It turns out he was born on a military base in Germany, where his father was serving in the British Army. His father takes part in the Falkland's War and serves several tours of duty in Northern Ireland. When he leaves the army he is unprepared for civilian life and becomes violent and abusive. When pushed in the interview about the physical abuse he suffered at his fathers' hand, Miller's reply is well-pitched: "I'm determined I'm not going to say, 'I was abused, therefore...' Because it's not as easy as that... The fact is he was trying to be a good father, and... I hero-worshipped him. He was tall, he was strong, he had a tattoo that wiggled when he clenched his fist, he had a gun, he'd killed people... I thought he was f**king brilliant.'"

Millers' admiration for his father is undimmed by his violence, and his loathing for his mother, who he sees as pathetic and servile, increases. And so when his father leaves home with another woman, he blames this too on his mother. He starts lighting fires in his room, skipping school, shoplifting and burgling. He kills the elderly Lizzie Parks when she finds him in her house. It is clear from these accounts that the young boy, having passed through various traumatic experiences, had become highly disturbed. Many of his actions did not follow a rational pattern and sharp shocks in particular were prone to incite hostile and even violent behaviour. Rather than receiving urgent help for his condition, all this was used in an adult court of law to indict a ten year old with murder.

As the questioning progresses, it becomes apparent that Seymour is in some way attempting to come to terms with his own role in Miller's conviction. One passage is particularly moving. Miller states, "I was ten years old," evoking the response, "'Yes,' Tom [Seymour] said steadily. 'And I think it's quite true—a lot of ten-year-olds don't understand death. They don't realise it's permanent. But I think you did.'

"'You just don't want to admit you got it wrong.'

"'What did I get wrong?'

"'Telling the court I knew what I'd done. Have you ever stood outside a junior school and watched the kids come out? The biggest kids, the "big boys"? They're *tiny*. I was like that.'"

Everything in Seymour's professional experience would seem to bear out Miller's contention. A child so young could not be expected to have a clear conception of the finality of death. Seymour's typical caseload, as we follow him through his working day, brings him into constant contact with children who, through various acts of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, are so damaged that they not only cannot make such complex judgements but also have lost any sense of personal boundaries. So why had Seymour felt compelled to attribute an understanding to Miller beyond his age? By use of illustrative vignettes, and without labouring the point, Barker successfully depicts the air of emotional hysteria at the time of Miller's trial, in which the less experienced Seymour may himself have become entangled.

In the concluding part of the story, Miller's new identity is jeopardised by the press because of a recent case in which two young boys murder an old woman, and he becomes a point of reference in the media. The press finally catch up with Miller and he is forced into hiding.

Border Crossing does seem to be alluding to something wider than the particular experience of disturbed children. Implicit in the story is an examination of the way the experiences of our early life deeply affect us and shape the way in which we see the world. This is present both in the characters of Miller and Seymour and it is something that Barker has returned to time and time again in her work. As a little girl, Barker remembers watching her grandfather washing at the sink, and being fascinated by the deep scar on his side—a lasting reminder of a bayonet wound he had suffered while fighting at the Somme as a young man during the First World War.

Although her grandfather refused to speak about his injury, Barker was in no doubt about its impact on his life: "At the end of his life when he was dying of cancer, he believed it was his bayonet wound leaking inside him. It took me quite a long time to realise that this wasn't ignorance, that that was a very profound sense of survivor's guilt. He almost needed to believe that the war had got him in the end."

It is Barker's ability to empathise with her characters, to understand their inner motivations, both conscious and unconscious, and to thereby illustrate the complexities of the human condition that enables "Border Crossing" to avoid the pitfall of becoming a somewhat didactic appeal for social tolerance.