

Women

By Melanie Reid

In a long media career, the persecution of Kate McCann, the mother of four-year-old Madeleine who disappeared in Portugal in May, 2007, is the cruellest thing I have seen

HOW many centuries of accumulated spite and misogyny, I wonder, went into the latest twist in the Madeleine McCann saga. Did the British television presenters feel the remotest twinge of conscience as they sensationally reported - second-hand via a Spanish television station - the leaks from the Portuguese police portraying Kate McCann in the worst possible light, as a mother who had left her children to cry?

And did Britain's tabloid editors, themselves presumably sons of mothers and husbands to the mothers of their own children, flinch even a jot as they ordered the devastating headlines "Mummy, why didn't you come when we cried"? to be unfurled on their front pages alongside the face of the missing little girl?

I have seen, lived with and been party to many different kinds of sadism in a long media career, but I honestly think that this latest outbreak of malice

towards Kate McCann is just about the cruellest thing I have witnessed.

Many serious writers have deliberately avoided discussing the case of Madeleine. Not because it is not serious, but because there was no enlightenment we could bring; nothing remotely we could add to the frenzy of distress, loss and bewilderment.

I have avoided reading or watching most of the coverage. It was too harrowing; the couple's grief too visceral to bear; and I could not stand the treatment they received from the macho, out-of-their-depth Portuguese police. For many of us, it was enough, briefly, to contemplate the horror of losing our own child. Anything more was prurience and soap opera.

But somehow we have passed a watershed. With this latest betrayal, picking deep at Kate McCann's emotional scars, we have regressed to the level of the medieval peasants reaching for the ducking stool. Although women suspected of being witches, I sometimes grimly think, received a fairer fate in their slow drowning than do modern women accused of being bad mothers, who are tortured to the point of mental disintegration.

And so it is time to speak out in

defence of Kate McCann, a woman whom I have never met, but someone who is being sacrificed to society's tyrannical views about a mother's role.

Even in the enormity of her suffering it seems Kate McCann must be punished for failing to live up to idealised, romanticised - and wholly

no justice in it. Kate McCann is just the latest in a long line of high-profile victims of the prevailing fatwa - that all mothers must be perfect, self-sacrificing angels. From Kate McCann to Louise Campbell (the mother of Molly/Misbah, the Scots girl who fled to be with her father in Pakistan), to Britney Spears to

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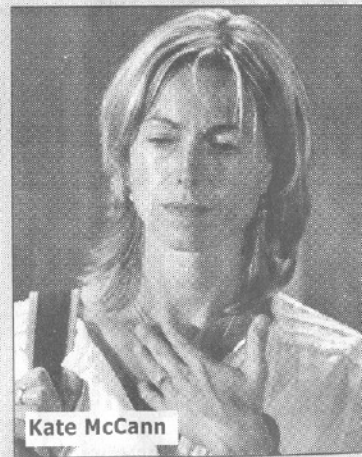
unrealistic - maternal standards. Her child cried the night before she disappeared. It is of no relevance to Madeleine's apparent abduction, but what a glorious stick with which to beat her already guilt-ridden mother.

Why do we do perpetuate this immense cruelty upon women? There is

Anne Robinson to Frances Shand Kydd, nobody loves to torture a perceived bad mother or a bolter like the British do.

Any sign of weakness, any suggestion of being "unfit", any hint that a mother is compromising her child by seeking small freedoms or equality, and the judgment of society is absolute.

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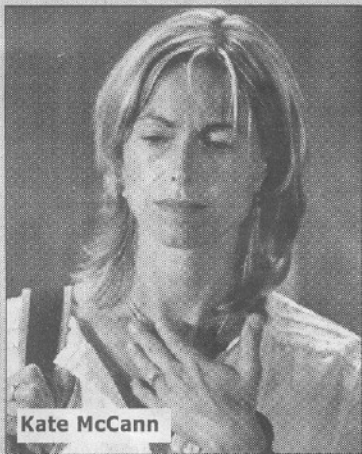


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simply hide their pain, die a kind of psychological death for their loss and exist in the shadows. Some, like Paula Clennell, one of the five women murdered in Ipswich, simply give up all hope when they lose custody of their

children. Their problems are too huge; the hole in their hearts too big to heal.

The taboo surrounding bad motherhood has always struck me as tantamount to pulling wings off butterflies. Vulnerable women, already heartbroken by their loss, must then face devastating social stigma. If women are honest, they admit the maternal paragon does not exist outside Catholic mythology. We all fail, and frequently. But women, terrified of being stigmatised, are often not honest.

You will find out why the media torture Kate McCann if you read the online blogs: it is because there is an audience desperate, as far as I can see, to join in any kind of attack on a bad mother. Everywhere I looked I found a harshness and a pitilessness - from both sexes - towards Kate McCann.

Women sanctimoniously pressed their own claims to maternal sainthood: "My sons are teenagers and I still don't leave them alone". They were also horribly vindictive: "Sorry Kate, but you have only yourself to blame". They even, outrageously, cited God: "You can never replace the time lost with your children which God has blessed you with."

On the Daily Mail site, women

criticised Kate McCann for being photographed smiling. "If I lost my child I don't think I would ever smile again", they declared pompously.

The Daily Mirror website spoke for itself: "Sadly, due to persistent and serious abuses, we will no longer be hosting discussions regarding Madeleine McCann. We do not take this action lightly... but the level of debate on the Maddy forums has gone way beyond what we consider acceptable, with several recent incidents of extremely abusive postings, both against fellow users and the McCanns."

A society, then, riddled with prejudice, which knows precisely how to attack women where they are most vulnerable, and thereby control them. I would like to reassure Kate McCann that she is not alone, but rather a member of a growing army of mothers who share her pain and her pariah status.

In a dark, lonely corner of purgatory, behind the sign "Maternal Failures Only", there are a surprising number of her fellows who offer her only understanding, love and support. And this is a purgatory, she will come to learn, that traps only mild sinners, the undeserving and the desperately unlucky. COURTESY THE TIMES