

Bookshelf

Reviewed by Eleanor J. Bader

Bronx D.A.: True Stories From The Sex Crimes and Domestic Violence Unit

By Sarena Straus, Barricade Books, New York, N.Y. 290 pages, \$22

Take TV's "Law and Order: Special Victim's Unit" and blend in the most sensational elements of your favorite Shakespearian tragedy. The result will closely approximate Sarena Straus' compelling, and at times lurid, memoir about the five years she spent as an assistant district attorney in one of the poorest and most crime-ridden locales in the United States, the Bronx.

From 1995 to 2000, Straus prosecuted murderers, rapists, batterers, and child molesters. Her account is gripping and repulsive, terrifying and dramatic.

She begins with a confession. While people are drawn to particular jobs for a multitude of reasons, Straus' desire to protect women and children came from a family history of abuse. Her paternal grandmother—the

victim of searing verbal tirades when she was growing up—had physically harmed the author's father and uncle when they were children. While both men became physicians, the damage was apparent.

"I did the job because I believed in it," Straus writes. "I believed I could do justice. I did it because I thought that if I could make a difference in the life of even one child, the suffering in my own family would not be in vain."

The stories Straus recounts are vividly drawn, and her idealism, dedication, and savvy are showcased. Yet she is judgmental, often to the point of being disrespectful towards the defense—she knows, after all, that everyone deserves high-quality representation and the presumption of innocence—and her snarks about Legal Aid and other defenders detract from her narrative.

Nonetheless, whether recounting the details of high-profile cases like that of Tabitha Walrond, a mother accused of starving her infant son to death, or that of Jose, a 12-year-old charged with smothering his 10-year-old autistic brother, Straus' tales are stomach-churning. At every turn, she is the proverbial bull in a china shop, fiercely attempting to get justice for the abused and neglected.

At the same time, she gives readers a glimpse into the limits of the law, highlighting the overlap between pathology and criminality. Likewise, the notion of treatment versus punishment is touched upon and Straus demonstrates the inadequacy of incarceration as penalty.

One of the most horrifying cases in the book involves Shaniqua Paulson, a child who claimed to have been sexually assaulted by a priest while studying at the Blessed Sacrament school. Fifteen at the time Straus met her, the child had kept silent about the abuse for more than three years. During that time, she gained 150 pounds and was so depressed she practically had to be pulled out of bed. She also had to be forced to bathe and went from being an A student to failing out. Her disclosure occurred shortly after she learned that a young cousin was about to enroll in Blessed Sacrament. At that point, the impulse to protect trumped the desire to keep mum about the violence. According to Paulson, the abuse happened when her

Catholic priest teacher asked her to stay after class and help him grade papers. Thrilled to be selected, she told Straus, and subsequently jurors, she willingly went into a room with him and had no misgivings when he locked the door. Minutes later, the priest threw her down on a desk and raped her, taking her innocence and sending her on a precipitous downward spiral.

"When he was finished, he told her that if she told anybody, he would kill her, and he also told her something else," Straus said in summation. "He told her that because of who she was, and because of who he was, that no one would believe her. That he was 'just an old man who drinks coffee and works for Jesus.'"

It's hard not to become livid while reading this account and even harder not to feel enraged when Straus loses the case. Apparently, the jury found it impossible to believe that a 70-year-old man of the cloth could so savagely attack an 11-year-old child.

Equally heinous is the murder of three-month-old Kharal Slade. While his father, Derek Slade, eventually pleaded guilty, seeing the infant on the ground after being tossed 15 stories to his death would be enough to undo virtually anyone. It is here that Straus loses it, deciding that she has had enough. It's impossible not to empathize.

Throughout, Straus' account is overtly pro-victim and she does a wonderful job of documenting the toll this work took not only on her, but on her colleagues. Not surprisingly, burn-out is endemic and few stay on the job more than a few years.

"My breaking point came when I could no longer separate myself from my work, when I began to hug my victims, when I lost the ability not to cry," she writes. "I knew I was in trouble when I sent a wedding gift to the mother of one of my smallest victims, a woman I had become particularly attached to."

But is detachment possible, or even advisable? On one level it seems like the only way to stay objective; on another it denies the impulses at the heart of impassioned advocacy. The legal system is by definition adversarial, but the scenarios Straus presents are neither cut nor dry. They attest to the tragedies in human life and the multiple psychological forces at play in abusive relationships.

Straus knows that there can be no winners in such scenarios, but avoids discussing whether there are effective treatments for child abusers and batterers. This makes "Bronx D.A." somewhat frustrating. For while one closes the book lauding Straus' Sisyphean efforts, the system remains profoundly ineffective. New assistant district attorneys are hired, burn out, and are replaced. Meanwhile, the violence continues, filling our newspapers with stories of depravity and indifference.

Straus' memoir does not suggest ways to reform public policy or deal with the pathology that turns people into sexual predators or criminals. That task remains for another writer. As "Bronx D.A." makes clear, it is far overdue.

Eleanor J. Bader is a Brooklyn-based teacher, activist and freelance writer whose work appears in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Lilith*, *Library Journal*, *The Public Eye* and *Z*.

