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Murder That Wasn't: The case of George Gwaze

Felicity Goodyear-Smith

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This is an extraordinary book about an extraordinary case. In 2007, 10-year-old Charlene Makaza, biological niece but effectively daughter of George Gwaze, died in Christchurch. Subsequently interpretation of clinical, microbiological and histological signs led both clinicians and the police to assume (mistakenly) that her death was a consequence of sexual trauma and suffocation. The finding of small traces of George's sperm in her underwear was seen as conclusively linking him to the supposed assault.

As a result of this, and a failure to recognise that the traces could easily have found their way into Charlene's underwear through entirely innocent mechanisms, George was charged with her rape and murder.

But George was not guilty, a conclusion reached not only by the jury in his first trial, but also by the jury in the retrial subsequently ordered by the Supreme Court. For him, and for his family, the horrors were phenomenal. Most of us find it hard to imagine the trauma of having one's young child die. Parents struggle with such experiences for the rest of their own lives, even when the death, unlike Charlene's, could be anticipated. It is probably impossible for most to imagine how awful it would be to have this compounded by accusations of being responsible for her rape and murder.

In her writing, Felicity Goodyear-Smith notes that the case is exceptional; the defence was not that George did not commit the crimes, but that no crimes were committed. Thankfully it was possible to obtain expert opinion, both from New Zealand and overseas, to demonstrate that the apparent signs of rape and murder could result from nothing more than the little girl's HIV-positive status, and her mother's practice of washing the family's underwear together.

As a result of a number of errors in this case, an innocent man had to endure years of being under suspicion and of separation from his 12-year-old niece (thanks to a CYFS ruling which prevented contact). Some may now feel ashamed of their involvement in this case. But the author of this book, and her colleagues who cleared George's name, should feel proud.

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