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A Murder over a Girl: Justice, Gender, Junior High, by Ken Corbett, PhD, New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2016, 273 pp., \$27.00

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On the morning of February 12, 2008, in a junior-high classroom in Oxnard, California, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney drew a .22-caliber revolver out of his pocket, stood, aimed, and shot 15-year-old Larry King in the back of the head at close range, killing him. The murder was witnessed by the boys' teacher and classmates. A putative motive was that, Larry, who was transgender, had asked Brandon, days prior, in front of peers, to be his Valentine. This murder, and the trial and controversy that followed, ultimately made national headlines, reaching media outlets from the Ellen DeGeneres Show to Newsweek and ABC's news magazine 20/20.

In *A Murder Over a Girl: Justice, Gender, Junior High*, Ken Corbett—a psychologist, psychoanalyst, and author of *Boyhoods: Rethinking Masculinities* (Corbett, 2009), as well as numerous articles on sexuality and gender—gives an eye-witness account of the 2011 trial of Brandon McInerney, charged as an adult for the murder of Larry King. What emerges is a deeply unsettling, often poignant picture of Larry and Brandon, their families, and events surrounding the murder. Here, trauma begets trauma, and Corbett's rendering shows the struggle of individuals, the community, and the justice system to respond to trauma and its precursor in this case, hate, when both reason and emotion fail as guides. Along with issues of gender identity and sexuality, Corbett's tale unfolds against a background of race—Larry is black, Brandon white—class, and the “culture wars” over the place of difference and otherness in our society. Corbett deftly weaves these elements into a single, complex tapestry, while never losing sight of a powerful narrative arc. The result is a gripping read whose rich, layered quality strongly recommends it to those engaged in questions of gender and gender identity, trauma, and the complex dynamics that can unfold around them.

At the core of Corbett's tale are two troubled kids. The child of a drug addict mother, Larry King was found as a toddler by authorities, abandoned and

screaming on a municipal sidewalk aside the stroller of his infant brother. Larry and his brother were eventually taken in by foster parents, Greg and Dawn King, who quickly found themselves overwhelmed by Larry's chronic developmental and behavioral problems. Larry's effeminacy was long recognized by his foster family. Corbett observes the complex and, for Larry, probably confusing nature of his family's response—a mix of recognition and **denial**, suppression and complicity with Larry's desire to dress as, and to be, a girl. Eventually Larry was removed from the Kings' home, technically due to minor delinquency, but possibly driven by Larry's repeated allegations of physical abuse at the hands of Greg King, allegations never definitively substantiated.

Placed in an adolescent group home, Larry began, with greater determination, to act and accessorize as “Leticia”—the girl of Corbett's title. Some noticed a new vitality in Larry, a **happiness** with himself, and a greater willingness to “push back” against the bullying that he endured. Yet as “Leticia” began to appear at school, with ever greater visibility, perhaps even defiance, many were alarmed: not only foster parents, but also school staff. Indeed, Larry/Leticia quickly catalyzed a chaotic response, and eventually open **conflict**, at his junior high, more so among teachers and school administration than other kids, most of whom seem to take Larry/Leticia in stride—with the obvious, tragic exception.

Brandon McInerney's background is marked by chronic abuse and neglect. He, too, is the son of a long drug-addicted mother, as well as a highly volatile, physically abusive father. Brandon is nevertheless handsome, bright, and athletic. Yet he is also emotionally inscrutable, sometimes a clown or a charmer, but prone to bullying and quick turns to violence. Moreover, investigation reveals that Brandon's home is filled with guns and his mind apparently saturated with white supremacist ideology. While Larry is clearly a victim of rigid social ideas about gender, Corbett makes the case that Brandon, too, is a victim of gender stereotypes. Warning signs were ignored—falling grades, increasing emotional withdrawal and sullenness, **obsession** with swastikas and other white supremacist symbols—because they were chalked up as “typical boy” stuff. Brandon flew under the radar of the adults in his life, until he planned a murder and executed it.

Corbett's account of these boys is fascinating in its **attunement** to both detail and the broader forces at work in their lives. But it is with his account of the trial itself that Corbett's acute eye and ear are brought fully to bear. *A Murder Over a Girl* ends as a meditation on justice and its vicissitudes. Corbett's account of the trial, remarkably well-told, draws the reader into this meditation, to

devastating effect. The law requires that a just verdict be based on fact and evidence, not emotion. Nevertheless, what Corbett illustrates is that the desire for something that *feels* like justice was pervasive on both side of the case—perhaps an inescapable human response, given the events. The result, traced out in disturbing relief, is a tug-of-war between fact and emotion, split between prosecution and *defense*. Justice emerges as an ideal painfully beyond reach.

The facts of the murder were well-established. Evidence was clear that Larry's murder was premeditated. Moreover, Brandon had been long fixated on Larry's difference, his gayness, his effeminacy. This *fixation* eventually overlapped with his “induction” into a tunnel-vision white-supremacist ideology. From this angle, the facts seemed poised to bring about a conviction of first-degree murder and hate crime. Yet to convict Brandon, who

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was only 14 at the time of his terrible act—and indeed, to convict one of “their own,” a boy whose life of abuse, neglect, and hate may have echoed the shame, or the secret pride, of his community—seems to have been emotionally intolerable to many in the courtroom and beyond. Perhaps such a conviction felt, to some, like yet another *trauma* in the making, one to be stopped at all cost. And after all, as Corbett himself ponders, Brandon *was* a child, with a terrible history. Was it right to hold him to an adult's standard of justice? Was is “too late” for him, a determination that would justify decades, perhaps a lifetime, of incarceration?

Then there was Larry's difference itself. Corbett does not simply tell, but rather shows, how Larry's effeminacy, and eventually his desire to make Leticia real, evoked a powerful negative response among mostly the adults in his life, and especially among his teachers. Larry's increasing visibility, and perhaps his refusal to be tamped down, was viewed as a problem, a disruption, that needed to be solved. But underneath this cry of “disruption” seemed to lie a sense of outrage, as if Larry's behavior and attitude were an attack on the propriety, the decency, of the school community.

The defense's case expertly synthesized the feelings—palpable in the courtroom, in local opinion—that Brandon's conviction would also indict a

community, and that Larry was a “problem” beyond the pale. The argument presented by the defense combined these views into an assertion that would ring as still another outrageous injustice, this time against Larry. The defense argued that Brandon was a victim of Larry's sexual harassment, with duress and shame so great—a “gay panic” effect, though the defense refused this designation—that his killing of Larry, although tragic and wrong, was beyond Brandon's ability to forestall. The underlying implication is that Larry's behavior, his [aggression](#), or the failure of certain adults to stop that [aggression](#), led to his own murder.

The trial ended in a hung jury, 7 to 5 against the charges of first-degree murder and hate crime. Even if one knew, prior to reading *A Murder Over a Girl*, of the trial's conclusion, what Corbett transmits to the reader is a sense that likely pervaded the minds of many at the time: the sense of something, perhaps justice itself, stillborn. Corbett recounts how, after the hung jury was announced, he himself felt compelled to leave, not just the courthouse, but the state, to clean himself, to get away. We are told that ultimately, prior to retrial, Brandon and his attorneys take a plea bargain, pleading guilty to a combined charge of second-degree murder and manslaughter, with a sentence of 21 years in prison. The charge of hate crime was dropped. This may seem a compromise of sorts. But still, is it justice?

Corbett's portrayal brings out both the unfathomable quality of justice in this case, as well as the emotional and [unconscious](#) dimensions of the courtroom dynamic. Most stunning is the way in which words were decoupled from fact in this trial. He shows the prosecutor who, despite the clarity of her argument, cannot get her words to evoke the reality of the evidence in the minds of many people in the courtroom. She appears desperately aware of this when presenting her final argument—the emotional peak of the book. As for the [defense](#) attorney, the words of his argument demand a Teflon blindness to fact that many in the courtroom embrace, almost as a moral stance. In the end, fact itself erodes as the only viable reference point to reality. Corbett depicts all of this with great impact. He could not have foreseen, as he wrote this book, the extent to which this story, of the loss of fact as the anchor of public discourse, would become a national reality. Yet this dimension of his story only further adds to its relevance. Corbett essentially shows, in microcosm, how it can happen.

A Murder Over a Girl, also a meditation on “gender” and “junior high,” underlines these elements as inevitably intertwined. Yet the combination is fraught. For Larry, junior high was a necessary but dangerous play space, the obvious place where he could bring Leticia to be seen by those who make up his adolescent

world—his peers—and to take a chance at making her real through their recognition. Larry's desire, simply put, was to be recognized as himself—or rather as the *her*-self within—and to be accepted, or at least tolerated, as a member of the group. This may read as too neat a formulation. But isn't this the desperate, human desire that unfolds for everyone in junior high, especially in the realization of gender? Moreover, it seems that the risk is present for everyone. Even the “straightest” of “straight” boys must run the gauntlet of the accusation of “faggot” hurled at them by their “straight-boy” peers—gender tested by fire—a phenomenon well-described by Corbett himself in his previous writings (Corbett, 2001). Indeed, Brandon ran this gauntlet: his distress arose, in part, from the fact that his peers witnessed him being the object of “gay” desire, and his [defense](#) against this was—absolute. For Larry, this danger escalated into what is the worst nightmare of anyone who has had to come out for anything in the face of terrible fear: that one will be killed for one's difference.

Corbett's book left me with other questions as well, on the mind of many these days, about the link between individual hate crimes and broader currents of hate and resentment within a society. Corbett does not make an argument for a direct connection between Brandon's murderous act and the resentments of his community. But the unspoken dynamics that Corbett brings out—through subtle observation, rather than explicit [interpretation](#)—are replete with the chilling suggestion that Brandon's killing of Larry, although his act alone, is not unrelated to a primitive emotional current endemic in his community. Such a “subterranean” link, if it exists, must of course remain elusive, unproven. Yet one need also consider Brandon's own words: he himself understood his act as committed on behalf of the group. Brandon saw Larry as “a problem for everybody.” As for murdering Larry, Brandon said, “I thought it was a good thing to do. Everyone hated him.” It seems Brandon knew, on some level, that he was not the only one disturbed by Larry. What can be made of this uncanny echo? The group he served must have been a potent conflation of [fantasy](#) and real others, but the details of such a “formation” undoubtedly deserve further theoretical reflection, especially with the rise of hate crime as a national phenomenon.

Corbett's writing is effective. The forward momentum that he builds for the overarching [narrative](#), of the trial and its aftermath, nevertheless allows for vivid forays into personal history (of the boys and their families); observation of group dynamics (community reactions, the emotional [dynamic](#) of the courtroom); and specific encounters between Corbett and the subjects with whom he has developed relationships, including the mothers of both Larry and Brandon. Also placed strategically throughout the text are Corbett's reflections

on his own experience as a participant-observer, which adds to the reader's sense of the subtler aspects of the events Corbett describes.

A Murder Over a Girl essentially reads as a case study in the best sense of that tradition. Not a case study of an individual, but

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of a constellation of individuals and groups. Moreover, this book gives what the most generative case studies have to offer, in that it can be read from multiple angles and different layers. Corbett uses a few key conceptual lenses to highlight facets of this story: theories of **object relations**, trauma, and dissociation, for example, hover close behind the text. However, the strength of his writing is that he illustrates as much as he explains. This translates into a study that captures through observation essential complexities and contradictions of the human experience in the face of **conflict**, trauma, and otherness that cannot be reduced easily to a single theoretical, clinical, or even political perspective. This, in my view, is an enormous strength. As a book for clinical learning, this volume could thus be paired beautifully and fruitfully with readings not only on gender, gender-identity, and sexuality, but also readings of Klein, Bion—especially *Experiences in Groups*—and theories of trauma and dissociation, among others.

My qualms about this book are few and minor. Corbett sometimes uses turns of phrase that are intended as expressive or poetic. (“Larry was ebullient, flaming. Snap!” “It could be said that she made him.”) Sometimes this worked, but at other times, diverted my **attention** to Corbett's language itself, and thus away from content I found involving. I did not always want to be diverted. But this is a detail of taste or literary style, not to be confused with the convincing effect of the whole.

The story told by *A Murder Over a Girl* pulls powerfully for a sense of righteous fury. This makes it a compelling read. But righteous fury is also, to my mind, why the jury of Brandon McInerney's trial hung, caught in an irreparable split. To his credit, despite obvious sympathies, Corbett doesn't take sides. By stepping back from the split, he keeps this book useful, deeply so. It is useful because it demands thinking in the face of **conflict** and **trauma**—thinking in the sense that Bion articulates, thinking that is painful, because, though necessary for growth, it reaches for an understanding that remains just out of reach, requiring one to go on trying to understand, bearing the overwhelming difficulty of what is considered.

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