Introduction

WHY WOULD ONE even want to talk to a mother who killed her children? So horrific is this crime that the thought of sitting in the same room with such a person brings a twinge of revulsion, an involuntary shiver, even after having spent hours in conversation with these very women. But now, at least for us, the revulsion is directed outward, at the crime, rather than at the women themselves.

We set out to speak with mothers who kill because, after almost two decades of studying these women’s cases, we realized that no one had ever really talked to them. Many had told their stories for them — experts, journalists, lawyers — but no one had ever asked the women if these stories had gotten it right, or even whether they had some thoughts of their own on what had gone wrong.

We turned to the mothers themselves, asking them to tell us their stories — not just the stories of how they killed their children but also the stories that might help us to understand why, and maybe how, it might have been prevented. We asked them to tell us their stories about who they were, before and after their crimes, stories of how they had lived, what they had expected from life and from themselves. We asked about their lives as children, as young women, and as mothers; about love and stress; and about their coping mechanisms and support systems. We asked about their experiences with the various agencies designed to support and protect vulnerable citizens and about their interactions with the criminal justice system.

We asked them these questions not because we expected that their answers somehow would be more “true” than those ascertained through the legal or health care systems. We fully expected them to tell versions of their stories that were defensive and self-serving. We asked them because we sought their unique perspective and insight into the events — their own explanations of what happened and why.

These women can tell us about their lives as they were living them in the years, weeks, and days before they killed their children. They offer us
a meaningful understanding of the factors that contributed to their children’s deaths and of the things that might have prevented them. Their stories shine a light on the path to preventing filicide, the killing of a child by a parent. They are as enlightening as they are terrifying.

Our conversations with mothers who killed their children left us feeling humbled and less sure of our capacity to assess others. We spent many long days listening to their stories in an eight-by-ten cinderblock room with a single window too high for a view, covered with bars. Their stories placed the abundance in our lives into stark relief, causing us to see the intricately woven fabric that sustains us. All the people who have cared for us, the places in which we feel safe, the beauty in even the worst days suddenly became visible. This fabric lifts and carries us through our lives. It was there all along, but we did not know it.

Prior Research

Our original work on mothers who kill their children, including our previous book, *Mothers Who Kill Their Children,* was devoted, in large part, to describing the patterned nature of the crime of maternal filicide. We surveyed hundreds of newspaper stories, and available medical and social science articles, to identify a set of five markedly distinct categories of mothers who kill. The newspaper articles afforded us an emotional distance from this tragic subject matter. We could keep the nightmare at bay, taking in the familiar patterns in each new story without having to sense the grief that each lost life demands of us. We focused on the ways that cases were similar to one another, and then on the ways in which they were different. We identified five categories of maternal filicide: neonaticide, or filicide related to an ignored pregnancy; abuse-related filicide; filicide due to neglect; assisted/coerced filicide; and purposeful filicide, in which the mother acted alone.

Years of working on this subject made us aware of the missing pieces when we discussed these cases. To think about why a mother would do so heinous a thing to her child, one has to make an intuitive leap, trusting that one knows enough about her life to understand her actions. But the truth is that we do not know nearly enough about these women’s lives to make such assumptions.

The fundamental contribution of this volume is to begin filling in the missing pieces of these stories by creating a record of the conversations...
that we held with forty women who were incarcerated for killing their children. Our conversations with the women began in 2001, when we spoke, in two- to three-hour-long sessions, with women serving time for homicide at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW). The methods by which we identified these women, and the questionnaire that formed the template for these conversations, are discussed in appendix A, at the conclusion of this book.

After we finished our interviews, we were struck by certain themes and patterns. We wanted to be sure that we had heard them correctly. Rather than reinterview everyone with whom we had spoken, we decided to speak once again, at greater length, with a subset of eight of these women. In considering which women to reinterview, we were limited by the fact that many of our original participants had completed their sentences and were no longer incarcerated. We attempted to select a representative sample, while also looking to speak with those who had been particularly forthcoming.

In 2006 we reinterviewed these eight women, asking them to expand more fully on the themes they had raised in our initial conversations and inviting them to reflect on how they viewed themselves and their crimes from this juncture. The questionnaire used to guide these conversations appears in appendix A. Because we rely so heavily on the stories told by these eight women, we have summarized each of their lives into “narratives,” which are presented in chapter 1, and are prominently featured in the chapters that follow.

Our interviews with women incarcerated for the crime of homicide confirmed our earlier research. Our conversations with women who committed neonaticide supported our first book’s findings regarding the emotional isolation and terror experienced by those who conceal or deny their pregnancies and then kill the infant within twenty-four hours of birth. Our discussions with women whose children were killed in neglect-related incidents revealed, as expected, young single mothers of multiple children, whose lives were in a state of chaos at the time of their child’s death.

Our research for this book could not, nor was it intended to, completely substantiate the findings of our first book. Although each of the various patterns of maternal filicide that we identified in our first book was represented by at least one of the women with whom we spoke, the number of stories representing any particular type of filicide was not necessarily proportional to its incidence. Approximately 70 percent of the women we interviewed represented three categories — abuse-related filicide, filicide
due to neglect, and assisted/coerced filicide — although these particular types of filicide composed only 47 percent of the cases identified in our first book. The population of women we interviewed at ORW included relatively few women convicted of committing neonaticide and very few women who purposely killed their children.

The limited number of neonaticide stories told by the women with whom we spoke reflects the fact that neonaticide often is committed by girls who have not yet become legal adults. Many are punished as juvenile offenders; their records are sealed, their sentences are limited, and they are housed separately from the adult prisoners. Because neonaticide stories are so distinctly patterned, we have gathered the few stories we heard and retell them, amplified by existing scientific and social science literature, in appendix B.

The reasons underlying the relative paucity in our study of women who purposely killed their children stems from the nature of mental illness, as well as from the manner in which the criminal justice system responds to the mentally ill. There are a broad range of mental illnesses implicated in maternal filicide cases. Some mentally ill mothers who kill suffered from chronic, disabling conditions, such as schizophrenia, which were either undiagnosed or untreated at the time of their crimes. Others cases involve women who, at the time of their crimes, were experiencing a recurring condition, such as major depression, or an acute crisis, such as postpartum psychosis.4

In spite of the fact that there are many cases of filicide committed by women who are profoundly mentally ill, in Ohio and elsewhere, there were few such women incarcerated at the ORW at the time of our study. Prisoners with profound mental disorders may be housed in mental institutions rather than prisons. Some have never been tried for their crimes because they are not competent to stand trial. Others, particularly those suffering from an acute episode of mental illness, may have been adjudicated “not guilty for reason of insanity” and may not be incarcerated. Some deeply mentally ill women have been tried and convicted of homicide, but because their illnesses proved to be too hard to manage within the general prison population, they are housed separately, with other mentally ill prisoners. Finally, many mentally ill mothers who kill their children also kill themselves, at the same time that they kill their children or apart from that crime. Using available literature on mothers who kill and mental illness, appendix C attempts to tell the “missing story” of this group of filicidal mothers, often mothers who purposely killed their children.
The Stories and the Listeners: Emerging Themes

These stories can only tell us so much. There are limits inherent in the methodology. One limit on the implications of these stories lies in the distance between the storyteller and the listener. As listeners, our responses to the women’s stories inevitably were bound up in our own realities and experiences. Although we shared a common vocabulary with the women whom we interviewed, our life experiences were so distinct as to render ambiguous even seemingly clear words, such as “home” or “good.” We often had vastly different definitions of these words.

Several women described their childhoods as “happy” or “good” but told of homes that were rife with violence. When we asked one woman to tell us about her childhood, she began by saying, “Boy — well my life as a child was very happy. I was raised by my mom and stepfather.” She went on to say:

They were very strict. I was abused and beat, but never knew why. I was never a cheerleader or in groups, but I couldn’t do anything — very sheltered. If I was late from school I was beaten, all the way through high school. Anything I did had to be during school. I have never been to a party to this day. . . . I ran away a couple of times.

As we undertook the task of retelling these women’s stories, we struggled to highlight what the women considered important, the truth as they saw it, rather than simply recounting what struck us as noteworthy. A story takes on a new form as it is heard and retold, and undoubtedly, we have reconfigured these women’s tales by virtue of what we deemed significant. This volume is as much a testament to our responses to their stories as it is an effort to tell them.

The core themes that emerged from our conversations involved violence, isolation, and hopelessness. Every woman with whom we spoke had been victimized by some form of violence. Violence was so common, and so endemic to their lives, that we found ourselves at first incredulous, and then simply weary. We longed to believe that they did not experience, or feel, the violence in the same way that we might have. Many were raped, and at such young ages, that we simply could not fathom what it would be like to try to live as an adult woman after having lived through that as a child. It was easier to hope that they did not experience rape as the same sort of horrific violation that it would be for us.
But their stories, as they told them, were not even about rape. Rape was mentioned only in passing. Nor were their stories necessarily about parental addiction, or child abuse, even though these things were present in almost all their stories. The effort to survive just one day of their childhoods would seem to entail soul-crushing grief. Yet, the women accepted their experiences as basic and normal, just as, in some ways, we all do our pasts. They offered up these stories about their lives not as explanations or as excuses, but as facts. This simply was how it was for them.

When love came, it came with a price tag. Your father, when you got to see him, beat you, or had sex with you, or both. Your mother gave you a place to live, but it was with her new husband and the children they had together, and none of them let you forget it, not even for a minute. Your boyfriend made you feel sexy, but he slept with other women, only saw you when he felt like it, teased you about being a dropout, beat you in front of your children, and sometimes beat your children. And there were no friends to rely on — no one to take your call, no one to help you determine what was normal, what was unacceptable, and how to chart a course to safety.

The lack of a safe haven amid the violence in their lives spoke to a deeper theme, one that linked virtually every story we heard — these women were profoundly isolated. Even among large, extended families, often there was no one paying attention to them, no one who cared deeply. The center of their lives seemed hollow.

Hope does not grow well in these environments. In order to have hope, one must believe in the possibility of change. It is hard to know whether children are born into hope or whether it must be cultivated. It is clear, though, that at some point in the months or even years leading to the horrific crimes these women committed, they lost faith in a future that looked any different. That despair lies at the core of their stories: there is the loss of even the hope for change.

There is a second limit in the methodology. By definition, these cases are nightmare scenarios. Many women are raised by unstable, abusive parents; many have intimate relationships marked by violence; many embark on motherhood at very young ages, isolated and lacking basic resources such as shelter and money, but they do not all kill their children. To date, there is no way to know how many other women survive precisely the same sort of circumstances described in these women’s stories and do not kill their children.
Even though stories, rather than data points, form the foundation of this volume, the truths told are no less valid or legitimate. Like the parable of the blind men trying to describe the elephant, each of the women's life stories, each of their versions of reality, is a partial truth. To the extent that we seek to make sense of the phenomenon of maternal filicide, these women's truths are vital to us.

Overview

This book proceeds in two parts. The first part of the book is devoted to retelling the women's stories and largely comprises their personal reflections on their lives and crimes. We begin our exploration of these mothers' journeys by highlighting the stories of eight women whom we were able to interview twice and whose stories reflect a broad cross section of the various types of filicide. Their cases demonstrate the most common themes that emerged from the stories told by the mothers with whom we spoke.

The chapters that follow these case studies are devoted to an exploration of the various themes as they manifested in the women's lives. Chapter 2 recounts the stories that grew out of their own childhoods, focusing predominantly on their connections to their parents. Interestingly, the women spoke at far greater length about their connections to their mothers than they did to their fathers. This chapter is a testament to the ways in which their relationships with their mothers affected their own lives, both as children and as young mothers. In chapter 3 we consider their stories about romance, retracing both the women's descriptions of their relationships and the significance of romantic love in their lives. Chapter 4 turns to the subject of motherhood, in which the women discuss both their hopes and dreams as mothers and the distance between those dreams and the realities they encountered.

Part 1 of the book concludes with chapter 5, which examines the women's experiences in prison, telling their stories about their lives as incarcerated adults. In this chapter we hear the women's stories about shame and punishment, and also about reconciliation. These stories afford us the chance to consider these women's experiences within the criminal justice system: both the manner in which their particular case was adjudicated and the effect that incarceration has had on their lives.
Part 2 of the book sets a context, or backdrop, against which the women’s stories, and the problem of maternal filicide in general, might better be understood. Chapter 6 discusses the social and institutional structures that framed these women’s lives, as young children, as adolescents, as parents, and as adults. The women demonstrated an intimate familiarity with various state agents — social workers, welfare bureaucrats, housing officers, lawyers, probation officers, public health workers, school teachers, hospital personnel. These various government officials emerge as critical influences on the women’s actions and choices. Chapter 6 also describes the manner in which the women worked to navigate their encounters with these various state agencies, attempting to avoid those that they perceived as potentially harmful, while accepting the involvement of others as inevitable or even desirable.

The book’s final chapter reflects on the implications and questions raised by the stories these women have told us. In particular, we return to the question of whether women who commit filicide might be different, in meaningful ways, from others who seem to be similarly situated and do not harm their children. We explore the alternative policy implications for punishment and prevention that arise from our data.

At the end of the book, we take a step back from the individual components or themes in the women’s stories and attempt to convey our sense of the whole — the confluence of factors that contributed to these mothers’ crimes. We consider the nature of their profound isolation from support and the fact that it seems plausible, if not likely, that the presence of any one positive factor — a well-paying job, a loving spouse, a supportive family, a healthy coping mechanism for dealing with stress, an attentive case worker — might have saved these mothers and their children from their fate. Their depiction of the struggle to parent with too few resources offers a silent testimony to the fragile network that holds life together for the vast majority of mothers and children in this society. From them we learn a new story about what contributes to resilience and the ability to survive, and even to thrive, in times of great stress.

But all of this storytelling starts with the stories told by the women themselves, and it is to them that we now turn.