

ANATOMY OF A SECRET: ONE MAN'S SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

GERARD McCANN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Anatomy of a Secret is a meditation on the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, and living with the consequences of Complex PTSD. It is a personal reflection on the role the Catholic Church played in the lives of many families in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, and the disparity between its teachings and its sinister underbelly. The story explores how abuse forces children into the role of secret-keeper, often creating and perpetuating a moral wilderness.

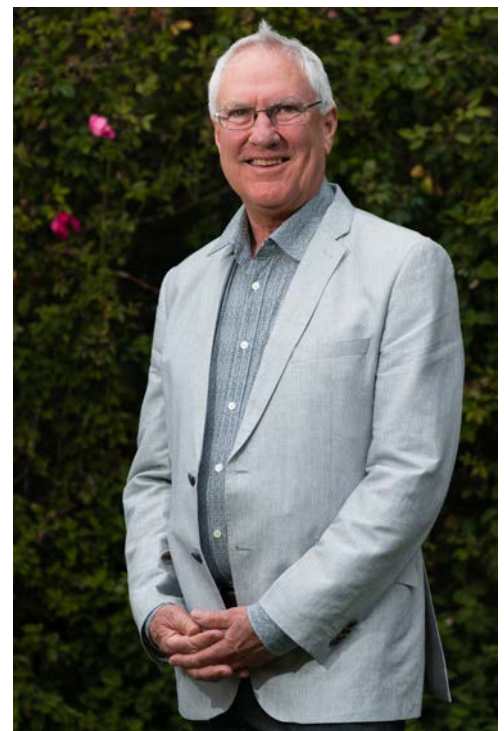
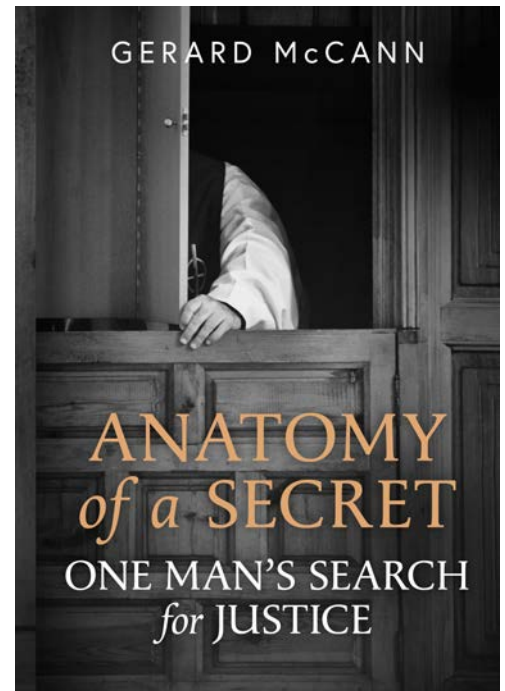
In this memoir, Gerard McCann courageously embarks on a targeted therapy that liberates long-buried feelings and restores his lost identity. This leads inexorably to an investigation of the life of the priest responsible for the abuse, a process that reveals the portrait of a criminal paedophile masquerading as a servant of God. The injustice exposed, of the Church protecting the abusers and attempting to conceal the abuse, compels Gerard to confront and hold the Church to account.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerard McCann was born into a staunch Catholic family in the West Australian Wheatbelt town of Goomalling, and grew up in the Perth suburb of Cottesloe. After completing school with the Jesuits, he studied Architecture at the Perth Technical College and the University of WA. He has a long-held interest in heritage architecture and developed a practice based around this in Fremantle. He completed an Arts degree at UWA in the 1990s, majoring in Australian and American literature. While on sabbatical around Europe in 2012, free from the responsibility of his practice, he immersed himself in non-fiction travel writing. Later that year, he began the memoir that was to transform his life. He is currently writing short stories and continues to draw inspiration from his writing group. He lives with his life partner in Fremantle. They have two children and three grandchildren.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think this memoir is called *Anatomy of a Secret*?
2. How familiar were you with the topic of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church before reading this memoir?
3. Why is it that such heinous acts continue to remain as secrets?
4. Why do you think the author decided that now was the right time to share his story publicly?
5. Do you think it's possible to move forward in life without addressing unresolved issues from the past?
6. The author returns several times to the topic of abandonment and depression. Why do you think it manifested differently for Gerard and his brothers?
7. How did Gerard's relationship with his parents affect how he parented his own children?
8. How would you describe the changing relationship between Gerard and his mother – as a young child, as a young adult and as a man?
9. Why do you think Gerard and his brothers managed to avoid some of the common repercussions of trauma, i.e., substance abuse, suicide, etc.?



10. Why did Gerard decide to pursue architecture, despite being told it was 'the least suitable profession' for him?
11. What impact did the biographer John Stewart Collis have on the author?
12. Why do you think the author would portray 'his happy self' to various therapists over the years, as opposed to being vulnerable and honest? And what was it about the approach of Jungian psychoanalysis that helped him take those first steps towards self-awareness?
13. Why do you think the Catholic Church and the Professional Standards Office wouldn't acknowledge the impact of the abuse on his childhood and schooling?
14. How did the author's research into Leo Leunig's history and uncovering the other victims assist him on his journey towards healing and justice?
15. How does the interweaving of past and present in this memoir aid the author in telling his story?
16. How did the author's return to Quairading as an adult impact his mental health, both positively and negatively?
17. Why do you think Gerard wanted to learn about Leunig's personal history?
18. How do you interpret the metaphor of the author's career as an architect with a focus on restoring and rehabilitating heritage houses?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to publish this memoir?

The initial impetus to write my story was anger. I unexpectedly came across the story of how the Catholic Church had run a secret and highly expensive rehabilitation and support program for paedophile clergy at a psychiatric clinic in Sydney. The program had operated in the 1990s and into the 2000s and had treated over a thousand clergy. The offenders were not reported to the police. At the completion of their 'rehabilitation', they were given a generous payout, accommodation and a university education and transitioned out of their Holy Orders. During this time, and before and after, the Church had been strenuously challenging and demeaning victims in the courts and in the press, denying them the 'truth' of their experiences. My rage was volcanic and I spilled my story to some close friends, who encouraged me to write it down. This process took on a life of its own as the story unfolded in a narrative non-fiction mode, where my feelings and experiences as I wrote and investigated the web of abuses became an integral part of telling the story. After seven years of writing, author Emily Bitto was referred to me to help finetune the manuscript, and after several edits she encouraged me to submit it for publication and competitions. Being shortlisted for the 2022 [City of Fremantle] Hungerford Award affirmed that publication was possible.

Writing, integral with psychotherapy, became a healing journey as it allowed me to externalise facts and feelings, helping me to understand and live with the wounds rather than bury them. As I uncovered more of the horror other victims had suffered, and the extent of the paedophile priest's offending, the scope of my story widened. It became an exploration of the priest and his times, as well as a documentation of the Church's responses to abuse generally, and to me specifically. I came to understand that the consequences of abuse, for me and the other men I interviewed, were universal and should be exposed to a wider audience. In this, I was encouraged by those survivors whose stories I had recounted. Not only were they very supportive of our collective story being told, they reported that reading my manuscript had helped them to a greater understanding of what had happened to them, a validation of their experience and their anguish.

Therapy has been such an integral part of your journey to reclaiming your sense of self. You participated in a number of different kinds of therapies – how was it that you knew psychotherapy at the Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) was the right one for you?

I did not know. It was extraordinarily good fortune. I was attempting to contact the police to report my abuse and inadvertently rang the Sexual Assault Resource Centre in Subiaco. When they suggested counselling, I presumed they were a 'sorting-house', a preamble to reporting the crimes upstream to the police. As it turned out, it was to become another bout of therapy, which I was always open to. Once again, I found myself trying

to get to the nub of the disconnect between 'me' and my missing feelings. I knew something was seriously wrong but I had no idea what that was, only experiencing it as profound disempowerment and constant rage. At SARC, I was teamed up with James N. He miraculously was the right person with whom I was able to develop a level of trust. Over several years, he skilfully led me to that place where the traumas were held in my body, around my heart, and he slowly guided me in bringing them into the light of day. Our process was highly intuitive, a two-way interpersonal exchange, an integrative approach of many disciplines, narrative therapy, somatic therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy and others, including some CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy]. This therapeutic experience was life-changing but highly disruptive, as the turmoil of a lifelong 'trauma suppression system' was exposed and dismantled – essential, however, for the reconstruction of the fragmented child-self.

Did the act of writing lead to any unexpected revelations? Were there some you left out of the book?

Yes. I was constantly surprised at the memories and feelings that surged into view as I wrote. Even though I have a video-like memory of whole scenes and conversations and events surrounding the abuses, the terror and feelings of helplessness associated with those memories was not available consciously, only appearing in nightmares that had haunted my whole life. I had no doubt as to the veracity of the suppressed feelings as they emerged, as often tears accompanied them. Sometimes they were so overwhelming, I sobbed. Importantly, the recollections reclaimed my inner voice, the internal monologues that had occurred at critical moments of my childhood. This voice had not only named my feelings at those times, but also contemplated the moral consequences of my position.

I also became very conscious of the potential problem of reliable childhood recall, a much fraught topic in judicial and literary contexts. In my case, the colour of the church at Kwolyin was a case in point. I remember it as being grey-green, but it is in fact red. I felt fortunate though that I had been very conscious of my feelings at the time, and so remembering these inner conversations, indelibly burned somewhere, were the means to access them. The feeling of revelation and release that accompanied their re-emergence testified to their truth.

There have been elements that have been left out of the book. There were many issues that dogged my young adulthood and their listing seemed repetitive. I edited these down to the most profound, sufficient to give a picture of myself working with what had happened and what I was to do with it. My married life, my parenting and my career as an architect occupy about three-quarters of my life, and though the childhood traumas occupied less than one-twentieth of that time, their effect echoed throughout. So there is much in between that has had to be distilled down to key moments of insight and experience, sufficient to describe the essence of the journey.

What's next for Gerard McCann?

I have retired as an architect and will let the dust of that career settle for as long as it takes to be able to see into the distance. In the past, writing has sprung to life when I have removed the yoke of otherworldly tasks and responsibilities. There are drawers full of material, but where or what they may lead to remains to be seen. That said, I love the surprise of seeing words appear on the page, seemingly from nowhere, but generated from a lifetime of watching and noting.



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