



The Lost Children of Easttown

Children, autonomy, and loss



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I'd like to start occasionally bringing in new voices to my newsletter. So, the first one is Eve Ettinger. Eve is a writer I greatly admire, and we've been texting about Mare of Easttown and I asked her to write about it. What she sent me was a beautiful essay about children, trauma, and autonomy. I love how Eve uses this television show to explore and reflect back how we as a culture see and understand children. Warning: There are spoilers.



Kate Winslet plays Mare Sheehan, a detective who has to solve the case of a murdered girl. (Image via YouTube)

The various plots of *Mare of Easttown* all turn on the children of the show. Kate Winslet is their irascible guardian angel, part avenging spirit, part Pennsylvanian Madonna-esque grandmother, springing to action when terror strikes their lives. She cannot protect all the children, and this fact is her personal nightmare. The horrors of the show are perpetrated by the adults, their choices often made as if there is no one else in the world but themselves. But the terrifying thing is that none of these people are responsible solely for themselves: at every turn, we see a choice made out of self-directed grief or anger, leaving a child alone, screaming, crying, or trapped. The children are unable to escape, and the adults responsible drag the children along with them into the darkness of the repressed beyond.

The murder to be solved is that of Erin, barely an adult herself, and the story centers on her story, not her son, DJ, who is the driving reason for much of the action in the show. The murderer (spoilers ahead) is revealed to be another child on the show, who barely shows up before the final episode. Mare's budding romance with an out-of-towner gets more screen time than this boy does. This child is reduced to an unknowable force needing restraint, while the adults in his life are given nuance and complex motivations and lots

and lots of moments with the camera where we are reminded that they are troubled souls. The child-murderer doesn't get this luxury. He's a device for the plot, not an actual autonomous character.

When I was a child, I lived an existence of injustice-fueled rage: adults not only didn't understand me and the needs of other children, but they deliberately demeaned us and refused to listen when we offered our perspectives. We had voices, we were telling them what we needed, and they patted us on the head and told us we didn't understand, we were so precious, please just be quiet. I still haven't forgiven them. The adults in our world had the ability to protect us and remember that being a child means being trapped and helpless so much of the time, and they refused to be bothered with stepping outside of their own, much more significant, perspectives.

The way children are portrayed in much of today's media and used as political pawns is what I meant when I said to myself as a child that adults don't remember what it's like to be a kid. The writers of *Mare* thought it clever and surprising to have a child be the murderer. But the children in this show just exist for the adults to understand themselves better, for them to grow or regress as humans.

As a child, I was raised to understand that my existence was to continue my parents' Christian fundamentalist legacy. The reality of me as an autonomous being was a threat to my father's understanding of himself and drove a wedge between us—as soon as I began forming thoughts and beliefs that he didn't curate in my mind, I was dangerous and needed to be controlled. We don't speak anymore. This is an extreme example of a pretty common thing, though. Parents have children for all sorts of reasons, but our society treats parenthood as a self-fulfillment exercise, and the character of the parent is reflected by how the child turns out. There is, of course, responsibility on the parent for their child's development, but kids are beings with free will, too. One of my friends who is parenting after a similar childhood to mine regularly says, "I may not like who my kid turns out to be, but my job is to nurture them and care for them, so they can be their full selves when I'm done."

I was watching *Mare* at the same time as I was reading Ashley C. Ford's debut memoir, *Somebody's Daughter*, for an interview for *The Rumpus*. The remarkable thing about how Ford tells her story (a childhood with an abusive single mom and an incarcerated father) is that she centers her narrative voice

firmly in her child's perspective and does not allow her adult self to interfere or mediate the experiences or observations of the child Ashley. I loved this so much. It's an unusual choice—I think I've only seen it done before in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. Both these books take the voice and perspective of a child seriously, giving legitimacy to the emotions and experiences of their child selves as a way of shrugging off the projections of adults in their communities that would ultimately restrict and stunt their self-exploration journeys.

Our children are our future, we tell ourselves as a society. They are what we do it all for; we must protect them at all costs. Conspiracy-theory-fueled crusades are waged in the name of their innocence, and adults refuse each other humanity under the guise of preserving that of children—but they are little more than pawns in our adult games. And the outcome is almost always to further reduce the likelihood that we might see the world from the eyes of a child and remember that they have the least ability to protect themselves and the least legally codified rights of almost any group of people in our society.

Today, as we watch state after state announce their reopening plans, I cringe. The pandemic isn't over. Adults are getting vaccinated, but children are still not (or not those under 12 or so, depending on the state). The politicization of mask-wearing and vaccine distribution has been a fight among adults, but the consequences of it are going to weigh on the children longest, and they have no say in the conversation or policymaking. They are the ones having to return to school in masks, the ones who are left exposed to the virus in a non-lockdown state when the adults are running around carrying on with life as usual and bringing their non-vaccinated children into potentially risky exposure situations. They are the ones who will bear the biggest mental health costs of the pandemic, as my friends who have had pandemic babies have already begun to experience, their toddlers melting down with sensory overload from going grocery shopping, freaking out when they meet another child for the first time in their lives at 14 months, and so on.

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As I finished the finale of *Mare*, I kept thinking about how different the show would have been if the children had been given any kind of agency as characters, if we had gotten a glimpse at their points of view at various points along the way. I think if we had, the ending where Ryan gives an extremely adult confession to Mare would have worked better, would have rung true. As it was, viewers complained that it felt stilted, too adult, too out of the blue. But kids can and do talk like that—and if we had been given the time to see him as more than a plot device, we would have probably accepted that speech as genuine.

The same goes for all children. When we assume they have no autonomy and disregard their opinions and perspectives and experiences, we are shocked when they tell us what they see and what they need and are more prone to dismiss these moments as an anomaly. But this sets us up for abused children not being believed, for future adults with attachment issues, for bullshit circular conversations about entitled millennials and snowflake Gen Z, for a society that disregards its future as not worth being listened to until it's too late (see: student loans and the gig economy, for one).

I can't stop thinking about how much Mare's handling of childhood and children's voices is indicative of our broader common assumptions about what it means to be a child. How different would our society be if we just listened to kids and took their whole humanity seriously?

Eve Ettinger is a writer and educator in southwest Virginia.

Further Reading:

[This is a wonderful essay about Mare of Easttown, hair, beauty, and class.](#)

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