



# THE WITNESS AND THE SUFFERER

In McIntosh Polela's memoir, *My Father My Monster*, which deals with the trauma of a childhood shaped by the murder of his mother at the hands of his father, the current Hawks spokesman and former television journalist writes about domestic abuse, familial shame and, eventually, forgiveness. The account of his years of unawareness of his mother's murder, his rebellious adolescence and his creation of a makeshift gun specially designed to kill his father show the confident and articulate public persona as starkly vulnerable. The following conversation is adapted from a Franschhoek Literary Festival panel discussion entitled "The Rise and Rise of True Crime".

BY MARGIE ORFORD

**Margie Orford:** *My Father My Monster* is a deeply intimate account of the ongoing trauma that results from the loss of one life. What was unique to me about your book was how familiarly you write about dealing with perhaps one of the most dramatic events possible: the loss, in effect, of two parents at once because one killed the other. What was the thing that started you on telling that painful story?

**McIntosh Polela:** What started it was realising that I had spent my entire life running away from myself. When I was growing up, for example, I never expected to go very far in life. I had rebelled in my youth and got shot at several times. I was convinced back then that I was not going to make the age of 18, and even 20 was a bit of a stretch.

But when I came back from England, having completed a Master's degree at the London School of Economics, and had secured a beautiful job as a senior reporter at e.tv, I still wasn't happy, even though I had achieved everything I had wanted to. I started to do a bit of soul searching.

I wanted to face my pain. I had simply run out of room to run to, so I had to become five years old again and grow up and experience all the pain again. By going through that experience, I hoped that I was going to find some release, and that I was going to find closure.

**MO:** Nobody told you the truth about what happened to your mother until you were 11 years old. What was that silence about?

**MP:** I only was able to unravel why there was a silence about my mother's murder in 2008 when I started to write my book. When I told my family I was writing the book, my mother's sister said she

wanted to talk to me. When I got to her house she told me that she never said anything to me because she felt it was going to be too painful for me, and that I was not going to be able to deal with it.

I only found out when I was 11 years old when I was with my uncles, who were drinking and talking about my mom in the past tense. For the first time then they said to me, "Your father is a monster. He killed our sister and if we ever encounter him again, we are going to kill him."

It was a very traumatic experience for me to find out the way that I found out, but from then on, there was total silence from my family. The only time I was able to get the information about the murder that I needed was when I spoke to the people who were acquainted with my mom before she died, and that was only while I was writing my book.

**MO:** You talk so much in your book about your life as a boy, about how you were abused by your unbelievably heartless relatives, and also about how you were made to be complicit in your sister's abuse when she was three years old and you were five. Many people have said to me that your story is also the story of their childhoods. For me as a fiction writer, I think that's where there's no difference between fiction and non-fiction: by reflecting a particularly painful story back to people, especially when it's told with authenticity and feeling, it holds up a mirror to people which they can use to reflect healing to themselves.

What struck me even more than that, however, was that what your father did to your mother – and to you and your sister, by extension – was enabled by the community in which he lived. Everyone seemed to be appalled by his behaviour, and were

traumatised by it, but there seemed to be no sanctions placed on him for, say, beating your stepmother. It is almost as though you and your extended family absorbed his terrible behaviour as your own personal shame, or your own fault. Why do you think that people who are violated absorb the violence as shame and keep that violation as a secret?

**MP:** I think that, because I wasn't told what had happened by my family while I was growing up, they themselves started to shy away from talking about the violence. As a result of that, they retreated to themselves. And when you retreat to your own thoughts, it becomes a shame that's yours alone.

That is how we were raised. We never spoke to adults in our family other than responding to them when they were telling something to do. As a result of that, we did not develop a habit of asking questions, and when you do not have that habit, you cannot investigate the shame you're seeking to solve inside you.

I think that happens in a lot of communities. They witness and they suffer, because there is no habit of asking questions and sharing information. But what I found when I approached my aunt and my father to gather information about my mother was that they suddenly felt liberated when they talked.

I also remember that when my sister and I went to report to our grandmothers that we were going to see our father, they suddenly told us this story of the pain they felt at losing my mother. For the first time, in 2008, 26 years after this all happened, they told us about every detail.

I just didn't understand why nobody said anything before, because it meant that as young as I was, at five years old, I had to carry the burden of looking after my sister, and of trying to protect her from abuse. When I failed to do so, and when I couldn't talk to anyone, I started to hate myself.

You carry those feelings forever, until you think to yourself: why did it have to take me to talk about this first for anybody to say something, and for this liberation to start?