

THE CULTURE

Violence of the lambs

Polyglot polymath and scholar Barbara Oakley takes a incisive look at the cult of the victim. Matthew Reisz reports

When the *National Enquirer* reported on a Utah trial in April 2007 under the lurid headline “Woman Marries for Love – THEN KILLS FOR SURVIVAL”, it seemed to be exactly what Barbara Oakley was looking for.

She had gone straight from high school into the US Army, took a degree in Slavic languages and literature and then completed her service as a signal officer. Although she had always enjoyed learning languages as a way of seeing the world through new eyes, Oakley recalls, she came to the realisation that “there was nothing more alien to my personality than being an engineer. If I really wanted to have a fresh perspective, that was the thing to do.”

She therefore embarked on an engineering degree that was twice interrupted by six-month stints as a translator on a Russian trawler, “to drink and party and all that kind of stuff. I didn’t really need the money, I just wanted to do it for the adventure and it gave my mind a break from the engineering.” Yet this early exposure to Soviet Communism, “a seemingly beneficent system which masked real horrors”, left a deep mark on her subsequent thinking. She spent another few months as a radio operator at the South Pole.

After completing her degree, Oakley worked in industry before returning to the academy for a master’s and a PhD. She was offered a job at Oakland University in Michigan, where she is now associate professor of engineering. Although she specialises in electrical engineering, she also teaches mechanical engineering, thermodynamics and statistics for engineers, as well as a more general course entitled *How Things Work*, “because there are students who know all about esoteric poets but don’t know how their refrigerator or car works”.

A similar spirit of taking things apart to find out how they work informs Oakley’s book on the genetic elements of psychopathy, published in 2007 under the striking title of *Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother’s Boyfriend*. By then, she was also beginning to reflect on the issues explored in the forthcoming volume *Pathological Altruism* (which she co-edited with Ariel Knafo,



Trade-off Oakley became an engineer precisely because it was ‘alien’ to her personality

Guruprasad Madhavan and David Sloan Wilson), covering everything from Western aid to the Third World to eating disorders and suicide bombers.

Yet Oakley also wanted to write a more popular book on the same theme and needed a striking example of “someone good who was hurt because of her altruism. The *National Enquirer* piece referred to Carole Alden’s trial and showed pictures of her in the court room, as she described how [her husband] Marty Sessions had abused her. I went into it believing she was innocent and a good person – I was really tired of writing about nasty, horrible people.”

After a long correspondence with Alden, who was ultimately convicted of manslaughter for her husband’s shooting, Oakley “decided to go out and see her in Utah to truly investigate. When I interviewed her in prison, I came out and said: ‘Oh my word, nothing is as it seems.’”

After an extensive investigation into the case, Oakley paints a decidedly unflattering portrait of Alden, which is strongly contested by Alden and her daughters. The results have now been published under another flamboyant title: *Cold-blooded Kindness: Neuroquirks of a Codependent Killer, or Just Give Me a Shot at Loving You, Dear, and Other Reflections on Helping That Hurts*.

Alden, who was charismatic and strikingly talented as an artist, was obsessed with taking in stray animals. She once received some pet emus as a gift after giving an interview claiming her daughter had breast cancer. Another memorable vignette reported by Oakley has her “swapping sexual innuendos

on the telephone while ordering lizards from a pet store owner in Cleveland”.

On one level, *Cold-blooded Kindness* is a gripping true-crime story, told in bright primary colours with many digressions about the decency of local law-enforcement officers and lawyers. Oakley reconstructs the scene in the pre-trial “war room”, where the prosecution team carefully sift through the

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evidence: the psychological report, the purchase of the gun, Alden’s different accounts of the events and the ballistic details of Sessions’ corpse. She provides photographs of the “pure, unmitigated chaos” of the marital home, with “over three hundred reptiles” and “rows of ceramic lizards and frogs”. And she describes the highly explicit drawings and emails that seem to testify to Alden’s deep interest in sadomasochism (and might explain the ways her body had undoubtedly been pierced and bruised).

Alongside Oakley’s interpretation of the specific case, both *Cold-blooded Kindness* and *Pathological Altruism* are also polemics designed to challenge what Oakley sees as conventional wisdom about codependency, compassion and the cult of the victim.

“I have come to believe,” she explains,

“that, for my fellow liberals, empathy, altruism and caring for others have become a kind of secular religion that is actually harmful, because it can be used as a cover for nefarious, corrupt and self-serving action. People can be blinded by their caring into doing things that hurt those they hope to help.” Like communism, altruism is often only “seemingly beneficent”.

Such speculations may seem a long way from electrical engineering, but Oakley believes that “my background is the only reason I can write my books, because engineers are taught to think in terms of trade-offs. Even altruism involves trade-offs, so I’m applying engineering thinking to what I feel are fundamentally important issues.”

Scholars in other disciplines, she observes, often have difficulty in accepting that there might be a downside to “the world of happy helping” and she cites cases of people cutting her dead as soon as they heard the title of the co-edited volume *Pathological Altruism*.

Herself almost heroically self-reliant, Oakley is caring enough to have adopted two refugee boys from Kosovo and claims to be “the most sympathetic person in the world to real victims”, yet she feels “deeply upset by people who assume the mantle of victimhood and besmirch it for the real victims”.

More concretely and controversially, Oakley suggests that we hear rather too much about the self-serving nature of corporations, given that “many other organisations behave in precisely the same way.

“Feminism can be thought of as like a corporation. It’s interested in its constituents. Well-meaning feminists are often trained only to see a certain way, only to support their constituents. That is partly what underlies the spurious research on battered-woman syndrome. Anyone who questions whether battered women are only simple victims is put in the pillory and crucified.

“There are young, inexperienced women who fall in love with a man and are put in a battering situation, but there is nothing wrong with them more than simple bad luck. That’s absolutely possible and my heart goes out to them. But there’s also a sizeable group – perhaps 40 to 50 per cent of battered women – who are themselves as much involved in the battering as the man. That simply isn’t discussed; it’s considered to be ‘blaming the victim’. But in fact it’s being more perceptive about the difference between real victims and those who portray themselves as victims.

“We need to take off the ideological blinders if we are to forge the intelligent interventions that can make a dramatic difference in these women’s lives. We need more scientifically based research in this area to help tease out what is actually going on.”

Barbara Oakley’s *Cold-blooded Kindness* was recently published by Prometheus Books. *Pathological Altruism*, which she co-edited, will be published by Oxford University Press in November 2011.



Charismatic Carole Alden’s case is at the heart of Oakley’s thesis