

SUZANNE BERNE A CRIME IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD 1997

Winner of women's prize for fiction 1999

What a horrible little bitch! The type of neighbour one does not need. The crime in the suburb is the murder of Boyd Ellison, but the other worse crime is the denigration of the single man next door. The denigration and destruction of his life and reputation is the worst crime as it will last for the rest of his life. The real crime is also the marriage destruction of Marsha's parents, which leave their children as the real "criminals", her brother becomes a thief, her sister becomes a cheap whore and Marsha is psychologically damaged and turned into a sociopath with the aim to hurt someone as badly as she was hurt. The reader gets the feeling that her sociopathic behaviour will be with her for the rest of her life exuding menace and horror on other people around her.

**This ambitious account of a sudden coming of age reminded me strongly of *To Kill a Mockingbird***

In the long hot summer of 1972, three events shattered the serenity of ten-year-old Marsha's life

her father ran away with her mother's sister;

a young boy called Boyd Ellison was molested and murdered;

and Watergate made the headlines

Living in a world no longer safe or familiar, Marsha turns increasingly to 'the book of evidence' in which she records the doings of the neighbors

, especially the shy Mr Green next door.

But as Marsha's confusion and her murder hunt accelerate,  
her 'facts' spread the damage cruelly  
and catastrophically  
throughout the neighborhood.

**'It is impossible not to be completely swept along. Berne's vision is gently humorous, ironic, quirky, and she writes with such piercing sensitivity . . .**

*During the summer of 1973, as the Watergate story breaks, headlines are made in a D.C. suburb when a 12-year-old boy is molested and murdered behind an area strip mall.*

*Not as widely reported is the divorce of ten-year-old Marsha's parents.*

*Narrated by Marsha, this first novel maintains a nicely edgy quality*

*as the family breaks up: Marsha's father moves out,*

*her teenage siblings dabble in smoking and shoplifting*

*, and her mother deals with the stresses of single parenthood*

*in the relatively unliberated Seventies.*

*When the boy's murder remains unsolved, and the neighborhood loses its sense of security and innocence,*

*Marsha copes by keeping a minutely detailed journal whose obsessive details threaten to mire the story.*

*1972 was a year rife with issues*

*Watergate was at full throttle, 'Tricky Dick' as Nixon was known, was in the midst of his worst year, as was our protagonist, 9 year old Marsha.*

*We learn at the outset that a 12 year old boy from Marsha's school was attacked, raped and murdered and left in a wooded area at the back of a Mall.*

*As the story is told from Marsha's viewpoint, we learn a great deal.*

*She is quite observant and since this event occurred just before summer vacation, she had a lot of time to observe.*

*At the same time, Marsha's father, Larry left the family with Ada, Marsha's mother's sister.*

*What a mess, mom left with three children while her husband traipses around the country. We have the family agony, the murder of the young boy, and then we have Marsha, the nosey, sarcastic young girl with a great imagination. Marsha has been abandoned by her father, and she and her family are left to pick up the pieces and deal with their emotions.*

*Marsha makes a big mistake that causes harm to others, but she must continue. A young girl on the brink of becoming a teenager, trying to deal on her own, worried about her mother, her father, their lives, what is she to do.*

*This is a coming of age story told by Marsha that has much detail, and it is riveting at times. The author is exacting, and such a well written book that reveals a lot about our times.*

*This story is a brilliant exploration of what happens when the ordinary meets the extraordinary. We follow the effects that the murder of a young boy has on the local neighbourhood and its inhabitants as observed by our narrator, Marsha, a young girl stuck at home with a broken ankle. Alongside Marsha's attempts to make sense of the murder and work out who did it, we see her dealing with the complexities of her family's problems. For a relatively short book there is a lot to discuss and get stuck into here. I liked the fact this book was not trying to be a thriller type murder mystery but was more of a character study into the different ways people react and deal with horrific events that impact their lives. Also the fact that sociopathy is not always the obvious "criminal" behaviour but behaviour just as destructive to the surrounding society.*