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Baby Reindeer Review: The Interwoven Psyches of a “Stalker” and Her Prey

Developed by Richard Gadd. A Clerkenwell Films Production. Netflix. All seven episodes aired on April 11, 2024.

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The British dark comedy miniseries, *Baby Reindeer*, begins with a nervous young man at the police station confessing that he has a stalker who is a woman. The dubious police officer asks for evidence. The officer then asks the earnest victim, “How long has this been going on for?” Donny, played by Richard Gadd, replies, “I don’t know, like six months, maybe?” The confused officer then asks the obvious question, “Why did it take you so long to report it?” And then typewriter style words come on the screen, “This is a true story.” Donny narrates and dramatizes a version of his own personal story. While struggling to make it as a comedian, he works as a bartender in a pub and meets his “stalker.”

Donny confesses to the audience that the first feeling he had for Martha was that he felt sorry for her. He had insight that it was “patronizing” and “arrogant” to feel sorry for someone he had only seen for the first time. Martha, played by Jessica Gunning, is a heavy-set woman wearing unflattering clothes who cannot afford a cup of tea but brags incessantly that she is a high-powered attorney with her own practice, celebrity clients, and numerous friends.

Donny had been feeling demoralized as a person and a comedian as he consistently failed to get laughs and his career had not yet taken off. So when Martha begins showering him with attention and interest, he welcomes it at first. Donny finds her amusing. She talks about herself and then complements how

“manly” she thinks he is and describes in detail what she likes about his body. Through the levity of Martha’s ridiculous appearance and laugh, there is a foreboding feeling that something catastrophic is going to happen.

The story is told from Donny’s point of view, revealing in his narrative that he has thought about why and how he became so entangled with Martha. His friends notice his friendship with Martha and decide it would be hilarious to pretend that Donny fancied Martha. He makes a vaguely sexual joke to get out of the awkward scene, but Martha takes it seriously and believes that Donny is romantically interested in her. She starts emailing him multiple times per day and the tone of the emails becomes overtly sexual. She also begins calling him multiple nicknames, including “baby reindeer.”

From the first episode, Martha begins to have outbursts that are disconcerting to both Donny and the viewer. Donny knows that she is not who she says she is, but he eventually follows her home and discovers she lives in a depressing, cluttered, dirty motel room with her computer and not in the furnished penthouse that she bragged about buying while in the pub.

Martha discovers around this time that Donny’s career as a comedian is not going well. She comes to one of his shows and actually makes him look good at her own expense. Donny feebly attempts to make it clear that he is not interested in her romantically, but she does not take “no” for an answer and keeps upping the ante. She also listens to Donny and seems to understand him, and he enjoys it. Martha struggles with identity, and so does Donny. She tells Donny that she wishes she could unzip people and crawl inside of them. At the end of the first episode, Donny decides to perform a Google search on Martha and discovers she has had a long history of stalking men, including her boss, and even served a four-year prison sentence. While he is reading about her, Martha sends him a Facebook friend request. While accepting the friend request, he repeats over and over, “I had a convicted stalker stalking me.”

The viewer realizes that this story is about the pathology of both the narrator and the fictional character of Martha (see below). Donny lives with his ex-girlfriend’s mother after he and his girlfriend broke up and she moved out. He gradually reveals that he has been a struggling comedian and writer for some time. Five years prior, while performing in Edinburgh’s

Fringe Festival, he met an older television writer, Darien, who complimented his show and gave him pointers, promising him fame and fortune. Over time, Darien kept upping the ante, giving Donny unpaid writing assignments, plying him with drugs and alcohol, and taking advantage of him sexually, ultimately raping him. Donny stayed in this toxic relationship for a while before finally breaking away from his abuser. He struggles with his sexual orientation and his self-esteem and carries a lot of shame.

In present day, Donny hides his identity and meets a transwoman, Teri, online who he likes and eventually loves but who he keeps hidden from the people in his life. He later tearfully admits to an audience of strangers that he messed up his relationship with Teri because, "I hated myself so much more than I loved her. And I loved her so very much." The viewer later learns that Martha was stalking Donny the entire time that he was dating Teri, emailing him 41,000 times, texting him repeatedly, and leaving him numerous voicemails per day, well after the stalking had already escalated to violence.

Donny reports to a police officer that he is being stalked by a woman but is met with skepticism. This experience is consistent with the literature that victims of female stalkers are often not taken seriously, although rates of violence are similar in stalkers regardless of gender.¹ Strand and McEwan found that female stalkers were found to be more likely than men to use written communication to stalk, also consistent with Martha's numerous emails and letters.¹

Donny's ex-girlfriend, Keeley, confronts Donny as Martha begins to stalk her as well on Facebook, and when Donny explains the situation he is in with Martha, she blames Donny, telling him, "You love drama." His girlfriend, Teri, also confronts Donny for encouraging Martha's behavior for his own personal gratification.

The problem with this Netflix "true story" is that, after the show aired, sleuths found the "real Martha," Fiona Harvey, a lawyer who claims that the character of Martha is pure fiction. In an interview with the controversial Piers Morgan,² Ms. Harvey said the only true things are that she met Richard Gadd where he bartended, but only "twice or three times"; that she is Scottish; and that she had a toy that was a baby reindeer, which became the story behind Martha's titular nickname for Donny. Fiona Harvey told Piers Morgan that she feels that Richard Gadd and Netflix defamed her. She said that she has never

been charged with anything, let alone convicted. She said that she may have sent Richard ten emails, not 41,000. She admitted to sending him a few tweets and writing Gadd one letter, but not the 106 depicted in the series. She said she never knew where Richard Gadd lived and had never been to his house. In the interview with Piers Morgan,² she admitted she did not see the show. At the end of the interview, she said that she may have met Richard Gadd five or six times, amending the "two or three times" she had originally stated.

In an article, Richard Gadd was quoted as saying of the miniseries, "It's very emotionally true, obviously; I was severely stalked and severely abused. But we wanted it to exist in the sphere of art, as well as protect the people it's based on."³

Whether the story is true, exaggerated, or pure fiction, *Baby Reindeer* has become extremely popular, in part because of its relatability and realistic tones. Donny's shame and self-loathing is palpable. There is very little research on male victims of sexual assault. In a 2012 article on the topic, most of the references were from the 1990s. The article indicated that male sexual assault survivors are unlikely to report their assault and, even if they do, are unlikely to seek treatment. The authors found that, of men who do report sexual assault, those who reported penetration were less likely to seek counseling.⁴

Jessica Gunning does a brilliant job portraying Martha as a complex character who is tragic and worthy of pity and occasionally empathy but also scary, bordering on Kathy Bates's character from Stephen King's *Misery*. The portrayal of the female stalker, Martha, in *Baby Reindeer* vastly differs from the portrayal of the male stalker, Joe Goldberg (another fictional stalker), in the Netflix series *You*, based on the novel by Caroline Kepnes.^{5,6} Joe Goldberg stalks and murders numerous people in the series *You*, but because he is physically attractive, charming, and is able to demonstrate prosocial behavior, his character is perhaps more likeable yet far more dangerous than Martha.

In a CNN article, a forensic psychologist who was interviewed suggested that media portrayals of stalkers are often overdramatized. The psychologist further described that the stalker characters in these shows are prone to violence, whereas in real-life, often there are more subtle forms of stalking that would not make for compelling drama. She argued that exaggerated media portrayals could be detrimental for people who

are being stalked, as they may not recognize it as stalking if the behavior does not rise to the level of a Martha or a Joe.⁶ In contrast, a BBC article entitled “I Was Stalked Like in *Baby Reindeer*,” Lindsey Goldrick Dean found the show relatable and very similar to her situation where she was stalked for 12 years by a man who she met online in 2004.⁷

There are still many misconceptions about what constitutes the crime of stalking, which only became illegal in California in 1990 and since then in all 50 states.⁶ In the U.K., stalking was defined in 2010 and amended as an offense under the anti-harassment laws enacted in 1997.^{6,8} Under the metropolitan police website, stalking is defined as:

Stalking is a form of harassment, but the stalker will have an obsession with the person they're targeting and their repeated, unwanted behaviour can make the victim feel distressed or scared.

Stalking may include:

- following someone
- going uninvited to their home
- hanging around somewhere they know the person often visits
- watching or spying on someone
- identity theft (signing-up to services, buying things in someone's name)
- writing or posting online about someone if it's unwanted or the person doesn't know

It's stalking if the unwanted behaviour has happened two times or more and made you feel scared, distressed or threatened.⁹

Because of the similarities in Donny and Martha's psychopathologies, it is difficult for Donny to report Martha and to let go of her. He makes sense of his grooming and rape by Darrien and the stalking

by Martha through his comedy and writing, and Richard Gadd does the same with *Baby Reindeer*. The theme of stalking, the psychopathology of the characters, and the brilliant writing in this miniseries will be of interest to many forensic psychiatrists.

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