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Review of the Miniseries and Novel, *Under the Bridge*

Novel by Rebecca Godfrey. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009. 500 pp. \$11.49 Kindle edition.

Miniseries developed by Quinn Shephard. A Best Day Ever Productions and ABC Signature production. Hulu. Eight episodes released April 17, 2024–May 29, 2024.

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Hulu's *Under the Bridge* is a true crime miniseries based on a real case and the novel with the same name by Rebecca Godfrey. It has earned acclaim, garnering an Emmy nomination for Lily Gladstone's performance as Officer Cam Bentland. Both the show and the novel portray several themes relevant to forensic psychiatry, including adolescent conduct disorder, trauma, and inherent racial biases within the legal system.

The series is set in 1997 and primarily follows the writer, Rebecca Godfrey (played by Riley Keough), as she returns after a long absence to her hometown of Saanich, British Columbia, Canada. Rebecca is haunted by her past after her brother drowned in their local lake as a teenager. To deal with her past, she returns from New York City to write about the kids in her town. Just as Rebecca returns, the town becomes consumed with the disappearance of Reena Virk (played by Vritika Gupta), the child of an Indian-Canadian Jehovah's Witness immigrant. Her body is eventually found in the lake in Saanich, placing many of the peers last seen with her under suspicion for her murder.

The narrative begins to follow the timeline leading up to Reena's disappearance, including examples of her teenage rebellion and attempts to make friends with a group of popular girls. Reena tries to befriend a clique of girls that call themselves the CMC ("Crip Mafia Cartel"), as they idolize gangs. This clique embodies everything that is counter to Reena's family values, including listening to rap music, attending drinking parties, and a level of freedom that she does not feel that she experiences at home. Most of the CMC girls reside in the Seven Oaks Youth Home and have a history of disrupted attachments and trauma. Research has shown that there is a higher burden of trauma in youths residing in residential care and this is correlated with emotional troubles, self-harm, and conduct disordered behaviors.¹ Trauma-informed and high-quality residential care is suggested for better outcomes for these youths.¹

Reena does not easily fit in with the CMC clique and feels the need to prove herself to fit in. Reena is not accepted by the leader of the group, Josephine Bell (played by Chloe Guidry), and Josephine's closest ally, Kelly (played by Isabella Gaspersz), as they are not open to newcomers. Dusty (played by Aiyana Goodfellow) is on the outskirts of the group and finds kinship with Reena, as both relate to being ostracized.

Following Reena's death, Rebecca uses her investigative journalism skills to interview and get close to the teenagers in Reena's social circle. When Rebecca returned to her hometown, she reunited with her former female friend and local law enforcement officer, Cam (played by Lily Gladstone). Cam also grew up in Seven Oaks until she was adopted by a local police family who she now works with. Through Reena's murder investigation, curiosity about her own past is ignited and Cam finds out she was forcefully taken off the reservation to live with a white family. Race and family history of immigration play heavily in the narrative and is highlighted in the treatment of minorities within Reena's social circle and the judicial system in Canada. The fictional character of Cam Bentland was in part created to comment on the violence within the legal system and Canadian history.² Writers gave Lily Gladstone the freedom to deepen Cam's backstory, and she made Cam a part of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation.³

Through the investigation and learning more about her past, Cam becomes increasingly disillusioned with the police force and judicial system. She

struggles to grapple with the violence and lies in addition to watching Warren Glowatski, a Native American (played by Javon “Wanna” Walton), become the sole suspect of all the peers in the group.

Warren is friends with the CMC girls but is also a part of the local Crip gang. He does not have stable housing and is supporting himself after his father moved away with a new partner. He represents a typical profile of a youth who interacts with multiple systems, including child protective services and juvenile justice systems. Godfrey’s connection and portrayal of Warren showed a strong connection between the two systems. Some of Godfrey’s unresolved feelings surrounding the death of her brother are projected onto her relationship with Warren, who is heavily featured in the novel. Godfrey writes, “Warren tried hard to please the Crips, selling a little weed on the side and acting the tough badass around Erik and those guys so they would like him. And sometimes he felt like he was living a double life, but not a false life, since the innocent schoolboy and the badass were both true and part of him” (Ref. 4, pp 60–1).

The show explores how important social acceptance is to teenage girls. When Reena was alive, she tried everything to become part of CMC, including inviting the girls over to her house, adopting their music choices, purchasing CDs for them, and becoming defiant against her parents. As Reena’s family becomes increasingly concerned about these girls and their influence on Reena, they try to forbid Reena from seeing the girls. Reena eventually makes a false accusation against her father to be removed from her home and live at Seven Oaks with the other girls. Despite her desperate attempts to get the girls to like her, she is rejected anyway, and she acts out against Josephine in anger, which starts a chain of events, leading to her murder.

The miniseries departs from Godfrey’s book by taking information from additional source material, such as the book by Manjit Virk, Reena’s father, *Reena: A Father’s Story*,⁵ allowing for an empathetic and deeper portrayal of Reena Virk.^{2,3} This information was not readily accessible in Rebeca Godfrey’s novel, given the timing of her information gathering and focus on Warren. The additional sources allow for a more panoramic view of the characters and story. The portrayal of this case is less sensational and provides a multidimensional look at the players while also honoring the victim, Reena Virk.

Rebecca reveals the role of race, gender, and socioeconomic status as she investigates the case. Warren is the initial prime suspect, and Rebecca finds him to be trustworthy in his accounts of the night in question, and she feels empathy for him, putting her at odds with the Virk family. In contrast to Warren with Métis heritage,⁶ Kelly came from a wealthy background, is white, and is female. Warren receives life in prison despite having a presumed lesser role and showing significant remorse, whereas Kelly, the instigator, receives five years despite showing callous, antisocial traits and no remorse. The showrunner stated, “Exhibiting a bit of mercy isn’t ever going to make the horror go away, but might allow movement toward a better place” (Ref. 2, third paragraph).

Kelly, a teenage girl, is not seen as psychopathic, which is consistent with the literature on gender bias, showing that clinicians often miss psychopathic traits in females.⁷ The review of Netflix’s *Inventing Anna* and Hulu’s *The Dropout*, portraying Elizabeth Holmes, pointed out this gender bias,⁸ and this bias has also been seen in many fictional shows depicting women and girls with manipulative and violent tendencies.⁹

The series also explores the complexities of grieving a loved one who was murdered and managing the legal system as a grieving parent. Suman (Archie Panjabi), Reena’s mom, visits Warren in jail, extending him radical forgiveness. Suman becomes a centerpiece in the series in showing the profound grief of losing her daughter, her strides to surface with some peace, and her strong narrative regarding racism and prejudice in the community. Her relationship with Rebecca reveals some of the ethics problems of using the sensationalist true crime genre to tell stories of pain and grief. In light of the themes of juvenile justice and childhood trauma in both the novel and the miniseries, *Under the Bridge* will likely be of interest to both forensic and child psychiatrists.

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