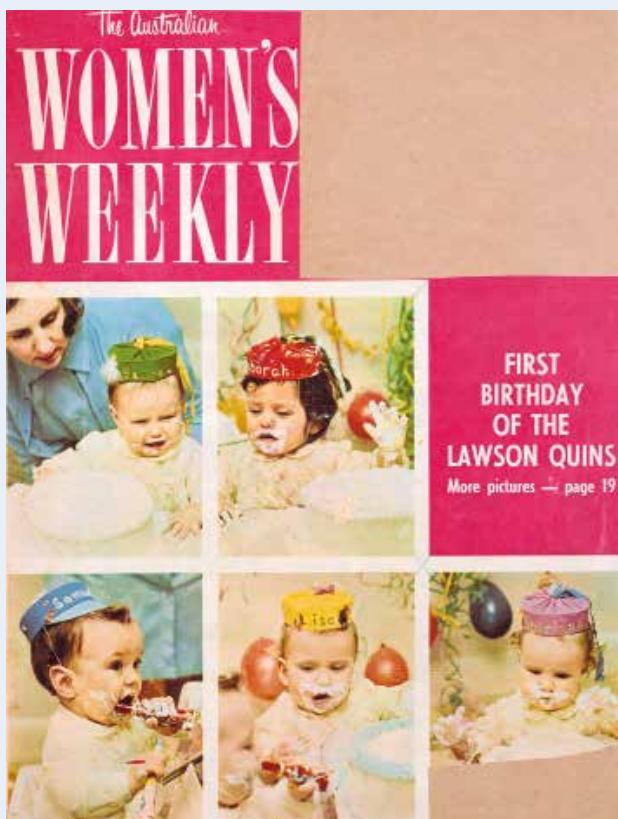


► REVIEW

new zealand books by paul little



The quins at their big sister Leeann's 2003 wedding. Pictured from left: Deborah, Lisa, Leeann, Samuel, Shirlene and Selina.



NOTES & QUERIES

In his new book *Stolen Lives: The Untold Stories of the Lawson Quins* (Paul Little Books, \$34.99), Paul Little details the lives of the five from their celebrity status as babies through to the abuse inflicted by their stepfather Gary Eyton, his murder of their mother Ann, how they dealt with their demons, and where they are now at age 50.

SARAH LANG: Why should people who've seen the 1997 documentary [*The Five of Us: The Life of the Lawson Quins*] read this book?

PAUL LITTLE: It covers more and in more detail, from big things through to little things, like their father Sam going to Hollywood to try to be a movie star, and their lives as babies.

SL: Were you old enough to remember the national fanfare when they were born?

PL: I was eight and remember it very clearly. I remember that parents and pregnant women reacted not quite with horror, but with "thank God that isn't me". And, bizarrely, I remember seeing their older sister Leeann once on the beach at Orewa.

SL: How did the book begin?

PL: It was Selina's idea. She went to the

documentary maker, Mark Everton, and he suggested me, so I met Selina on her own. From the background I knew there was a book in it, so I was keen right away. Deborah was keen too; the others not so much. But I met Lisa and Shirlene and made sure they didn't have an allergic reaction to me. They rang the others and said, "He could be worse."

SL: Did they do it to set the story straight once and for all?

PL: Yes. I could have talked to any number of people for different perspectives, but they wanted a book that told their story the way they saw it... something their kids and especially their grandchildren could read as time passes.

SL: At first, Samuel chose not to take part, then changed his mind, then never got back to you?

PL: Yeah, I was ghosted, like when Cameron Diaz



Gary Eyton and Ann Lawson on their wedding day.

broke up with Sean Penn.

SL: You mean Charlize Theron.

PL: Right, the “z” confused me. Anyway, I’m confident Samuel is a presence in the book. Half of it covers their lives up to age 16, when their mother died. Even those who remember the murder-suicide don’t understand the extent and the depravity of Gary’s techniques. It’s really important to me that readers are aware this still happens, despite progress with court orders and the police. There are still guys out there saying, “Come back to me or I’ll kill the kids.”

SL: Do you really think Gary planned to kill them all that night?

PL: Oh yeah. He had enough bullets. He’d been staking out the house the night before, and Ann was worried he was going to kill somebody. That night, she made Leeann come home from the pub after her, in another car.

SL: After the murder, the quins went through difficult things like violent relationships, drug and alcohol problems, and

depression. Do you think they all have or had post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]?

PL: I’m absolutely sure. It was a hell of a trauma and all their off-the-rails behaviour is classic PTSD. I don’t know if you ever get rid of PTSD, but they don’t have symptoms anymore.

SL: The title *Stolen Lives* clearly points to Gary’s effect on them, but are you also hinting that their lives were stolen by the national obsession with them?

PL: Just a little. I don’t want to emphasise it, because I don’t think they think that.

SL: Did you feel a responsibility to their having put trust in you?

PL: Absolutely. By the time I sat down with them, they’d already decided to tell me these things. But that [candour] still took me by surprise as a relative stranger. You go from stranger to close very quickly.

SL: What surprised you the most?

PL: Weirdly, being a parent, it was how enthusiastic Ann was about having five babies

at once. Ann’s letters from the hospital to her mother and family were the most wonderful documents to have. Someone’s dead but you feel like she’s there talking to you.

SL: You explain that Ann repeatedly tried to protect the kids and herself, even sending them to boarding school, moving towns and getting a non-molestation order, but the system failed her. Don’t you also write that the system couldn’t have done anything to stop Gary?

PL: A reasonably wise cop once told me that protection orders can’t guarantee somebody won’t get killed, but they do stop a certain number of people. You can’t stop someone like Gary who is hell-bent on it, but the cops could have done a much better job, rather than just trying to keep the family together.

SL: Who knew about Gary’s violent attacks on Ann?

PL: It’s hard to be entirely sure who knew what. Some neighbours and friends’ parents say they knew but didn’t know what to do; others say they had no idea.

SL: Was it important to you to be fair to Ann and the quins’ father, Sam [the couple legally separated in 1972], because they’re not alive to tell their side of the story?

PL: Absolutely, and not being related makes it easier to be reasonably objective.

SL: Were you surprised that Sam compiled detailed, negative reports about each of his adult children?

PL: That might have been the most surprising thing, actually. It’s a real

shame those documents were lost. I don’t want to get too “meta” about it, but maybe he was trying to make some sense of how things turned out.

SL: Are you amazed at how well the quins are doing now?

PL: Oh yeah. Many people would have used what happened as an excuse to stay off the rails. But they were determined to get control of and be proud of their lives. It’s taken them until now to get to an equilibrium, look back with some dispassion and say, “We actually made it.” That’s why it wouldn’t have been right to do a book any earlier.

SL: What do they think of the book?

PL: Deborah’s said she liked what I’ve done. Some of the others found it confronting to read, but felt comfortable by the end.

SL: What draws you to write about and often co-author books with people like Willie Apiata, Paul Henry, Ray Avery and Edmund Hillary?

PL: It’s amazing to get to tell such rich stories.

SL: And why did you set up Paul Little Books to publish your own and other books?

PL: Just standard-issue megalomania, really. And it’s fun.



Stolen Lives
The untold stories of the Lawson quins
by Paul Little