

NO EXPECTATIONS

If the reader is expecting a work where a public indictment is made or a plot against somebody is schemed, then this is not the right book to buy. When accepting the challenge posed by the editors, we immediately envisaged it only as a journalistic work, easy to read, without any literary, academic, police-related or erudite expectations. It is only the publication, in the form of a book, of a long journalistic work. Whether mediocre or sufficient, it is for the reader to assess, as we do every day with the material published in the media, when we earn our daily bread. Beyond doubt, as in any other journalistic work, nothing can stir us. And it is on doubt that we base our approach. Precisely because today the Maddie case still remains a strange and intricate mystery.

“What is extraordinary”, explains Ben Ando, reporter of the BBC, “is the time this story has been going round”. According to this crime expert, one of the factors which made this case significant worldwide, is the degree of uncertainty that its investigation put forward. The role that the internet played in spreading out Maddie’s images and her family’s to a global scale is another matter that Ben Ando underlines. The physical beauty of the McCann family is, for this journalist, of particular importance. So much so that Maddie has been classified as “tragically beautiful”. Different specialists within the media believe that Maddie’s case meets all the necessary requirements for keeping the public as interested as at the beginning.

It is clear right away that this is “just” about the disappearance of one child among many others, but “a British, beautiful blue-eyed child, who disappeared in a British tourist settlement, in Algarve, a holiday destination regarded as safe by people from her country is a theme that offers a range of media opportunities” says the renowned Brazilian advertising executive Edson Athayde. If they were a poor family, ugly, not white, in a third world country, the case would be already forgotten”. “It is a soap opera story, without a predictable end: there is always new data. The good ones, probably are mean. The mean ones, probably, are victims...they are feuilleton ingredients”, concludes the man who lead António Guterres to the Prime Minister seat.

Yet for University Professor Rui Cádima, when the McCann family became “the best self-advisors of their own, they trespassed the line of being the parents who lost trace of their child to become the advisors of parents who lost trace of their children”. Paulo Moura speaks about a MWCS (“Missing White Child Syndrome”). This journalist states that there is a scale for news importance. “Nobody would ever admit that this scale exists, although it is applied every day”. “In the middle, are the blond and young boys then brunette girls, and so on. Somehow like the scale in force for the number of deaths in catastrophes: an American citizen is worth a hundred Arabs, a thousand Chinese citizens, ten thousand African citizens”.

In fact, the scenario is Portuguese, but the child, her parents, friends, the hotel owners, some of the staff at the Ocean Club resort and even a good portion of the population of Praia da Luz, are not. As well as the retired policemen, private detectives, dogs and forensic tests, alleged to be “vital for the information”.

In the interpretation of Professor and Investigator Cristina Ponte, this case gathers all the necessary elements for a melodrama: a good-looking child, the victim, and a couple

with a fine image. It even has aspects which merge with the unconscious, like the figure of “the bogeyman” – as the man alleged to be seen by a witness, carrying a child wrapped in a blanket. The investigator understands that the campaign held by the parents has an undeniable significance, was very well prepared and included the intervention of football players and going out on the street with the child’s teddy bear...”

In order to understand how the disappearance of a child expanded into unprecedented dimensions, it may be necessary to consider the parent’s attitude and the media campaign around them. However, the connection of the McCann family to the British Government, not yet completely known, as well as the machinery they had at their disposal, could not be disregarded. Besides the four press advisors (one of them, the mythical Alex Woolfall, who managed to “banish” a scandal of genetic manipulation from the British media), Kate McCann’s uncle, Brian Kennedy, has played an important role as the couple’s spokesman.

This whole army of advisors is commanded by Clarence Mitchell, ex-journalist for the BBC and, until recently, Director of the Government’s Media Monitoring Unit at the Cabinet Office of the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Some regard him as a witty man, some as a dandy. Certainly, Clarence Mitchell has defined very well the strategies for approaching the media. Nobody can contact the McCann’s without his permission. Coordinated with the contacts and information he acquired during his time at Downing Street, the rest is easy to deduce. Clarence Mitchell is the true owner of the information - in the broad sense of the word, so maybe because of that he has made so much ink flow - before, during and after the McCann’s leave Portugal. First, he was in Portugal as “appointed” by Gordon Brown’s Cabinet, then he returned to London, but his liaisons with the process remain intimate, in such a way that, after 17th September, as soon as the McCann’s returned to the UK, Clarence Mitchell officially resigned from his job at the British Government in order to assume functions as advisor to the McCann family. On Clarence Mitchell’s return to the scene, TVI’s journalist Hugo Matias gathers, like us, that “it seems to be more gratifying to work for the McCann’s than for the British Government”. Although most of the “success” of Maddie’s case is attributed to the strategies adopted by the media, or to the telegenic features of the couple, one thing is definitely true: the disappearance of any child has never, out of the million and two hundred thousand that vanish every year, obtained the same visibility and air time that this one already has. And we are still halfway through it...

However, in this case as with anybody else, everything started as “just” the disappearance of a child. We can’t see any difference between the disappearance of Maddie and that of any other child. We are sorry for all of them.

This said, we need to make clear to the reader that, as much as we regret it, the solution to the mystery - or at least a hint as to where Madeleine Beth McCann is, will not be found here.

As a matter of fact, in the light of national law, to which all of us are formally bound, solving this puzzle is the responsibility of the police. There are reports by those who some days want to wear the uniform and some other days want to attack the work of those wearing it. There are even reports that those who did it have passed scot-free, but that’s a different kettle of fish.

It is clear that we couldn't express here all the facts or hypotheses which took place during the period when the parents were in Portugal. In fact, to get at least a reference to all that has been already published would be an enormous effort and is not our aim, especially with the timetable we were given to perform it. In the future, surely, other names, big names in journalism and other areas will do it. This task we now undertake is in a way to help us not to forget certain doubts that in the future will certainly become clear but, as of now, are relevant.

We accepted the challenge posed by Prime Book, Portugal, and Rui Costa Pinto Edições, International rights, - signed with their word -, and not other precisely because these editors accepted our condition that this had to be only a journalistic work, simple and unpretentious. What we write about here is therefore, some of the incoherencies we found throughout these months.

Hernâni Carvalho and Luís Maia

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