

Mandatory Thinness and Mother-Blame

The Newspaper Coverage of the Marlene Corrigan Trial

BY KATE CAMPBELL AND SUE LEVESQUE

Les journaux, en rapportant le cas de Marlene Corrigan, accusée d'avoir maltraité et abusé de sa fille qui est morte pesant 680 livres à 13 ans, ont renforcé le discours de l'obsession de la minceur et du blâme jeté sur les mères. Cet article est une enquête sur le contenu des journaux de l'époque.

In *Don't Blame Mother*, psychologist Paula Caplan argued compellingly that a discourse of mother-blaming is interwoven throughout all levels of North American society. Many other feminist authors, including Naomi Wolf and Susan Bordo, have pointed out the powerful discourses regulating normative standards of beauty and body image for women. In reading the news coverage about Marlene Corrigan and her "obese" daughter, it became clear to us that this case was a horrifying example of how both of these misogynist discourses work together to regulate the behaviour of both mothers and daughters. Marlene Corrigan, who failed to raise a daughter who fit with the feminine ideal in appearance or behaviour, was labelled a "bad mother," and was held up as an object of ridicule and scorn by the press.

On January 9, 1998, Marlene Corrigan, a California woman, was found guilty of misdemeanour child abuse, following the death of her 13-year-old daughter Christina. This case received extensive media attention in both the United States and Canada, most of which focussed on Christina Corrigan's weight, which at the time of her death was 680 pounds. In the news coverage, the discourses of mother-blame and mandatory thinness operated in a mutually reinforcing manner to present Corrigan as guilty not of failing to provide care,

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but for failing to keep a clean house and raise a thin daughter in accordance with contemporary standards of good mothering. Our analysis focuses on coverage published between July 1997 and February 1998 in the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Corrigan was charged with felony child endangerment, following Christina's death in November 1996. Ultimately, Marlene Corrigan was found not guilty of a felony, but was found guilty on the lesser charge of misdemeanor child neglect, and was sentenced to three years probation, 240 hours of community service, mandatory counseling, and a \$100 fine. The facts of the case are somewhat difficult to determine, due to conflicting news reports and witness statements, and procedural anomalies in the investigation of the case.¹ Allegedly, Christina, who had not attended school for more than a year prior to her death, had a cold or respiratory infection, and her mother, who had stayed home from work for

the day to care for her, had left the apartment for a short time to buy food. When Marlene arrived home, Christina was dead. The forensic pathologist employed by the coroner's office ruled that Christina had died of "heart failure due to morbid obesity" (Freespirit 12). However, upon cross-examination at the trial, it was revealed that no autopsy was ever performed on Christina's body, despite Marlene's request for one, and that the cause of death ruling had been made on the basis on a ten-minute external observation. Newspaper reports stated that Christina's body was covered with excrement and bedsores, but no skin or tissue samples were ever taken to prove these assumptions, and the fact that the pathologist actually admitted during the trial to having lied in his official report, claiming to have performed an autopsy when he did not, was downplayed or ignored in the press coverage we examined (see Freespirit 12).

In press statements, police and prosecution lawyers repeatedly denied that the central issue motivating the charge against Marlene was Christina's weight. Despite these denials, we assert that Christina's obesity was a primary issue motivating this case, and was certainly the central preoccupation in the press. In news reports, Christina's weight was used as *prima facie* evidence of abuse, and media reports positioned Marlene as guilty before she was ever convicted. In each of the 27 articles we examined, a direct reference to Christina's weight at the time of her death appeared in either the headline, the first line of the article, or both. Typically, there was an emphasis on Christina's size, followed by an assertion that her

weight was causally linked to the amount of food she consumed, for example, by the phrase, "death by overeating" (Brazil A1). Because Christina's death was attributed solely to her weight, Christina and Marlene were positioned as culpable. The press relied upon the pervasive societal discourses of mother blame and "fat-phobia" to package and make sense of this news event, and it was the tenacity and popularity of these discourses which made this story newsworthy in the first place.

During the trial the defense put forward a very different interpretive framework from which to make sense of Christina's death, and suggested that Christina's weight gain was the result of a medical condition. However, these assertions were not taken up by the press in a way that disrupted the mother-blame framework. Although medical discourse is used in mainstream media to explain everything from female behaviour to sexual performance, and is frequently used in media discussions of obesity, this medical analysis was notably absent from the coverage of the Corrigan case. Few reporters even speculated about why a 13-year-old girl might weigh 680 pounds, except to attribute it solely to her eating practices. According to medical records, Christina weighed 60 pounds at age three, and 272 pounds by age eight. Within the next four years, she had gained an additional 400 pounds. Strict diet regimens only made her gain weight more quickly. Although doctors did suggest that she might have had a slow metabolism or some other medical problem, she was not referred to a specialist. Marlene Corrigan took her daughter to doctors more than 90 times in Christina's first eight years, and was repeatedly told to put her child on diets. When these diets failed, and no other medical treatments were suggested, Marlene was blamed. For example, on July 18, 1997, the *Examiner* quoted one of the investigating officers:

It was apparent to all of us that there should have been and could

have been steps taken to control her weight. Common sense tells you that to allow a child, any human being, to reach that weight, you are jeopardizing their health. (Brazil A1)

Dieting was presented as the "common sense" solution to Christina's

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problems, when in fact, there is much literature which suggests that dieting may cause increased weight gain in some individuals, and that weight lost through dieting is often regained (see Kassirer and Angell; Brown and Jasper). Verifiable facts about Christina's long history of weight gain were largely ignored, and reports focused on the behaviour of her mother, who was judged for buying her child food, and was said to have fed her child to death. It would seem that the explanation that Christina died due to maternal neglect, rather than due to a medical condition that was untreated by doctors, was a more convincing explanatory framework in the eyes of reporters.

The failure by the press to adopt the defense's medical framework, or to at least balance it alongside the dominant explanatory framework of overeating, reflects and perpetuates fat prejudice. This "fat-phobia" can be illustrated by tracing the discursive link constructed between obesity and slovenliness, through the repeated

juxtaposition of descriptions of Christina's size and of the empty food containers which supposedly surrounded her at the time of her death. It is important to note that the evidence of the condition of the Corrigan home was not substantiated, as photographs taken at the scene of her death were not presented at the trial. Nonetheless, highly disputable claims appeared and reappeared in hyperbolic fashion, and functioned in a self-perpetuating and self-legitimizing way. Almost all of the articles made reference to the purported filth of the Corrigan home. The sensationalism with which these conditions were often reported is best illustrated by an editorial which appeared in the *Toronto Star*:

It was scene to break your heart. In a corner, the TV set was on, the glow of Jerry Springer providing the only illumination. On the floor in front of it, a soiled sheet. Little Christina's body, on the soiled sheet in the cramped room, lit by the glow of Jerry Springer, was surrounded by a wall of empty food containers. (Slinger A2)

The stereotype of a fat girl in front of a television, surrounded by junk food wrappers, is so believable to readers that it did not need to be substantiated in order to be credible. In this example, we can see how the facts of the case were sensationalized and fictionalized to a ridiculous extent, completely belying the claim that the function of news coverage is to report unbiased, objective facts. The writer describes Christina's death as though he had been present, and constructing a scene in order to solicit an emotional response.

Throughout the media reports of this case, Christina Corrigan was portrayed as a stubborn, willful, somewhat unlikeable girl, while her mother was represented as passive and overwrought. The clear implication of this representation is that if Marlene Corrigan had possessed sufficient backbone to stand up to her out-of-control daughter, this tragedy would

never have happened. Thus, Christina's death is blamed both on Christina and on her mother. Marlene was described throughout the press coverage as passive, indecisive, and a quitter. We are told specifically that she, "threw up her hands" (Ryan A11), and was "a frustrated, overwhelmed single mother who did not seek aggressive intervention or recognize impending danger" (Fernandez 1997b, A1). In one article, a professor of pediatrics is quoted as saying, "parents of overweight children often have a difficult time setting limits" (Fernandez 1997b, A1). Christina's death was directly attributed to her weight by the press, and her mother was blamed for this weight. Thus, Marlene Corrigan was represented as having killed her daughter through bad mothering, and in particular, through her passivity. Although in later articles there is some sympathy expressed for Marlene, there is also a clear assumption that she was negligent in not overcoming the barriers she faced as a single working mother. Marlene's allegedly poor housekeeping is mentioned repeatedly in the press coverage, and this poor housekeeping is linked to implications that she did not spend enough time caring for her child, and that Christina would not have died if her mother had not worked outside the home. One article asserts that childhood obesity has increased by 54 percent in the past 20 years, and the blame leveled against working mothers is clear (Fernandez 1997b, A1).

Another message in the press coverage of the Corrigan case is that child care is the sole responsibility of parents, in particular mothers, and that schools and social service agencies do not have an obligation to care for children. Although it was acknowledged that both the school system and social services were negligent in their treatment of Christina, Marlene was ultimately held responsible for this negligence, as evidenced by the repeated assertions that she should have tried harder to get help. The efforts that Marlene did make to help her daughter, including lobbying the

school for special transportation and seating, trying to arrange home schooling, and appealing to social services for assistance, were not credited by the press. The attitude in which child welfare is considered to be entirely private and not a matter of community responsibility is summed up by Christina's former school prin-

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cipal, who was quoted as saying, "If I had a child that large to begin with, I would have taken care of it, without any intervention from anyone else" (Brazil A3). An editorial on the case reads, "there was only one person who could have saved Christina ... and that was her mother" (Ryan A11). These statements reinforce the belief that families are entirely private, individual units, and that mothers who require any outside assistance are negligent, unsatisfactory parents.

In addition to being portrayed as passive and inadequate, Marlene was represented as a bad mother because of her supposedly cold and uncaring nature. She was described as "sullen" (Solis A7), "stone faced" (Goodyear 1998c, A1), and "not prone to sentimentality" (Fernandez 1997b, A1), none of which are descriptions usually ascribed to the ideal mother. As suggested earlier, the press reports were premised on the assumption of Marlene Corrigan's guilt long before the official verdict was reached, and any claims from Corrigan or her law-

yer about her innocence or her love for Christina were framed in a manner which cast doubt on their authenticity. For example, we are told that Corrigan, "portrayed herself as a loving mother" (Fernandez 1998b, A1). The phrase "portrayed herself" implies that the statement is not true. Another report stated that,

Witnesses Monday testified that Christina ... had spent her last days lying amid a debris-strewn living room floor.... But defense attorney Michael Cardoza described Corrigan as a caring mother. (Fernandez 1997c, A7)

The juxtaposition of these two statements clearly undermines the assertion that Marlene Corrigan was a caring mother. The following quote is another example in which Corrigan's maternal love was questioned:

Outside the courthouse, Corrigan and an attorney marched away from a dozen television cameras and reporters, who begged her to explain whether she thought she could have helped her daughter. Cardoza told reporters that Corrigan is still grieving over the loss of her daughter. (Solis A17)

To say Corrigan "marched away," while reporters "begged" portrays her as cold and heartless, and her grief is represented as disingenuous. Corrigan's lack of repentance is highlighted in several media reports, particularly during the sentencing hearing. Even when Corrigan was found guilty of a misdemeanor rather than a felony, reporters implied that she was, in fact, guilty of a felony, and that she was given a lesser charge than she actually deserved. Reports stated that Corrigan "escaped a felony conviction" (Fernandez 1998a, D1), and that she might be sentenced to "only" six months imprisonment (Goodyear 1998c, A1).

In many news reports, Christina Corrigan was used as a de-humanized symbol of grotesquerie and horror.

The lurid descriptions of her size and the circumstances of her death made her into a freakish spectacle, especially in the initial, most sensationalized coverage of the case. As the case progressed, Christina was portrayed simultaneously as a helpless martyr to her mother's inadequacies, and as a stubborn, willful girl who brought on her own misfortune. She was described in the press as "cheeky" (Fernandez 1997b, A1), "ornery" (Goodyear 1997c, A25), and out of control. These representations of Christina's stubbornness reinforce the supposition that her mother was negligent in not raising her daughter to be docile and compliant, and that Christina's problems were the result of personality failings on her part as well as her mother's. We are told she "refused to attend school," and "wouldn't cooperate with efforts to be treated" (Bowman A1). The social prejudice and discrimination that she experienced as a fat child are completely dismissed in the news coverage. Her school principal was quoted as saying that Christina was a "happy child who got along well with her fellow students" (Brazil A3), while other reports suggest that in fact, Christina was tormented by her peers. This harassment was dismissed by reporters as ordinary childhood behaviour. One teacher was quoted as saying, "you know how kids can be" (Fernandez 1997b, A1). In new reports, the word "embarrassed" was frequently used to explain Christina's actions; Christina was supposedly "too embarrassed" to go to school (Goodyear 1997e, A17), and "too embarrassed" to see a doctor (Fernandez 1997b, A1). The use of the word "embarrassed" performs an integral role in the way the Corrigan case was reported, serving to locate Christina's difficulties entirely at the level of her personality, and overlooking the systemic discrimination that Christina faced from medical and educational institutions throughout her life. The blame for the anti-fat discrimination Christina faced is shifted away from these institutions and onto Christina and her mother.

The press coverage of the Corrigan

case functioned to censure not only Marlene, but all mothers who do not meet societal expectations of ideal mothering. The coverage also vilified fat people, by discursively linking obesity and slovenliness, and by representing death as the inevitable, and possibly deserving, consequence of extreme obesity. If Christina Corrigan had died from complications due to anorexia, it is highly unlikely that her mother would have been accused of a felony, and certainly there would not have been as much media attention. This particular display of mother blame was fueled by the widespread societal fear and hatred of obesity. The way in which Marlene was represented as ignorant and passive, while her daughter was portrayed as obstinate and difficult served to reinforce the supposition that the one of the primary roles of a good mother is to regulate and control her daughter's behaviour, including her daughter's eating and physical appearance. It is not surprising that given Christina's failure to achieve an ideal feminine body, she was represented as an unlikeable and unfeminine person, and that these unfeminine characteristics represent her mother's failure to socialize and regulate her in an acceptable manner.

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¹These contradictions were highlighted in a report by Judy Freespirit, a fat activist who attended the trial.

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BARBARA HUDSPITH

Family Album

Two women stand at battle for my soul
Two stand at the water's edge

One woman flings herself
upon the upturned wave and rasping her craft against
the pebbled shore

Rows

Then grappling deep she fingers her nets and heaves
and the boat lists laden
with creatures that flap and slither on the well-greased
boards

that writhe in vain on the darkling homeward journey
As the swirling wind
pierces

her naked shoulders
and the watching water chafes
her fissured hands
pungent and raw from the gutting

The other woman hesitates
with one tentative shoe
one dainty toe on the gunnel
Her swain coaxing tenderly
pleading for the soft-gloved hand outstretched and now
withdrawn
while the wily water
laps insidiously
and with a final roguish tug
plunges her deep into the tepid sea
her petticoats heaving
their delicate network
roiling with its catch

A spluttering puppy she shakes herself
free from the indignity
and prances mincingly back
to the red hot fire to the cluttered parlour
and mother

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