

The Guardian - Thursday January 9, 1997

It was the murder that rocked New Zealand: the bludgeoning to death of a mother by her own daughter and the girl's best friend. For 30 years, nothing has been known of the whereabouts of that daughter. For 30 years, speculation has been rife. And now she has been unearthed. . . in deepest, darkest Kent. Alison Daniels reports

THE SECRET HISTORY

IT HAD BEEN the last lost piece in the story of one of New Zealand's most notorious murders. Periodically, it would rear up into the public consciousness, provoking a frenzy of speculation and a string of new leads. All, inevitably, turned cold.

Pauline Parker was one of the two teenage girls convicted of the killing of her mother, Honora Parker, on a deserted path in Victoria Park in Christchurch in the summer of 1954. In 1967 she vanished from public view, her whereabouts unknown. Attempts to trace her met only with vague, contradictory assertions: either that she was unhappy or that she had found contentment. In New Zealand, her family kept silent.

Then on Sunday came the intriguing outline of those missing decades, with the publication of an article in a New Zealand woman's magazine, the Auckland-based *Woman's Weekly*. In a preview piece, the magazine revealed that Pauline Parker, now known as Hilary Nathan, was living an isolated life in a "secret haven" in England, stalked by remorse and comforted only by prayer. In the next instalment, journalist Chris Cooke promised details of his year-long search for Nathan, plus an exclusive interview.

The excitement generated by the discovery is a measure of the damage that the murder carried out with Pauline's best friend, Juliet Hulme, then aged 15- did to New Zealand's belief in its own respectability and innocence. It forced a society still bound by traditional English values to consider not only the horror of a life snuffed out by teenage girls, but the question: mad or evil?

Honora Parker died from shock as a result of multiple blows to the head with a half-brick. Her battered, bloodied body, one shoe kicked off and a finger nearly severed, was found sprawled in the dirt. The half-brick was left by her head.

In 1950s New Zealand, the Supreme Court trial proved a sensation, centering on the girls' admissions of guilt and Pauline Parker's confessional diary. Most memorable was the prosecuting counsel's description of a cold, callous murder carried out by two "precocious and dirty-minded girls" a summary ensuring that the "mother killers" were for ever branded evil. Spared the death penalty because of their age, the girls were sentenced to detention and sent to different institutions where they were held for five years. They were ordered never to meet again and they never have.

In Christchurch, the murder remained lodged in the collective culture of the city, but came back into wider focus with the release of Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures* three years ago - a film that offered a controversial portrayal of lesbianism and obsessions.

The film blew Juliet Hulme's cover, revealing her new identity as crime writer Anne Perry, living in a converted farmhouse in the village of Portmohomack in the north of Scotland. Concrete details about Parker's life remained a mystery, however. After being released from

detention in 1959, she had taken the name Hilary Nathan, supported herself through a series of manual jobs and completed a university degree. The last official reference describes her as a teacher in an English girls' school, but it was generally believed she had returned home from the UK in the 1970s and was living on New Zealand's North Island. The release of the film sent reporters on a false trail to a bookstore in Auckland.

MEANWHILE, HALF a world away, Hilary Nathan had been living first in London and then in Kent, teaching at a local authority school for special needs children, before she retired to run a riding school in the village of Hoo, near Rochester.

For the 57-year-old, the moment of discovery last weekend prompted a call to her closest friend of 30 years, Joan Nathan. The two women met in London in the late 1960s and Joan changed her name to Nathan by deed poll to allow the pair to take out a joint mortgage and buy a house together. Their friendship, Joan maintains, is platonic.

During the phone conversation, Hilary confirmed that the stories laying bare her past and filtering into British newspapers this week were indeed true, and asked Joan to field calls from journalists, allowing her breathing space to consider how best to react.

Joan Nathan described Hilary's mood as "very tense". She was wavering between going public or bolting for cover. If Joan was shocked by her friend's explosive news, she kept her thoughts to herself. Her only priority, she said, was to look out for Hilary. A slim woman with short white hair, she welcomed reporters into her modest terrace house fronting on to the main street in the village of Snodland, west of Rochester. She was polite but evasive and had contacted her lawyer in London before agreeing to speak to a tabloid newspaper.

Until this week, Hilary Nathan had lived a low-key existence in Hoo, population 7,000, a village among a belt of similar small towns skirting Rochester. She lives alone in one of two adjoining ivy-clad stone houses, at the end of a single track road. The houses are set amid ploughed fields and overlook the Abbots Court riding school, which Nathan has run since 1986.

Until three years ago, she taught at Kent County Council's Abbots Court School [*sic.* - *should be 'Abbey Court' - red*], for children with special needs in nearby Strood. For most of that period, she was deputy headmistress and by all accounts commanded respect for her ability to work well with children. Her former employers register surprise at the revelations, but point out that her career was untarnished.

If the word shock crops up among those who've read the newspapers in Hoo, it is uttered without malice and swiftly followed by shrugs and remarks about the past being just that. Those who know Hilary Nathan describe her as a private individual, dedicated to her 10 horses. Pleasant but not outgoing.

In a field looking towards the riding school, a woman feeding her two horses pauses in the biting wind to say she has known Nathan for close on a decade. This, however, is the first she's heard of the murder and, after scanning the first few paragraphs of a newspaper story, she does not want to read further. "The way I look at it, she's paid for the crime. She seems perfectly all right, she's been a teacher for many years. It's not something I suppose you want to think about, but the children thoroughly enjoy the riding school," she says.

Other neighbours like Father Adams, priest at the English Martyr's Roman Catholic Church Nathan regularly attends - refuse to be drawn, save to say that it is not for others to make judgments.

In New Zealand, however, there is less reserve. The story has been something of a minor sensation there, leading TV Three's 6pm news bulletin on Monday before being circulated to the papers by the New Zealand Press Association. By some strange twist of fate, Heavenly Creatures is one of the movies currently being screened on the pay-for-view TV channel.

Nathan's sister, Wendy, has revealed snippets of Hilary's English lifestyle, telling how she eschews television and newspapers, is a devout Roman Catholic and has paid dearly for her mother's killing. She says her sister, in running a stables and living in the country, has fulfilled a childhood dream. "She has led a good life and is very remorseful for what she has done. She's committed the most terrible crime and has spent 40 years repaying it by keeping away from people and doing her own little thing."

For her part, Anne Perry responded briefly. The news had come as surprise, she said, but she wished her former friend well. In an interview in the Guardian last summer, Perry seemed resigned to the fact that the world was never going to forget her or her childhood friend. "It's not ever going to go away but maybe I shall live in such a way that it will not be what people remember of me." She ended by saying that her worst fear was that Pauline Parker would eventually be found. Perhaps Hilary Nathan agrees.