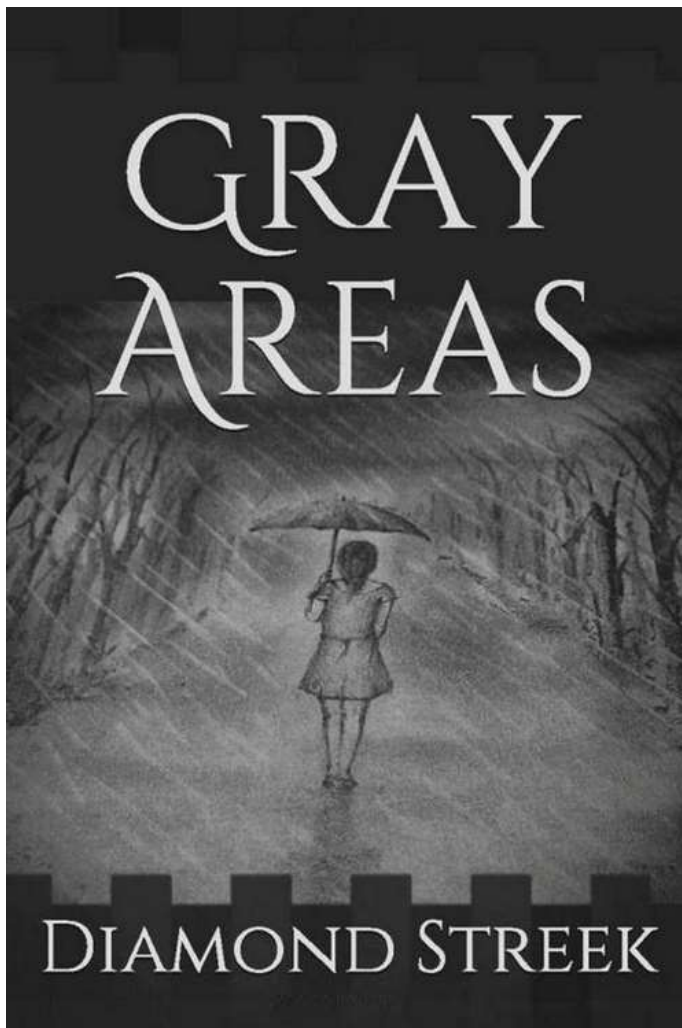


Streek offers opening salvo on social services' woes

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"Gray Areas" by Diamond Streek. Columbia, S.C.: Sea Wright Publishing Co., 2020. 156 pages, \$19.95 (paperback).



“Thirteen-year-old Cienna knew that this was the story that had landed her permanently in foster care at age 8, but she felt there was so much more,” Diamond Streek writes near the beginning of “Gray Areas,” an attempt to shed some much-needed light on social services in this country. “There was a whole lifetime of confusion and a messed-up, ugly history before this story.”

“Her story was always a swinging pendulum between pity and blame,” the author continues. “Many people blamed her for her unusual behavior. Others said she was sexually abused, and yet others blamed her mother. No one would let her read her own case reports, and yet everyone whispered terrible stories about her past. Sometimes she tried her best to listen to all the adults around her talking; at other times, she tried her best to block it out.”

So begins one of the most interesting, haunting, fascinating and infuriating excursions into the human psyche that I have read in quite some time. The narrative consists of 18 “episodes” beginning with “The Victim Child” and ending with “Adoption Event.” The book is designed

ostensibly for heightened awareness and discussion, with “book club questions” at the conclusion of each episode. At the end of the seventh installment, “The Spanking – And then she turned seven,” for instance, the reader is confronted with the following thought-provoking queries: “1) Was there an attitudinal bias, negative comments about the parents, inappropriate terminology, assumptions, speculation and prejudice?” and “Did the social worker observe the parent and child together?”

“Gray Areas” is designed to raise our collective consciousness on an aspect of society that often goes underreported and, when it is acknowledged, underappreciated. The literary style is unconventional but exceptionally effective. The portrait that emerges is a passionate and visceral condemnation of practices that are, according to the author, all-too-common and completely despicable. It is obvious the author is intimately familiar with the subject matter at hand; in fact, you get the impression Streek had a front-row seat to the events, exchanges and other interactions as they were unfolding in real time. Moreover, if you had not previously thought of our social service system as a “theater of the absurd,” you will probably be inclined to reassess your perception after

making your way through this exquisite primer on a process that has, in many respects, gone completely off the rails.

The prose is fluid and conversational, alternating between excerpts from official reports and the author's accompanying explanatory text. Streek is careful to maintain the integrity of the language, syntax and other defining attributes of the source material that form the basis for this self-described "exposé on the scandalous inner workings of social services." For example, it is specifically noted that the "grammar, spelling and content errors" present in the referenced documents have been maintained so that the reader will get a more accurate picture of the level of professionalism and attention to detail exhibited by those who unintentionally contributed to the final manuscript.

As you may have already surmised, the names – and any details that could be used to identify the individuals at the heart of the thesis – have either been completely changed or significantly altered. With respect to "Diamond Streek," it should also be noted that the author's identity has been deliberately concealed, and nothing is revealed that could indicate who the person is or what their vantage point was during the composition of "Gray Areas." This is totally understandable given the sensitive nature of the information being conveyed. It is readily apparent, however, that Streek is on a mission. And, after reading this harrowing account of how one of our foundational institutions treats those it was created to serve and protect, you will understand the reasons for the anonymity.

You can get some sense of the challenges Streek feels we are up against in the following passage from "The Soap Opera," the 11th episode and one I found especially enlightening (taken from an "investigative summary narrative"):

"Bizarre Punishment – Verified as to Child Victim (CV) by Adult Perpetrator (AP) Ricardo Rio – according to allegations matrix, Bizarre punishment will be verified due to Cienna having to 'chew on soap' for over 10 minutes which is a punishment, that is cruel and would be considered torturous for a child to have to endure. She was said to have puked while chewing on the soap and AP, Ricardo, was laughing at her and telling her that he was going to get more soap during this 10-minute episode he admitted to administering to Cienna. Ricardo also made the mother mop up the soap suds and throw up while Cienna was forced to chew the soap. Cienna was forced to watch her mother clean up while enduring this form of cruel punishment and had to help her mother finish cleaning up the mess before she could wash her mouth out with water."

Disgusting, certainly. But in comparison to much of the evidence contained in the official reports, investigations and summaries chronicled in the book, the previous excerpt is relatively benign. So fair warning: "Gray Areas" can be pretty explicit; the descriptions of allegations of physical, psychological and sexual abuse don't leave much to the imagination – and that is by design. The story Streek is telling should upset people to the extent that they feel something should be done about it.

As noted on Amazon, "Gray Areas" is intended as an opening salvo; i.e., "the first step in opening up dialogue on the secret society and hidden power of social services. A shocking story with stolen children, lies, manipulation and false accusations of sexual scandal. You will understand why social activists are crying out for transparency and change. Read it – for the children."

Look, this is not a pleasurable read – but it is an important one. And it's not that those who are working hard to secure the best outcomes for the children and adolescents they serve are inherently "bad" people. But they are caught up in a system that apparently has infinite room for improvement.

Let's hope that improvement comes sooner rather than later.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.