



Open Letter To Channel 5

Dear Channel 5,

I am writing to you regarding the programme you aired on the 8th May 2014, entitled 'The OAP Killer: First Kill, Last Kill.' I recently had the displeasure of watching it on 'catch up' and, unfortunately, it is still fresh in my mind. I appreciate that the subject matter is not meant to be palatable. It is, after all, a programme about the serial killer Kenneth Erskine and his horrific crimes. I understand that, and I expected the facts to be difficult to hear.

What I didn't expect, and what drew my attention, disbelief, and frankly anger, is the massive disparity between the way the programme represented Erskine's male and female victims. I was also alarmed by the distasteful way in which your reconstructions portrayed the female victims in particular.

This is an open letter, Channel 5. The reason I've chosen to make this letter open is because I feel that the issues I am raising are essentially relevant to the current discussions in the media about 'rape culture'. Whether people choose to believe it exists or not, 'rape culture' is an issue. Why not put #rapeculture into twitter and see how many results you get? That should tell you how many people believe in it. The Centre For Relationship Abuse Awareness, says that,

'rape culture is the desensitisation of and acceptance of violence against women as normal'

Yes, you may say. We know. But what has all this got to do with us and our programme on Kenneth Erskine? Well, Channel 5, I'll come to that.

Firstly, for those that are choosing to read this letter, and who may not have watched the programme, (still available over at 5 on demand if you can bear it) let us first go over the facts. The 'OAP Killer', Kenneth Erskine, was initially convicted of 7 murders, by strangulation. Erskine targeted elderly men and women, and in most cases he carried out an act of buggery on his victims. It's not nice. It's horrific and unthinkable, but unfortunately we have to think about it, because it happened and Channel 5 have chosen to make a programme about it. Of his seven 'official' victims, three were women, and two of them were sexually assaulted either before or after death. The rest were men. Each man was sexually assaulted either before or after death.

In addition to this, there were four other suspicious deaths attributed to Erskine that he wasn't 'officially' convicted of, but is believed to have been responsible for. At least one of these had been sexually assaulted, and all of them were men. Let me just pause there to let you digest the facts; a potential total of 11 victims, three were women and two of those women were raped. Erskine murdered five men and all five were raped, with the very real likelihood that there were another three male victims. We can conclude, therefore, that the majority of Erskine's known victims were male. However, after watching 'The OAP Killer: First Kill, Last Kill' you'd be forgiven for thinking that none of the men were raped, and that most of his victims were women.

Erskine only ever raped by buggery, yet the word itself, the phrase 'male rape' nor the word



'sodomy' were used in the programme. At first I thought that maybe, Channel 5, you were trying to be tasteful in your documentation of these awful crimes. Maybe you had deliberately chosen to omit these words to protect the dignity of Erskine's tragic victims? As the programme went on, however, and I watched the repetitive and frankly distasteful reconstructions of the crimes themselves, over and over, I started to realise that this couldn't be the case. During your programme, there are (and I have counted) a total of 13 'flashes' of dramatised violent attacks and some longer reconstruction sequences. In 11 of these you used female actresses. In the other two, the victim can not be seen and could be male or female. The actor playing Erskine can be seen sitting on the women's chests, leering over them with a sweaty brow. In one particularly disturbing scene he is seen to slowly rip open a women's nightdress whilst lustfully and depravedly looking down upon his victim. Later in the show, in what I can only describe as the most insensitive depiction of reconstructive rape and murder that I have ever seen, we can see the feet of Erskine and his victim, rocking violently together, Erskine presumably in the act of buggery the dead or nearly dead victim.

I ask you Channel 5, how is that image more acceptable to your viewers than mentioning male rape? The sorrow I felt for that woman and her poor relatives, whom I desperately hoped were not watching your show, was immeasurable. Why, Channel 5, is it acceptable for the families and relatives of the female victims in this case to be subjected to that horrific reconstructive image of their loved one being raped and murdered? When, in comparison, you clearly feel that even documenting the rapes of the male victims would have been a step too far?

I would like to ask why you only mention the phrase sexual assault when discussing the female victims? Why did you describe the sexual assaults on the elderly women graphically eight times throughout the programme, but not once mention any specific sexual assaults on the male victims? Why did you choose to only show female actors in your reconstructions? Why is it, Channel 5, that you seem to think it is 'acceptable' to visually reconstruct brutal rapes on female victims, but not males? Yes, it is rarer for a male to be raped in a stranger attack, but should this mean it is any more or less 'shocking?' Rape is rape. It is inherently shocking and upsetting, no matter what sex the victim is. It can be unforgettable and life changing, no matter whether the victim is male or female.

Yes, the rape of an elderly male is truly horrendous, but does this make it unmentionable? In comparison, is the rape of an elderly female victim so mentionable that you feel the need to repeat descriptions and images of it throughout your programme? Why, in fact, did you choose to make a programme about Erskine at all? Why choose a serial killer who, it could convincingly be argued, chose to target males over females, and then fail to mention this crucial supposition? You decided to document a killer who chose not once to vaginally rape, but sodomised his victims, and again, you completely fail to mention this critical fact?

I could be forgiven for thinking, Channel 5, that by refusing to mention the sexual assaults on the male victims in this case, you not only deliberately misled your audience, but also enforced the current opinion that we as a society are more desensitised to female rape, and that it is in some way 'less shocking' than male rape? And, if this is the case, then you, as a company, could well be playing a part in sustaining, empowering and encouraging the current, and definitely real 'rape culture' that exists in our country, and indeed around the world. Or, maybe it isn't an acknowledgement of 'rape culture' at all, but a symptom of it. Maybe these attitudes



are already so ingrained in all of us that there was no other way you could think of to make the programme.

What is it to be Channel 5? Was it simply an oversight on your part? Or, did the inherent acceptance that female rape just happens mean that your colleagues were much more comfortable talking about it? What's more, what does it actually mean for women in today's society, when the rape of a female is thought of as less shocking than that of a male? Surely that very fact that women of all ages are raped on a regular basis in this country should actually make it more shocking? By refusing to mention words like 'sodomy', 'buggery' and 'male rape', whether it was intentional or not, you have given a loud and clear message on how you think society feels about male and female rape. In my opinion, not only have you given the female victims in this case no dignity whatsoever, but you have also denied the real story of the male victims. You've denied them the terrible experience they suffered by refusing to acknowledge it ever happened.

My intention is not to detract from the terrible facts in this case. Each of the victims suffered an absolutely appalling death at the hands of a dangerous criminal with a broken mind. I cannot bear to think about what they went through. This letter is not really about the murders, it's not about Erskine and it's not even about the facts of the case. It's about men and women. It's about how, no matter how far we think we've come, there's still an awful void between the way men and women are represented in the media.

The way the Erskine murders were portrayed by yourselves did anger me. Maybe it's not your fault Channel 5, and, if I'm honest, I'm not really expecting an answer to this letter. But I just had to write it. I was furious after watching your programme and at first I didn't know why. The more I thought about it, the more it became clear to me. Maybe it is society itself that I should be directing this letter at, and maybe it won't make any difference. But, even if it only serves to raise the awareness of the reality of 'rape culture', the ongoing battle of feminism and the ever increasing fight against violence towards women, then it will have been worth it. And, Channel 5, I hope that, maybe, just maybe, you'll consider your portrayal of female and male victims of crime with a little more thought in future.

Yours Faithfully,

Alice