

# Monsters live anywhere, even next door

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Melbourne *Herald Sun*

May 07, 2008

It scares us stupid that random evil exists - and in people who can look as normal as our neighbours.

No wonder we now hear pathetic theories to explain Josef Fritzl, who locked his daughter in a sound-proofed bunker under his house for 24 years, along with three of the seven children she was forced to bear him.

Even in anguished Austria, Fritzl is portrayed as an evil somehow created by his country - or at least by Amstetten, his town.

"What kind of country is this?" cried the newspaper *Heute*, as police searched the cramped four-room prison in which Fritzl held his daughter and - for their entire lives - their children Kerstin, 19, Stefan, 18, and Felix, 5.

"A whole country has to ask itself what it was that has gone so fundamentally wrong," agreed *Der Standard*, likewise sure Fritzl and his crimes were created as logically from a bunch of ingredients as Austria creates Red Bull.

But what's really to know about such evil but that it can exist?

That's not what people want to hear, of course. Much more comforting is the fancy that there are perfectly comprehensible reasons to explain how a respectable engineer came to be so unimaginably cruel.

Add reason A to reason B, and of course you get a monster. Or, rather, they get a monster, because reasons A and B sure don't exist here, do they? Not with us.

Oh, no, because we need to believe Fritzl is a specifically Austrian problem, and not a human problem we might share. That's why so many non-Austrian commentators have been so keen to see his crimes as part of pattern as Austrian as Hitler.

So they note that just 18 months ago another Austrian woman, Natascha Kampusch, broke out of the basement cell in which she'd been held for eight years by a man who'd snatched her off the street to be his sex slave.

They add that in 2005 three young children were rescued from a near pitch-black cellar in Linz, where they'd been held for seven years by their crazed mother. With these links made, they then theorise with a hooting happiness that such evil is just part of some specifically Austrian sickness - one that can't spread over the border.

Observe. Poland's *Dziennik* newspaper demands to know: "Why are such beasts born in Austria?"

Although Italy's *la Stampa* concedes these crimes are "naturally not exclusively Austrian", it is glad to add, "but there they are tied up with waltzes, yodellers and cuckoo clocks" - all of which are as reassuringly unltalian as lederhosen.

Likewise, the *Tagesanzeiger* of mainly Protestant Switzerland blames lower Austria's "arch-Catholic" society where "words such as civil society and self-responsibility are still alien". As if Catholicism created only devils and not a single saint.

But in Britain, it's the Nazi theme that's preferred, because which country could be more innocent of the taint of Hitler?

Thus *The Guardian's* Berlin correspondent, Kate Connolly, gloats: "For years, (Austria) used slick marketing skills - promoting its mountains and Mozart - and the title given to it by the Allies as 'Hitler's first victim' to avoid confronting the central role it played in the Holocaust. One should be wary of taking this parallel too far, but this country knows and has ingested the rules of how to cover up."

You would hardly guess that this slander of an entire country for the sins of one man was written by a reporter from a place that itself produced Fred and Rosemary West, who practised incest, slaughtered at least 12 young women and murdered even one of their own daughters in a house so infamous for its depraved horrors that its every stick and brick was later destroyed for fear they might become souvenirs. Or inspiration.

Truth is, Fritzl is no mere Austrian. He is instead human, and in him, therefore, was the potential for the kind of evil that can explode wherever humans are found.

Indeed, the catalogue of human depravity has entries from all over the world, with Australia's including the Port Arthur massacres, cowardly killer Julian Knight and Snowtown bodies-in-the-barrels murders. Nor is the list of children kept prisoner in dark rooms made up only of Austrians.

Five years ago police in New Jersey broke into a locked basement to discover two emaciated children under a bed stinking of faeces, urine and vomit. They'd been shut up for years, and in a cupboard was the mummified remains of their little brother.

In Northern Ireland, in 1956, a boy called Kevin Halfpenny was found locked in a darkened henhouse, where he'd been kept for so long that he could only caw, not speak, and had legs so bowed by rickets, through lack of sun, he could not stand.

In Russia this very year, another seven-year-old was found locked in a Volgograd apartment filled with tame birds. His mother had refused to let him out or even speak to him, ever, and he reportedly tried to speak to his rescuers by chirping and flapping his arms like the wings of his birds.

In Japan, a 10-year-old girl, Fusako Sano, was grabbed and held captive for nine years in the room of a crazed man, while Belgium's unspeakable Marc Dutroux left two of the six schoolgirls he'd caught to slowly starve to death in his dungeon.

I don't mean to distress you with tales of such cruelty. In fact, there are many, many worse I could tell, and I've only singled out a few with some parallels to the Fritzl case.

But they should be enough to remind us that evil is confined to no country or time. Josef Fritzl is not a product of a culture but of a malignant biochemistry we do not understand, or ascribe simply to a Satan.

As Austria's president, Heinz Fischer, protested last week: "There is nothing fundamentally Austrian in this case. Monstrosities, of which human beings are capable, manifest themselves everywhere."

That's clearly not what many of us would want to hear - that in our streets could also live a Fritzl of supernatural evil, capable even of raping his daughter kept locked in a cellar.

But perhaps it is the only thing we can learn from the Fritzl case - the only lesson that may just leave our children safer.

Evil can occur anywhere, and sometimes for no reason we can possibly know, let alone predict. We cannot let this realisation overwhelm us, but we can and must not be so trusting as to believe the devil is stuck in Austria.

The cries you hear from next door may be his work, too. Pay heed.