

[Weirdo. Mosher. Freak.](#) by [Catherine Smyth](#)

**The Murder of Sophie Lancaster**  
Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) June 2012

From the outset, this book is direct and down to earth. It reports the violent assault, in their local park in the early hours of Saturday 11 August 2007, on **Sophie Lancaster** and **Rob Maltby** from the Lancashire town of

**Bacup**

, the subsequent court case and development of the

***Sophie Lancaster Foundation***

. Sophie never recovered from her injuries and her life support machine was turned off on Friday 24 August 2007. Aged just 20, Sophie suffered her fatal injuries while cradling her boyfriend Rob's head in an attempt to protect him from the cowardly assault which started on him. Although Rob was released from hospital the same day, his injuries have profoundly affected his life since. So what insights do we get from this book?

All five youths convicted of the assaults, two of whom were convicted of Sophie's murder, appeared at Burnley Magistrates Court on the Monday following the assault, initially charged with grievous bodily harm with intent. This was a horrific and shocking assault, seemingly dealt with efficiently and effectively by the police and courts, resulting in long sentences for those convicted. Other similarly tragic cases that spring to mind have resulted in public campaigns for changes in the law, or official procedures, as per the Sophie Lancaster Foundation, often involved failures of process, yet the only failure of process here seems to be the delay in police and ambulance services initially getting to the scene of the assault.

I found this book surprisingly illuminating, highly personalised, and offering some genuine nuggets of how the media report on stories, yet with a distance, style and narration of a journalist's notebook, reflecting who it was written by I suppose - journalist **Catherine Smyth**. Initially it reminded me of

***Error of Judgement***

by Chris Mullin, though with a couple of profoundly important differences that give us a real insight into some important trends in contemporary society. Whilst

*Error of Judgement*

downplayed the highly charged political background behind the prosecution of the those known as the Birmingham Six,

***Weirdo, Mosher, Freak***

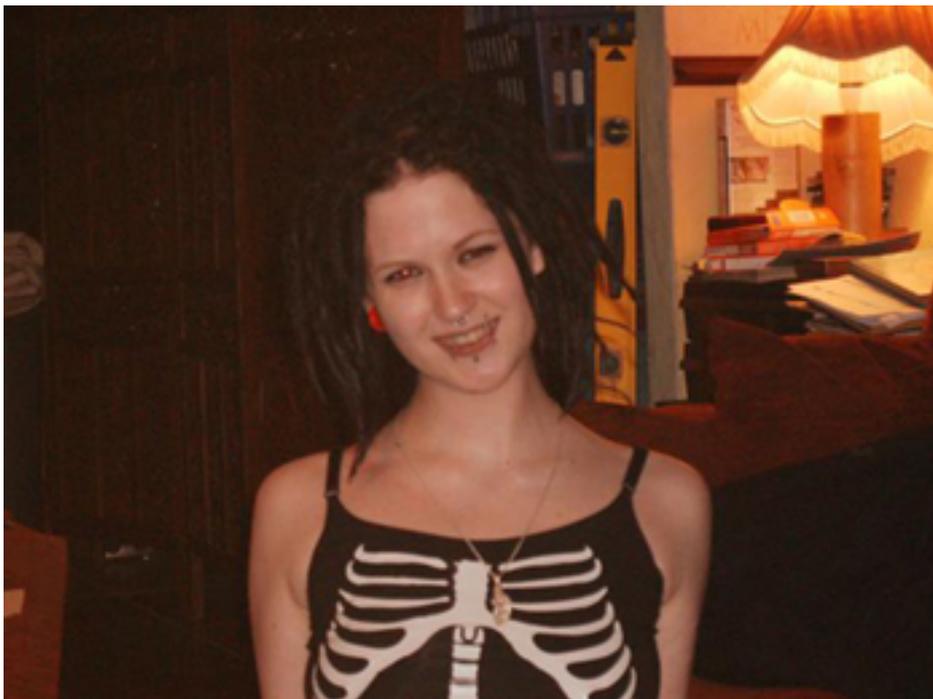
rather keenly asserts a social and political context leading to the actions of those convicted of this violent assault in an economically run down northern town with a vibrant industrial past.

Opening the book, Catherine details how she first came to know of the assault and became involved in reporting on it. At the time she worked as the news editor at the **Rossendale Free Press**, and was informed about the investigative police activity on the Sunday night at Stubblelee Park in Bacup by a friend. Intrigued to know more, she went to see for herself. On hearing the news coverage on the Monday morning, the seriousness of the assault became clear and briefed her colleague on the paper responsible for following up stories with the police.

This section at the start of the book is very illuminating on the importance of blending both formal and informal processes and relationships required for quality investigative journalism to be most productive (in contrast to the current shock horror revelations coming out through the leveson inquiry that journalists talk to a variety of people in the course of their work). Perhaps the most useful and important break that helped Catherine develop her quality reporting of the case came when she was contacted on the monday morning by a former reporter at the **Free Press**

**Nigel Lancashire**

, who was Rob Maltby's uncle and wanted to ensure the paper had some good quality, timely and reliable information to cover the story with. As Catherine learned who the two victims were, she realised she has seen Sophie around Bacup, describing her as 'a woman who knew her own identity and was not shy of expressing it'.



Blending personal profiles of those found guilty of murdering Sophie and inflicting grievous bodily harm on Rob, with profiles of witnesses to the assault and the period leading up it, with profiles of Sophie, Rob and their friends, with practical facts about the movements and events on the evening leading to and during the assault, a very disturbing image is developed in your mind and you are compelled to read on. Compelled to read on, yes, though quite why I'm not exactly sure - it's grim reading and unnervingly upsetting. Something struck me after a while though, and it's difficult for me to assess exactly how accurately this reflects reality, but the world that Sophie, Rob and their friends live in comes across as one without much active adult presence in it. It's a very **Lord of the Flies** world, and especially when it gets dark which really

is strange as that's not my recollection from when I grew up.

Kids are forced out of town centres and further afield into parks. Some school students I had working with me recently on work experience told me how the Community Support Officers, who insisted on being known by name to get closer to the kids, would demand to rummage through the handbags of these 15 year old girls when they were simply spotted in town on an evening. These absolutely charming kids quite rightly identified this hostile experience, when not doing anything wrong, as the cause of why so many of their friends ended up going further out of town to dimly lit parks or fields just to get away from being treated like vagrants. I don't know Bacup, but from looking at Google maps, Stubbylee Park does look like a place young people would go to get away from adults.

The adults re-appear on the scene when all the practicalities of police matters, criminal proceedings, the funeral, fund raising and campaigning work require sorting. The detail Catherine provides on the development of fundraising and campaigning for and around the [Sophie Lancaster Foundation](#)

is very instructive of how these things get traction. Whilst Sophie's mother, Sylvia, tried to rationalise how her popular and friendly daughter can be so senselessly beaten by a small group of teenagers, the national media and politicians ran ceaseless campaigns around what they characterise as

***Broken Britain***

. Alongside all this, spontaneously, groups of friends and local people help out with fund raising and campaigning initiatives to keep the memory of Sophie alive, filling in the narrative with whatever seems to make sense.

The objectification of young people as 'feral' embodied in the ***Broken Britain*** campaign by **The Sun** and the

### **Conservative Party**

, among others not only dangerously elevates young people as beyond the control of adults, it does so in a way that makes things harder for integrating the generations. Catherine highlights the awkward way in which alcohol consumption is increasingly used as a way of establishing adult authority in Britain, only making its consumption by young people more problematic, rather than approaching the socialisation of young people into alcohol consumption in a far more relaxed way as is often the case on the European continent. The attempt to tag of dressing patterns of young people as distinct sub-cultural activity only takes the objectification of young people as a different group that bit further when the more relaxed integration of generations to inculcate expected behavioural norms would be beneficial.

Increasingly, the story around this case is that Sophie and Rob were attacked because they dressed differently, representing a sub-culture in society that some narrow minded people, representating a dominant culture, couldn't accept. Maybe I am missing something in this narrative, but there seems to be a leap of imagination from the extensive examples used of how indifferent people have become to difference of identity, class, and culture, to then try and fit a separate political discussion onto a particularly dreadful and thankfully very rare assault. Trying to develop a rationale for events involving a few young people who are relatively marginalised and out of control doesn't make for developing good policy, however it may ease the pain for some.

