

Rebuilding a life — without Billy

Life With Billy

By Brian Vallee with an introduction by Jane Stafford. Published by McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Ltd., Toronto, 1986.

Available from Red Herring Co-op Books, 1555 Granville St., Halifax. (\$4.50/paperback) 224 pages.

Review by LOIS CORBETT

On March 11, 1982, Jane Stafford Hurshman did something to make her life easier. She shot and killed her husband Billy while he lay asleep on the seat of his pick-up truck.

Hurshman had been living with Billy Stafford for six years —

six years of beatings, rapes, kicks, slaps and punches drove her, finally, to take a shotgun from her son and blow her husband's brains out.

Life With Billy is the true story of Jane Hurshman's ordeal, one that started shortly after the birth of the couple's first son and has yet to end. Written by journalist Brian Vallee, the book details the brutal beatings Hurshman received, as well as the painful and degrading sexual acts Stafford forced her to perform. The book is not a pleasure to read: it is frightening and graphic, horrifying and depressing. It is a glimpse into a battered woman's everyday reality.

In the introduction to *Life With Billy*, Hurshman says she

couldn't understand why she was being beaten: "At first it was a black eye now and again or bumps and bruises that could be covered up. I started wearing tinted glasses, long-sleeved shirts and blouses, turtlenecks and slacks. As all this was happening, I tried to figure out why. It always ended up with Bill telling me it was my fault. I began to believe him, thinking all the while that things would get better. They didn't. As time went on, I lost everything: my confidence, my self-esteem, my pride — with time, I even lost the ability to care or feel. Bill took everything from me, a bit at a time, until there was nothing left but a shell."

Hurshman says she wanted *Life With Billy* written for other women who lived or are living the same hell as she did. "If even one person picks up this book and is helped by it, that will be reward enough," she writes. While *Life With Billy* concentrates on Jane Hurshman, the author refers to other incidents of wife abuse, and includes statistics of wife battering in Canada and politicians' responses to the issue.

Hurshman won an acquittal in front of a cheering courtroom audience on Friday, November 20, 1982, but she had to fight an appeal filed by the Crown in 1983. Hurshman then entered a plea of guilty of manslaughter and was sentenced to six months in jail and two years of probation. Her probation period ended August 14 last year, and she now

works at a rehabilitation centre in the Maritimes. But Hurshman says the healing is not complete. "I still see a therapist. I still have hurts. Some wounds will never heal. I cannot erase the scars. I cannot forget — but I can go on with the rest of my life. . . There are beauty and happiness and love out there, and I'm going after them," she writes.

(and the difficult style of *Life With Billy* displays this), Vallee first met Hurshman while producing a CBC "Fifth Estate" segment on her ordeal. He includes a short note at the beginning of the book to explain his own reactions to wife battering.

"I decided to write this book because I believe the issue of wife-battering is important," write Val-

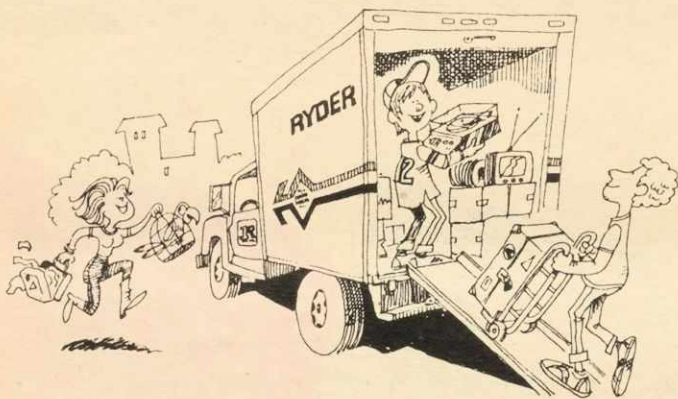


Life With Billy, captures some of the details of Jane Hurshman's life. While the most interesting parts of the book are those in which Hurshman tells her own story, Vallee does a good job collecting and arranging the biographical, statistical and judicial material needed to put her story into the context of wife abuse in Canada. Not a writer by trade

lee, "but I proceeded only after Jane Stafford (Hurshman) agreed to co-operate in its preparation."

Even though her book is still working to improve the lot of battered women, she regularly talks to battered women, police groups and directors of the region's transition houses. She criticizes the legal system and the police, saying that laws must change to protect the victims of abuse and deal with the real criminals. "I was both victim and accused," Hurshman told David Holt of *Atlantic Insight* earlier this year. "As the accused I was represented immediately. As a victim I had no rights."

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