

## Seconds Out, Round 2

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The Sydney Morning Herald, on its October 6 front page, reports the “Bill Henson Saga”. It came as a surprise that there was, in fact, any such a thing as a saga running over this matter. To all intents and purposes, it had seemed that an unpleasant and contrived news event earlier this year (see Art, Police & The Suburbs, May 30), benefiting a nervous new prime minister, child protection advocates and circulation auditors, had finally finished.

Previously in the Henson Saga: A new exhibition at a Sydney Gallery had included Henson’s photographed nude study of an adolescent girl (with her parents’ full and public consent). A complaint was made to the police, enabling a media report that Complaints Had Been Made To Police. The exhibition was disrupted; many politicians expressed revulsion over art they had not seen; publicity was generated for the child protection cause (no bad thing); a fine and reputable artist was denigrated with his work removed in front of television cameras from several Australian galleries (very bad thing); and suburban puritans generally enjoyed themselves. When it was over, the image received a spotless bill of health from the censor’s office, police announced no grounds for charges and the confiscated artworks were returned to galleries. There was much shock and horror, much waste of limited police resources and nothing approaching an informed debate. Right, let’s go to the pub.

But wait. There’s more. Some months later, a detail from a journalist’s book on the matter is re-printed in the Herald and other outlets. It describes objectively (and not unsympathetically) how Henson observed strict protocols in seeking possible adolescent models at a Melbourne school in the company of proper authorities. Henson’s photography has long been concerned with adolescent anguish. He does it with skill and integrity but now the knives are out again. The deputy prime minister, this time, is filled with disgust and offers a quote about strangers entering schools looking for nude children. Yuk. Good story, eh? And thus we have a new round in what is now, apparently, “the Henson saga”.

In the chapter *What is News?* in his recent book on the history of journalism, *My Trade*, BBC editor Andrew Marr makes a number of points in a British context which may well apply in Australia. The number of child sex crimes, he observes, remains generally static and the number of child murders has declined in recent years. Available studies show only that we know nothing of how prevalent these crimes are. And yet the number of paedophile stories in the media has risen astonishingly since the mid 1990s. Marr concedes this may eventually emerge as a valuable warning from a caring media about a highly sexualized age. On the other hand, he notes, society has rapidly developed a deep suspicion of men who lead scout troops, coach swimming, take photographs near beaches or lead youth groups. Parents are afraid to allow their offspring out alone, many innocent men have been made miserable and a large number of children have been unnecessarily frightened. Treatment for paedophilia has not noticeably improved and much innocent voluntary work has been curtailed.

Marr goes on to write that “brave, intelligent, probing reporting is so important that it is now impossible to imagine a decent society surviving without it [while] bad journalism ... ready to whip up irrational fears, is a fast route to social perdition”. Whether a new round

of reporting of Bill Henson's art and methods (or, at any rate, what others think of them) amounts to brave, intelligent journalism or just another bite at the cherry is probably a debate we need to have. But I'm not holding my breath.