

Cold Blooded Kindness: Neuroquirks of a Codependent Killer, or Just Give Me a Shot at Loving You, Dear, and Other Reflections on Helping That Hurts

Barbara Oakley

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Murderer. Loving mother. Sadomasochist. Animal rescuer. Master manipulator. Talented artist. Each of these identities applies to Carole Alden, the subject of Barbara Oakley's book *Cold-Blooded Kindness*.

In July 2006, Alden shot and killed her husband Marty Sessions in their debris-strewn trailer. Tying the body to the back of her truck, she dragged it into the yard, intending to bury it in an inconspicuous "grave." Somewhat later she called a "friend" who told her that if she didn't immediately call the police, he would. Two calls came into the Millard County, Utah, sheriff's station.

This sequence of events forms the basis of an exploration of difficult questions. Can innocence and guilt be easily determined? When is "battered woman syndrome" not a valid defense? When do empathy and caring become a disease? Why do children who share genetics and experience become so different as adults? How do notions of certainty affect judgment? What do we actually know about psychiatric disorders? How is justice best served in the legal system?

As she examines these questions, Barbara Oakley tells the story of Carole Alden's life and of Marty Session's death. She combines interviews with experts and with those directly involved in the Alden case with her own research to present a dynamic discussion that informs and challenges. For instance, she summarizes the work of Lenore Walker, who was instrumental in defining battered woman syndrome, but also presents the weaknesses in Walker's methodology and in the application of this concept by law enforcement and the courts. In the final chapter of the book, Oakley writes, "This book isn't really about gullible Carol. It's about gullible us." And, indeed, the ultimate challenge of the book is: What does it reveal about me?

Readers who like being provoked to think beyond commonly acceptable theories of guilt and innocence will enjoy this book. Oakley weaves a clear and compelling narrative for an audience who does not need degrees in psychology or neuroscience to invest in her story.

Cold-Blooded Kindness is Barbara Oakley's sixth book. Two prior works*, *Evil Genes** and *Pathological Altruism*, also explore the combination of borderline personality disorder, genetics, and brain structure that results in anti-social behavior. Barbara Oakley is associate professor of engineering at Oakland University.

GERALDINE A. RICHARDS (July / August 2011)

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