

Spotlight Essay

Spotlight is an incredibly moving film showcasing just how powerful investigative journalism can be through the exposure of the systemic sexual abuse by priests and the Church's efforts to cover it up.

First, it is a testament to the amazing instincts of the editor, Marty Baron, and the reporters that this was something they should look more into in the first place. The case of Father Geoghan was considered a singular case at the time, and while there had been other allegations and reports, this was a topic largely shied away from in the press and just in general. Baron had the shrewd insight that this was just a small part of a much larger story, and through his encouragement of his staffers to pursue it, they were able to stumble upon the giant conspiracy.

The instincts the Spotlight team also had in how to build up their story were spot-on. Discovering that priests who had been discovered molesting children were labeled as on "sick leave" or "unassigned" and using that to go through all the Church directories to find all priests accused was a huge moment and led them to confirm the fact that almost ninety priests had been involved in the abuse. As evidenced by the showing of time passing in the film, this took a lot of time and precision, but this was a huge step towards uncovering the larger conspiracy.

Similarly, figuring out that the Church never took cases through the court and handled it all discreetly as to sweep it under the rug was an important revelation that showed them just how systemic the cover-up was. Through both the victims that they interviewed and the lawyers who dealt with the cases, the reporters took the time and effort to make sure that their stories were told the right way, no matter how hard they may be to hear.

Another important aspect of the story to highlight is all the obstacles the team was up against as they investigated the reports of abuse and the cover-ups. One of the biggest issues they faced was that over 50% of their readership were Catholic, not to mention Boston is a predominately Catholic city. Bishop Law and the Church had very powerful ties throughout the city and to many people that were involved somehow. If the story was not written correctly, or in a way that people would not be able to ignore the truth, there could be some serious repercussions for both the paper and the people involved. Baron had the mindfulness to know that if they only reported on the abuse, there might be some backlash, but in the end, nothing would truly be done about it. But if they could prove, through the stories of victims and papers that condemn the bishop and other high-ranking church officials, that this was something that has been going on for decades and the Church has kept it silent, then they could have a real impact.

Many of the reporters also had personal ties to the story in different ways – Sacha Pfeiffer's grandmother being a devout Catholic, Matty Carroll living near a treatment center for priests who abused children, and Walter Robinson having gone to a Catholic high school where he discovered that a priest abused one of his classmates. Some of these instances could have been dramatized in the movie, but it only helped to show just how close the case was to everyone involved. It might have made it a little more challenging to report on, but even more worth it.

One of the most powerful moments of the film for me was when Robinson discovered that he had been informed of the abuse years ago through a tip, and he buried it unknowingly. The weight of thinking that if he had pursued the story earlier, he might have been able to protect hundreds of children's lives, is

obvious. But through telling this story now and doing it justice, he is making sure his earlier failure is corrected and that no child after this will be harmed.

The Spotlight team did not shy away from the truth, and they did not let all the people who told them to let it go, they would never change anything, they would only hurt the Church's reputation, deter them from making sure the whole story was told. They used the power they had to make sure that people in power were held accountable. Through the amazing work they did, they not only exposed systemic abuse in the diocese of Boston, but they also inspired a wave of change across the world.