

Least Said Soonest Mended

A Study Guide

Libby Tudball

'Least said, soonest mended'
... explanations and apologies are useless
and only make bad, worse.
Brewer's Dictionary of Phrases and Fables,
(ed.) Betty Kirkpatrick, Cassell, 1992.

Introduction

Least Said, Soonest Mended explores true events in the life of one family, events that were never discussed over thirty-five years. Steve mediates between his mother, Vi, and his sister, Val, attempting to understand the past, and why his parents chose a pathway which hid realities and denied feelings. The painful impact of their decisions caused major psychological problems for his sister. Val was fifteen when she had a baby daughter who was adopted. She had no choice in what happened, no opportunities for counselling, and was then expected to get on with her life. In *Least Said, Soonest Mended* we follow the family's journey from the 1950s through to the time when they are all brought together and the facts are laid bare. This highly personal film is about revealing the hidden. In the process, questions are raised about the meaning of family and motherhood.

Before Watching the Film

- ⊙ In a class discussion, talk about the title of the film. Do you agree or disagree with the phrase 'Least said, soonest mended'?
- ⊙ Does the more modern phrase 'let sleeping dogs lie' have a similar meaning?
- ⊙ Think and talk about possible situations in any family or group where it could be better not to discuss what has happened. Then talk about situations where

Curriculum Links: *Least Said, Soonest Mended* will have relevance and interest for teachers and students of Media Studies, Health and Personal Development, Welfare Studies, Studies of Society and Environment or Human Society and Environment, and English.

it is vital that the family or group reaches a resolution and moves forward on the basis of open and frank discussion.

Activities After Watching the Film

These questions may either be discussed as a class, in small groups, or completed as individual writing tasks.



Val and Karen, the daughter she relinquished for adoption, together in Bath, England, May 1999

Setting

At the start of the film we are taken back in time to Bath, England. The voice-over describes Bath as an 'icon to the stiff upper lip on which the Empire was built'.

- ⊙ What does this mean?
- ⊙ What impressions does the film-maker create in this initial setting for the story?
- ⊙ What other settings are used in the film and why?
- ⊙ At the end, Val and her daughter Karen are pictured in Bath, where the film begins, as though a full circle has been completed. Do you think the circle has been completed at the end? Has the pain of Val's experiences been lessened through the making of the film?



Steve Thomas, writer, director, producer

© In the images we see of Val and Steve, what clues are we given to show they were teenagers of the 1960s?

Val's Pregnancy

© The film depicts various reactions to the news of Val's pregnancy. Val's mother says it was 'a disaster', that she 'had let the family down'. The doctor said she 'was a silly girl', and Val 'didn't notice anything'. What explanations can you offer for each of these reactions? How might other people react to the situation?

© Val was fifteen when she found out that she was pregnant. She had had no sex education at school and no discussions with her mother. Do you find this surprising? Why or why not?

© The doctor advised that Val should be taken to a home and have the baby adopted. Find out about and discuss what alternative approaches would be possible today. You could refer to web sites listed in the reference section in this guide for starting points in your search.

Meeting the Key Players in the Story

© What techniques does the film-maker use to provide the viewer with a background profile of Val, Steve and their mother and father?

© What impressions do you develop of the twins' childhood?

© Is there any significance to the story in the fact that Val and Steve are twins?

© Why do you think the parents decided to 'keep the children in the dark' about the impact of the supermarket on the family business? Do you think this was a wise strategy?

© Where is Mum interviewed and by whom?

© Why do you think Steve decided to make this film?

© How you think Mum feels about the process of reflecting on the past?

Val and Steve as Teenagers

© In what ways are Val and Steve different as teenagers?

© Why was Keith cut out of the family photograph?



Director Steve Thomas and his twin sister Val outside the former Adoption Agency



- ☉ Why did Val's parents decide to take her to Bournemouth?
- ☉ Val was taken in secret to Bournemouth. Why did her parents lie about what had happened? Who would they have taken into their confidence?
- ☉ Why didn't Steve know what was happening?

Val's Visits to the Scenes of Her Past: The School

Val says she was 'in shock' for three days after arriving at the school. She describes the school and the work she did there as 'like being on a conveyor belt', 'she trained me, and I trained her'.

- ☉ Why didn't Val recognize the front of the building when she visited the school where she worked in the kitchen?
- ☉ Talk about your impressions of what it was like for Val to arrive, and then live and work at the school.
- ☉ Why do you think there seems to be a discrepancy between Val and Mum's memories of the frequency of the visits?

The Birth of Val's Baby

Val was moved to the church home for 'fallen girls'

when her baby was due. Kimberly Ann was born at 10.45 am on Friday the 11th of December, 1964. In most homes for single mothers at the time, the babies were taken from their mothers soon after birth, but Val nursed and spent time with her child for two months before she was adopted.

- ☉ What are Val's memories of the birth?
- ☉ What do you think of Val's treatment? Was it any different to the way pregnant women in general were treated during the 1960s?
- ☉ Why was Val so bitter about her parents' gift of a teddy bear for Christmas?
- ☉ What would Val have preferred to happen to her child?
- ☉ Why were the train trip and visit to the Muswell Hill Children's Aid and Adoption Society so traumatic?
- ☉ Was Val's arrival home another instance of 'Least said, soonest mended'? Explain your answer.
- ☉ Do you think the secrecy about the birth of her baby increased the trauma for her?

Val and Steve's Mum

In the film we learn a great deal about Mum's attitudes and values, her relationships with her children, and her role in the various stages of their lives.

- ☉ In what parts of the story do we see her living according to the saying 'Least said, soonest mended'?
- ☉ Why do you think Mum wanted the silver tea service for her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary?
- ☉ When the baby was born, Mum said 'there was no good getting upset'. How does this reaction compare with her usual behaviour?
- ☉ She says that 'Dad couldn't handle holding the baby'. Why do you think she said that?
- ☉ Mum says, 'You can't put your thoughts into our time thirty-five years ago'. To what extent do you think Mum's reactions to her daughter's pregnancy were typical of the social values of the time?
- ☉ Why did she decide to deny Val the pictures of her baby that were sent by the adoptive family?

⊙ In a class discussion, talk about different responses to this decision.

⊙ Why do you think Mum covered up Dad's illness? Steve said that 'Mum felt it was for Dad's good as well as Val's and mine. She felt that his temperament was such that he might give up and take an overdose or something if he knew he was going to die. Presumably the doctors were complicit in this cover-up too, because they left it to Mum to decide whether or not he was told'.

⊙ How does this view fit with current views on patients' rights ?

Val's Adult Life

In 1974, Val, her husband Mike and their daughter Tessa moved to New Zealand. Val became obsessive about her role as a musician and teacher.

⊙ What do you think might have motivated Mike and Val to emigrate?

⊙ Steve comments that 'it's probably a truism that "we are where we are, usually because we don't want to be somewhere else"'. Do you think the move to New Zealand helped Val's state of mind?

⊙ How do we know that Val desperately wanted to know about her first born daughter?

Val revisits Bournemouth in England, where she was sent to have her baby in secret in 1964.



Karen at Bath in 1999

⊙ How do we know that Val grieved for her lost daughter for twenty-five years?

⊙ What factors do you believe may have contributed to her physical and mental breakdown in 1984?

⊙ What do we learn about Tessa's relationship with her mother?

Karen

Karen didn't like the idea of a secret file somewhere with details of her birth mother, so she organized an appointment to see a social worker.

⊙ Why do you think the social worker avoided giving her Val's letter?

⊙ Why was Val so angry when she found out that her daughter had not received the letter?

⊙ How did Karen feel when she eventually read the letter?

Karen and Val's Reunion

⊙ Do you think letter writing was a better form of initial contact between Val and Karen than a meeting? Explain your answer.



Two years after Karen and Val started to correspond, Karen decided to meet her birthmother and flew to New Zealand.

© How would you describe their memories of the first meeting?

© What were Karen's initial impressions of her birthmother and her family?

Duncan

Duncan is Karen's adopted father. He and his wife adopted Karen when the law stated that there should never be any contact between birth parents and adopted children.

© What arguments could be put for and against this policy?

© How do you think Duncan felt about making contact with Val and her family?

The Production and Filming of Least Said, Soonest Mended

Steve Thomas (Val's brother) is the producer, director and narrator of *Least Said, Soonest Mended*. Read the following interview with Steve about the film and talk about his comments using the questions as a guide to your discussions.

Why did you decide to make the film?

© Before reading Steve's answer to this question, think and talk about what his response might be.

Firstly, I wanted to retrace my sister's experience, to understand her pain. Secondly, I was fascinated by the very different versions of the same story that each of my relatives carried and I wanted to explore these. Thirdly, I wanted to reconcile my family and felt that getting this story out into the open was a necessary first step.

© In what ways is Steve's response similar or different from your class response?

To what extent did you achieve your aims?

I think I probably achieved the first two aims, but I was a little naïve concerning the last! This is apparent in the final scene when Val plays the piano in the pub. Afterwards Val draws the cover over the piano as Mum and Duncan discuss some dead jazz singer. The veil is drawn over her suffering once again. But then, that's life. If it was a fiction film we'd have probably all hugged and had a cathartic experience, but in real life there is often no easy resolution for complex issues. Unlike a lot of fiction, life doesn't have neat and tidy endings, however much we would like to create them. At least Mum and Duncan, meeting for the first time, found something they had in common that they could talk about.

Over what period was the film shot and how did the filming and interviews of family members occur?

Before reading the response to this question, suggest how long you feel the process may have taken.

The script for the film was researched and written over about six months in 1996/'97. Then it took a long time to get production funding. The filming was eventually done in two blocks in 1999. I spent a week in New Zealand with Val and her family, recording interviews early in 1999. A couple of months later I spent three weeks filming in England. I did interviews with Mum, then Karen and Duncan. Finally, Val flew over from New Zealand and we revisited the places she was sent to in Bournemouth and London. Then we brought the whole family together in Bath.

How did you decide on the structure of the film?

The structure of the film is the chronology of the events that actually happened, from 1964 to 1999. This is the kind of manipulation of reality which happens in editing a film. The aim is to stay true to the story one is telling, rather than the filming process. Where we did maintain the chronology of the actual filming was in the family gathering in Bath. The piano scene in the pub was the last thing filmed and it is also the last thing in the film. The selection of a structure for the film in the editing process is very important and often difficult. When you think about it we could have told this story in lots of different ways.

© Before reading on to see what alternative structures Steve suggests, draft some other structures as a small group activity.

We could have started in the pub in Bath and then 'flashed back' to past events or we could have introduced Val and Karen together at the beginning and then told the story of their reunion. In the end, often the simplest structure is the most effective and we decided to tell the story from start to finish, pretty much in order of the events as they happened.

© Do you think this was the best structure for the film? Why or why not?

What other key ideas in the film would you want the audience to be aware of?

One important thing is 'point of view'. The main impetus for the film was for Val to tell her story. The film, however, contains multiple points of view, including those of Mum and Karen. Although my

sympathies lie very much with my sister, I did not want to make a film which was judgemental, that is, about 'goodies' and 'baddies'. Life is more complex than that. I wanted everybody to give their own point of view and then leave you, the audience, to make up your own minds about the whole thing.

© Do you believe that the film is judgemental of any of the key players or not?

To what extent do you think the film helped Val deal with her anger and memories?

I think that making the film helped Val in that it was an open acknowledgement of what had happened to her, which she hadn't been able to speak about for so long. She had been talking about it for some years, to her own family, in a women's group that she attended and to her counsellor, but this was a more public acknowledgement.

It was hard for Val to revisit those places she was sent to, but she says it helped settle things for her and put things to rest. I don't think the anger and the grief she feels will ever be completely cleansed though.

For my own part, I wanted to give Val the opportunity to tell her story because I've always felt guilty that I wasn't available to her at the time, even though it was not my fault. So the film was my way of trying to make up for that.

Did the film help Mum and Val's relationship?

As far as Mum goes, given her preference to 'let



Mothers and babies at the Maternity Home for Unmarried Mothers in Bournemouth



sleeping dogs lie', I think her participation was a wonderful gift to the film. She was prepared to talk about the past because she knew it was important to me. Unfortunately, in the short term anyway, the film doesn't seem to have helped her relationship with Val; they are still not able or willing to sit down and talk things through with one another.

What do you think will happen to Karen and Val's relationship in the future?

It's hard to say, because life is so unpredictable (except in hindsight!) but despite Karen's statement that it wouldn't worry her if Val stopped writing to her, I think that as time goes on her relationship with Val will become more important, not less.

Karen has already lost her adoptive mother and one day will lose her adoptive father. She may also have children of her own, which I think will change her view of motherhood. I think she is very loyal to Duncan because on a practical basis he is her parent and they have a very close relationship.

Karen said something to me when we were filming which I thought was very interesting. She said she didn't believe she was scarred by being taken away from Val. She believes that 'as long as a baby is kept warm and fed, and is loved, it doesn't care who looks after it'. I've thought a lot about that statement and

I think it's an important one to discuss. Indeed, the film could also be said to be about the question 'what makes a mother?'

© Do you agree with Karen's point of view?

© What do you think are the characteristics and qualities of a mother?

What do you think of the saying 'Least said, soonest mended'?

I guess it's pretty clear from the film that I'm not in favour of the kind of attitude summed up by this old English saying. I also don't agree with sayings like 'let sleeping dogs lie', 'what you don't know doesn't hurt you' and 'what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve about'. These are all sayings (or proverbs) that were common in my extended family in England. All I can say is that this approach didn't serve my sister or me to our advantage. It's a kind of paternalistic, protectionist philosophy whereby decisions are made for you rather than with you. There is no consultation and so one is rendered powerless.

© What are your views on these other sayings Steve disagrees with?

© Research other sayings in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrases and Fables*.

Is there any situation you can think of where it is better for matters to be covered up?

The milieu that I grew up in was one where children were to be 'seen but not heard'. There may be times, perhaps with small children, when it is best that they don't know the full story, but I think that teenagers are perfectly capable of handling and coping with (given the right support) very difficult issues and tragedies. Indeed, for our own health and self-esteem we need to be given that opportunity.

It's also very hard on the person who has decided to keep information from others. It's a great burden they are heaping on their own shoulders in order to maintain control of events or the people around them.

© Do you think that Mum took on a burden?

What effect did the denial of information have on you as you grew up?

I grew up feeling that things were kept from me. I

could have been of help to my sister, I could have said goodbye to my dad, but I was denied the opportunity to do either. This has caused anger and guilt which I have only become aware of in later life. One result is that I can't abide people keeping secrets! I also empathize with people who are denied their rights or patronized. In short, I have difficulties with 'social engineering', however well-intentioned.

Making documentaries is my way of getting things out into the open and sticking up for the underdog. For me, film-making is about finding my voice and giving a voice to others. A lot of the films I've made are about the mistakes made by 'do-gooders' and well-intentioned people who feel qualified to say 'I know what's best for you'.

Are you glad you made the film?

Sure, although what the film was about shifted for me as I was making it. It started out as an 'adoption story' with the aim of bringing about some sort of resolution for my family. But as the filming went on I realized that it was really a film about the tenacity of family identity and the roles family members play. Families have their own internal rules by which they operate and it is very hard to break these down or change them. As individuals we fit into this *modus operandi* or risk becoming the 'black sheep' of the family (to coin an old phrase). Also we tend to adopt or be given roles within the family which stick. I realized while filming that I was still playing the role I have always played in my family – that of 'peacemaker'. I realized that we've never been a family that sits down and 'has it out with each other', and even though thirty-five years had passed, we weren't about to change. 'You can drive a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'. In this case the horse is my family!

More Recent Reunions

In 1996, Tessa and her boyfriend went to England to visit Mum/Grandma and were joined by Val at Christmas.

© How did Mum react to the idea of meeting Karen?

© How did she justify the fact that she didn't want to meet her?

The Family Gathering in the Pub

© How do you think Karen feels about Val?

© Do you think Karen might feel a conflict of loyalty between her adoptive and biological parent? If so, why?

Do you think that Val's anger and suffering has been lessened by the experience of making the contact and getting the family together?

© Why was the gathering at the English pub and Val's piano performance so important?

Steve qualifies his dismay at the apparent lack of concern for Val displayed by Mum and Duncan with the words: 'Of course the truth is more complex. There are other stories behind this story and in the end a family finds its own way of surviving the pain'. What do you think he means by this?



Karen and her husband

© Discuss possible reasons why Mum came to have her 'let's not talk about it' attitude.

The Future

© What impressions are we left with about what may happen to Karen and Val's relationship in the future?

© What factors could influence their relationship?

Issues for Further Research and Discussion **Teenage Pregnancy in Australia**

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that thousands of young women who are still at school become pregnant each year. About 12,000 women below the age of nineteen give birth each year, and possibly an equal number of pregnancies are

terminated. The statistics also show that a young woman's chances of completing secondary schooling once she becomes pregnant – and makes the decision to continue the pregnancy – are almost nil. Few schools have programmes to ensure that pregnant and parenting students are made to feel welcome and encouraged to continue.

© What are some of the implications of these facts for young mothers today?

Birthmothers and Adoption

Women who have experienced the trauma of relinquishing their child for adoption express many different reactions to the loss of their child. Most agree that the loss has led to psychological distress. A common view is that women in the past had no choice but adoption, since it was viewed as shameful for women, particularly young women, to become pregnant and have a child out of wedlock. Many relinquishing mothers feel they were forced to give up their babies, and there are countless stories of hidden shame and grief. Birthmothers interviewed about the loss of their babies report having low self-esteem, relationship difficulties, depression, compulsive-obsessive and panic disorders. Most say that a delayed grief reaction continued for long periods in their lives. Birthmothers who are reunited with their children reportedly go through further pain at first, and the experience has varied outcomes.

© Do you think attitudes have changed towards young single mothers today?

© If so, what factors have caused a change in attitudes?

© How can social welfare networks support young mothers?

The Rights of the Parent, The Rights of the Child

Today questions concerning the rights of biological and non-biological parents and their children are even more complex because of the multiplicity of means of conception for infertile (heterosexual and gay) couples. The use of donor sperm, surrogacy and invitro fertilisation (IVF) have put issues about biological parents versus non-biological parents, and the rights of children to know who their biological parents are, onto the public agenda. The most basic questions include what constitutes 'a parent' and how this concept has changed.

Further References

Documenter is an on-line documentary journal run out of Melbourne which has an interview with Steve Thomas in its archive. The web address is <http://www.documenter.com> and the title of the article is 'Filming the Family', vol.3, no.1.

Ronin Films distributes *Least Said, Soonest Mended* and there is a downloadable director's statement about the film (attached to information about the film) at their web site: <http://www.roninfilms.com.au>.

Other Web Sites

<http://home.att.net/judy.kelly/Sdiscussion.htm>

Donna Portuesi, 'Silent Voices Heard, Impact of a Birthmother's Experience, Then and Now' @ <http://www.adoptioncrossroads.org/portuesi.html>

www.sev.com.au/awe/

Books

Present, Pregnant and Proud

Available from the Association of Women Educators, PO Box 229, Sandgate, QLD, 4017, email: awe@m141.qone.net.au

VANISH (Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self-Help) has an excellent resource book which can be downloaded as a PDF file at their web site <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~vanish/>

VANISH can be contacted at 199 Cardigan Street, Carlton, VIC, 3053, ph (03) 9348 2111, email: vanish@vicnet.net.au

Evelyn Burns Robinson is a relinquishing mother who has written a book on the subject entitled *Adoption and Loss: The Hidden Grief*. She has a web site through which the book can be purchased for \$19.95 plus handling & postage:

<http://www.clovapublications.com>.

Clova Publications, PO Box 328, Christies Beach, SA, 5165, ph (08) 8186 3706, email: sales@clovapublications.com

Least Said Soonest Mended is available through
RONIN FILMS: PO Box 1005, Civic Square ACT 2608
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