

Open secret: Kevin Donovan's account of the Ghomeshi investigation is comprehensive, but not revelatory

Book Review by David Hayes, *The National Post*, October 17, 2016

Secret Life: The Jian Ghomeshi Investigation

By Kevin Donovan

Goose Lane

260 pp; \$19.95

Several years ago, while talking to one of my former feature writing students, Jian Ghomeshi's name came up. I often listened to Ghomeshi hosting CBC Radio's Q, and thought he was an effective interviewer whose hushed, intimate voice was made for radio. My former student, a talented young woman in her late 20s, said to me, "do you know the joke about Jian Ghomeshi? If you're a female journalist in your 20s working in the arts in Toronto, he's hit on you."

I was surprised but then thought, why should I be? It's a common enough scenario and, if true, I would think less of Ghomeshi, but assumed it meant he was one of those middle-aged celebrities fixated on young women. Not admirable, perhaps, but also not criminal.

When the Ghomeshi scandal became public — driven by the reporting of independent media critic Jesse Brown and triggered by Ghomeshi's rambling Facebook post in which the former broadcaster admitted to a taste for consensual rough sex — it was catnip for the media. As weeks passed, more women came forward, mainly anonymously, with disturbing stories of choking, punching and sexual assault, initially on Brown's Canadaland site and, later, in *The Toronto Star* when Brown entered into a partnership with the paper's investigative unit and the coverage grew exponentially.

Most of us followed it with varying degrees of obsession as it led to a high-profile pair of trials early this year with Ghomeshi represented by Marie Henein, one of the top criminal lawyers in the country. (It's hard to imagine an actor who could better play the role of a sleek, brutally strategic litigator who shreds the Crown's case.) The Ghomeshi trials launched a nation-wide debate about how sexual assault cases are handled and especially how women with the courage to come forward as witnesses are treated.

Secret Life: The Jian Ghomeshi Investigation, by the *Star*'s lead investigative reporter Kevin Donovan, is what, in magazine journalism, is called a "comprehensive." With big, dramatic stories, the public follows reporting in the daily news and on social media but the information comes in stages and is incomplete as the story unfolds in real time. A "comprehensive" is assigned long after the story has run its course when a journalist gathers everything that can be researched, including new revelations, into one big narrative: *this is what really happened*.

In some respects, Donovan's book delivers. Although much is familiar, there is also intriguing new material. For example, Donovan provides a fascinating, step-by-step blueprint of a journalistic investigation. For those who wondered why the Star took so long to run with its sensational scoop, he takes readers inside private meetings involving the paper's libel lawyer and senior editorial managers as they debate the credibility of sources and legal implications. A big, well-financed media organization is the natural target of a lawsuit, so the Star was cautious, always aware of the "responsible communication defence" that requires journalists to prove a story is clearly in the public interest. Would the two key women who first came forward as confidential sources "come to the party" (appear as witnesses at a libel trial)? The answer was no, so Donovan — and an impatient Brown, surprised by the Star's tentative pace — kept looking for complainants who would. Depending on your point of view, the Star was a prudent, responsible corporation or so cautious it became paralyzed; Brown was a gutsy risk-taking journalist or a loose cannon.

This is Donovan's story, though, so readers get his take on things. While he credits Brown for some reporting, the culture clash is obvious. To Donovan, Brown is a "self-described media critic" and a "sentence finisher" (someone who asks a question and when the interviewee pauses, finishes the sentence for them, heading off the chance for unexpected revelations). He also complains that Brown was reluctant to ask his sources tough questions and too freely offered anonymity. Donovan concludes, "the partnership between the Star and Brown was uneasy at best, and growing volatile."

With the Star waiting for the right moment to publish, however, it was Brown who provided it for them. His tweets about his investigation into Ghomeshi's private life had unnerved the broadcaster, and when Brown announced that an upcoming post on Canadaland "is a monster, it's a huge revelation ... that is worse than embarrassing for certain parties," an even more rattled Ghomeshi — who had been fired that day after his lawyers showed CBC executives video evidence of a badly bruised woman as proof of "consensual sex" — assumed Brown's "monster" story was about him (it wasn't). Ghomeshi wrote a rambling Facebook post outlining his rough sex and BDSM proclivities, and that admission, Donovan explains, opened the door for the Star to publish the allegations it had been sitting on — although he underplays Brown's role.

Donovan also found sources to help him reconstruct meetings in the offices of Ghomeshi's downtown Toronto law firm, Dentons Canada LLP, where various members of his team — lawyer, manager, agent, publicist, PR consultant and Jaime Watt, chairman of high-powered crisis management firm, Navigator — develop a strategy for their client.

In one memorable scene in a Dentons boardroom, Ghomeshi "paced around the room and moved his arms wildly as he described sexual scenarios he had been involved in with various women ... Those of his advisors watching Ghomeshi noticed that he seemed to become aroused as he described how rough sex is done: his

voice rose, the timbre of his voice changed, and he provided more detail than needed.”

While these scenes will be new to the reader, the material from the 17 women and two men whose identities Donovan knew (although most were anonymous), as well as allegations from four other women whose identities Donovan couldn't confirm, is more of a rehash. In some cases, he elaborates on what appeared in the *Star*, like the story of Grace, who was part of the original investigation, but in the book ruminates at greater length on why she continued texting with Ghomeshi. Or he describes in more detail the strategies and preliminary discussions with key complainants. He also talks to the father of one complainant who says of Ghomeshi, “It's a good thing we don't live in the same city. I'd end up with charges.”

The real weakness of the book, though, is that readers learn almost nothing new about Ghomeshi himself. Based on his interviews, Donovan writes, “the man was struggling with issues of depression and anxiety, and despite his fame, he desperately wanted to be liked. The women who spent time with him described him as a master manipulator and a narcissist.” He adds that none of this was helped by a “host culture” at the CBC that had made the network's star untouchable.

But most readers know all this from coverage over the past two years (including additional reporting by Brown). To be fair, the book's subtitle is clear — it's about the *investigation* — but surely what everyone wants to know is who this entitled, reckless, petulant, anxiety-riddled mass of id at the centre of the scandal really is. The psychological literature about sex offenders describes how they typically reveal little about their real feelings, are secretive, close-minded and self-righteous. They're also possessive, believing that anything they want, including people, should be theirs to do with as they please. There's much more that might have been explored through research and interviews, even if Ghomeshi and his family refused to cooperate. Furthermore, though Donovan touches on the post-incident contact that women so often have with abusers — which became the linchpin of Ghomeshi's defence — that's another under-explored theme, possibly for a deeper, more reflective book (by Brown?) yet to be published. *Secret Life* reads like a book being prepared in a rush, to catch a moment in time.

This may explain the publishing history of Donovan's book. *Secret Life* was originally Kobo's first publishing deal, with the e-book retailer producing the digital edition on its platform and partnering with the independent publisher ECW Press for the print edition. Publication was targeted to precede Ghomeshi's first trial. In May 2015, Jesse Brown posted on *Canadaland* about the feeling of dread some of the women had when they heard that Donovan's upcoming book would have “greater detail and background than we would ever include in a newspaper story.” Brown claimed that Donovan didn't consult the women and had told him that he “doesn't work with sources” and his relationship with sources “is not a partnership.”

According to industry insiders, in October 2015, ECW judged what it had seen of the book as lacking both in impact and new information, and pulled out. By mid-December Kobo had decided the material was too sensitive for its inaugural title.

(Not to mention that some women at both publishers were less than keen on publishing it.) In the end, Donovan's agents shopped the book around again and signed a deal with Goose Lane Editions, a small but respected New Brunswick publisher.

The book was released less than two weeks ago, so it's impossible to tell at this point how the many women who risked so much by coming forward to tell their stories will feel about *Secret Life*. In its preface Donovan writes, "I have taken great care to not reveal their identities. I have altered or left out all identifying details of these women, from physical characteristics to exact dates to geographical locations." If he's succeeded, he either intended to do this all along or may have been pushed further in this direction by Brown. Or we may still register complaints from the women at the centre of the Ghomeshi affair about being victimized again.

Donovan ends with the fallout left in Ghomeshi's wake. Women whose lives touched the broadcaster's and were left with scars. Women whose credibility was torn apart in a courtroom. CBC executives bounced from their jobs. Friends of Ghomeshi who have re-evaluated those friendships.

And then there's Ghomeshi himself, unemployed and said to be in counselling for his behavior, whose life, even after this book, remains very much a secret.