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The shameless vilification of Regina Twigg

"Trapped in the media circus" was the story's headline and if ever there was an indictment of overbearing reporters it was that color photo in the Tribune on March 10. Tall-towered TV news trucks with gaudy corporate logos lined up like a bad accident near Ernest and Regina Twigg's house — the house Kimberly Mays now calls home.

Media critics during this sensational baby-swap case chanted the obvious: *Overkill!* All three major networks, CNN, local TV and radio, three wire services, and reporters from London, New York and Washington — all at times have covered the story. So when Kimberly Mays joined the Twiggs' household last week, psychologists' and family members' pleas for privacy were immediate and understandable.

And yet ... are we blaming the right instruments for the wrong reason? Is it media-as-intruders who are at fault? Or is media-as-chroniclers more worthy of scrutiny?

Consider: It would be tough to argue in favor of less-than-thorough coverage. When a healthy baby is switched for a sick one in a hospital nursery, that's news. And when a child goes to court five years after the swap's discovery to reject her birth parents, that too is news.

What's less defensible, however, is the telling of this tale in black and white. Even on color TV screens, shades of gray need not apply. Melodrama has its own internal rules, chief of which is that forces of good always battle forces of evil. This baby-swap tale carried more stereotypes than if it had been told by the Brothers Grimm.

The Wicked Stereotype

Granted, a certain amount of typecasting was inevitable as each memorable character popped up. There were, among others, a dodging doctor, a nurse impeachable even on her deathbed, a stalwart father, a scornful ex-wife and a dazed girl. At the center of it all stood Cinderella's hateful stepmother, Hansel and Gretel's tormentor and the Wicked Witch of the West all rolled into one: Regina Twigg.

"She was tight-lipped, suspicious, angry," wrote Gail Collins of Newsday, describing her courtroom demeanor. "She has the eyes of a whistleblower, or a citizen who believes there are still prisoners of war in Vietnam. Or Oliver Stone, explaining how the CIA helped kill John Kennedy."

Regina Twigg, like the old hag feeding Hansel goodies to fatten him up, gave her critics much fuel. She wrote letters to the editor of Kimberly's hometown weekly newspaper, signing other people's names. She emoted on "Oprah." And she never gave up hinting that Robert Mays helped orchestrate the original mix-up and then engaged in a conspirator's cover-up.

But what did she do to deserve being painted in print as wholly irrational, impossibly obsessed, callous, hysterical, illogical, disgusting and ugly — even a child abuser? The nicest thing said about her was that she was "a stranger" to Kimberly.

And talk about putting the victim on trial: "Don't you think it's about time you started acting like a mother?" asked an opposition lawyer in open court.

170 Alone on the firing line

Regina Twigg was the popular villain, the kind you love to hate. No one, not even the pundits, came to her defense.

In all the negative outpouring, the storytellers ignored the *other* side of Regina Twigg. She had, after all, amply displayed the credentials of motherhood throughout the late Arlena's repeated illnesses. Imagine raising a big brood while nurturing your ailing youngest, comforting her during surgeries, then watching her die. Nobody praised Regina Twigg for standing by the child she learned was not hers. Nobody gave her credit for postponing the search for Kimberly until a time when the quest would not hurt Arlena.

After Kimberly Mays "divorced" her biological parents last year, Art Ginsburg, one of her lawyers, said the Twiggs should "accept reality." Kimberly would never, ever live with them, he said. Kimberly, young and emotional, can be excused. Ginsburg should have known better.

Syndicated writer Ellen Goodman, applauding the case's outcome last year, said Americans agree "that Kimberly and her legal father should be free from interference by her biological parents."

We media types don't look so smart now, do we?

After last year's custody trial, lawyer John Blakely of Largo said, "Ultimately, the Twiggs will be vindicated." March 10 was V-Day. The Twiggs are no longer Kimberly's pursuers; they are her parents of choice.

You can't say the same about the media, hoisted with their own petard. It wasn't overkill but oversimplification that marred the coverage. The baby-swap case was never black and white. And life, even at its most melodramatic, is never a fairy tale.