

[Home](#)[Up](#)[Doc List](#)

99-122 Doc

Against Innocence

The New Republic

03/15/1999

Margaret Talbot

The truth about child abuse and the truth about children.

I. On August 12, 1983, a woman named Judy Johnson placed a call to the police department in Manhattan

Beach California. She had a crime to report: her two-year-old son had been sodomized at his preschool. And that was how it started. What kept it going, what made Judy Johnson's allegation virtually unkillable, even as it began to look more and more controvertible, is another story, one whose implications we have neither reckoned with nor escaped.

Johnson, as it turned out, was not the most reliable of narrators. Within two years, she had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. (This was shortly after she had engaged the police in a stand-off, menacing them with a shotgun from her front door.) Within four years, she had died of liver failure induced by alcoholism. By then her stories had lurched into Gothic grotesquerie. Her son's ordeal at the McMartin preschool, a family-run operation with a long and placid history in its prosperous community, had included, she claimed, being made to watch the sacrifice of animals and human infants, to ingest urine, blood, and feces, and to accompany his teachers on airplane flights to Palm Springs and into a labyrinth of underground tunnels where one of the accused "flew in the air" and the others "were all dressed up as witches." By then, too, Johnson had accused various elected officials, along with models whom she saw in advertisements and strangers passing in cars. The prosecutors on the casesome of them, anyway-regarded her as an unpleasant joke. "You want to hear what Judy says happened now?" court records show one of them razzing his colleagues. And later: "Jeez, I wish Judy would just disappear and leave us alone."

Yet the chain of events that Judy Johnson's delusions set in motion seemed, and almost was, unstoppable: an avalanche, a runaway train, all the tired metaphors of inexorability come to mind. The McMartin school case eventually encompassed 354 counts, 41 witnesses, and 369 alleged victims. In an effort to locate the kiddie porn for which the McMartin toddlers had allegedly been exploited, local investigators, along with the FBI and INTERPOL, seized and reviewed thousands of blue movies and photos. In an effort to find bones, bodies, burial sites, clothing-any evidence at all of the ritual sacrifices that supposedly went along with the sexual abuse-they searched 21 residences, seven businesses, 37 cars, three motorcycles, one farm, and a national park in South Dakota

where one of the defendants had once gone camping. Gloria Steinem put up money so that a team of archeologists and geologists could excavate beneath the school looking for secret tunnels. (Their existence was never established.) The police offered a \$25,000 reward, no questions asked, for a single pornographic photo of a child taken at the McMartin school. (None ever materialized.)

Therapists and social workers cocooned the parents of Manhattan Beach in support groups, in which they were encouraged to vent their grief and to elicit further "secrets" from their children. The result of such ministrations was that by 1985, as Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker write in *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (1995), "hundreds of South Bay children were naming ministers, reporters, soccer coaches, aerobics instructors, grade school teachers and babysitters as abusers.... If the charges were true, one could only conclude that over the course of a decade, one-third of the children in the South Bay had been molested, raped, and then terrorized so utterly that not one had dared to tell." Indeed, under the coaching of satanicritual-abuse experts, who picked up the smell of panic and jetted in from all over North America, some of the McMartin school parents became convinced that any number of local celebrities, including members of the Anaheim Angels baseball team, had been involved in the abuse conspiracy. Seven preschools in the area were eventually shut down. And the trial itself was to last three years from April 1987 to July 1990-making it the longest-running (and the most expensive) criminal proceeding in American history.

In the end, as we know, for the story has been told many times now, the McMartin case did not yield a single conviction-only a welter of mistrials, acquittals, and deadlocks. It turned up no forensic evidence to support the charges that the school had been the scene of ritualized sex abuse. Nor, for that matter, did any of the other prosecutions of alleged sex-abuse rings in American daycare centers-McMartin was the first of about several dozen cases like it in the 1980s, including the notorious Little Rascals and Wee Care prosecutions-turn up such evidence.

The defendants in these cases included a large number of women, which in a way was not surprising, since most day-care workers are women. Still, this fact was surprising-or it should have been-since women also make up a small percentage of child molesters in general (about 12 percent, according to the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect) and a minute percentage of those who molest very young children. And the sudden focus on day care was odd, too, since children are far more likely to be sexually abused by adults who are related to them than by teachers or day-care workers. Reliable studies based on reports from state agencies suggest that perhaps 2 percent of confirmed child sex-abuse cases take place in day-care or foster-care settings, and virtually all of those cases involve one perpetrator. The diabolically organized conspiracy to molest-the crime posited by the day-care prosecutions of the late '80s and early '90s-is a chimera.

And yet, even as the charges grew more and more implausible, and corresponded more and more suggestively to a toddler's notion of unspeakable transgression rather than to any known profile of adult sexual perversion-in Maplewood, New Jersey; a 26-year-old day care worker named Kelly Michaels was accused of playing "Jingle Bells" on the piano in the nude and licking peanut butter from the genitals of her young charges, and

one of the McMartin children said a teacher had served her feces in chocolate sauce-the child abuse professionals held fast to their mantra: "Believe the Children."

For several years, moreover, during which innocent people, many of whom were themselves the parents of young children, were sent to prison, the press by and large went along. "The horrors may only have started with sodomy, rape, oral copulation, and fondling," Newsweek confidently reported of the McMartin allegations in April 1984, and added the following consumer tip: "The Manhattan Beach case serves as lesson for any parent: choosing a pre-school is an exacting decision—as important as choosing a college" says Pittsburgh childcare authority Marsha Poster Rosenbloom." Time's account noted that a horse was slaughtered in front of the toddlers to intimidate them into silence, but the magazine neglected to ask how this messy procedure was accomplished without detection in a busy preschool in the middle of town, where parents and teachers came and went throughout the day. "Parents," Time chided, "were too trusting, assuming that separation anxiety was the reason their children cried when dropped off at school."

By the late '80s, then, the notion that many, many day care workers went into the field only to sate their Sadean lusts for small children, and that schools were places fraught with sexual "stranger danger," and that childish innocence was under unprecedented assault from the forces of evil, had sufficient credibility to darken the nightmares of mothers and fathers across the country. II.

he question, of course, is why-and the answer is not merely of historical interest. For while it is true that we have come to the end of this particular cycle of prosecutions, we are still in the grip of the same debilitating belief that kept those prosecutions alive. We seem to think that we can protect children from sexual depredation chiefly by imagining them as chaste and empty vessels-as though only if they were such figments of our frightened imagination would the moral horror of their violation be great enough to call up society's resources on their behalf. The innocence of young children-which is to say, the sexlessness of young children-is a newly reclaimed article of faith for many child-abuse professionals, who contend that overt sexual curiosity in children is often a sign of pathology or abuse. (To adopt this point of view, they have had to beat back the ghost of Freud, but that hasn't been so hard of late.) The deeroticization of childhood is also a talismanic notion for many of the rest of us, who want to believe that prelapsarian virtue may still be found somewhere, clean and gossamer-white. Our children seem to provide a foundation for our belief in the possibility of pure and perfect innocence, and what else can?

But this interpretation of childhood teaches more about American adults than American children. Can we really not protect our children as they are? For children need not be sexless in order to trigger our solicitude and our censorship of certain aspects of adult life. They need only be what they are: smaller than us, newer to the world, more easily frightened, not yet capable of certain kinds of cognition and will, and so on. There is such a thing as infantile sexuality, even if sex is for grown-ups. And the sentimental tenet that the value of our children lies in what they are not-corrupted, sexual, us-entails some unkindness and some injustice to them. Molestation is not the only terrible fate that can befall a child, though to read much recent fiction, or a large sub-genre of self-help books, you might think otherwise.

The re-Victorianized hypervigilance about "good" touch and "bad" touch that makes many teachers—even preschool teachers—wary about holding or hugging small children is one sad and practical consequence of such attitudes. So much can be read into a gesture now, so much assumed about its motivations and its capacity for contamination. "We advise our members not to touch the children, especially as the children grow older," the spokeswoman for a New Jersey teacher's union told *The New York Times* last year. "We have to be careful because there have been so many false accusations against teachers."

Similar policies at many day-care centers now prohibit workers from changing a baby's-diaper without another adult present and discourage them from holding toddlers in their laps. Joseph Tobin, who teaches early childhood education at the University of Hawaii, has written thoughtfully about the kinds of fears and precautions that he encounters among students who are preparing to be preschool teachers now. In one classroom discussion, about an exuberant four-year-old girl who liked to kiss little boys, half of Tobin's students thought that such behavior "should alert us to the possibility of sexual abuse." Tobin was disturbed that what seemed to him normal behavior should automatically trigger such alarm.

I asked myself... [W]hy would something as ordinary and innocent (at least to me) as a preschool kissing game strike so many of my students as dangerous? In the weeks that followed students described other situations they found problematic: children playing doctor; a field trip to a dairy farm; a male teacher holding a little girl on his lap.... Children's sexuality, sexual play, sexual knowledge, adults touching and being touched by children—these struck my students as dangerous and threatening to children, their caretakers, or both. For their part, some parents, too, seem to take an unseemly pride in policing the sensual pleasures—for both parties—of caring for young children. As one father recently boasted on an Internet chat group, "I remember being scrupulous to avoid any inappropriate stimulation of my infants while making sure they were clean."

Our preoccupation with people who actually do assault children has made us wary of people who never would assault them. These days we are all suspects. Of course, most of us are not drooling in carnal thrall to the very young. Most of us are perfectly able to draw the line between an awareness of the erotic strand in the relationship between parents and children and the callous exploitation of it. So we have become suspects not so much by acting differently with our children as by acting the same, while all around us, and especially in the helping professions, the definitions of suspicious behavior change.

A child psychologist named Toni Cavanagh Johnson recently conducted a survey of 369 mental-health professionals in which she asked various questions about what sorts of family intimacy are "appropriate" and "inappropriate." When she asked, "What ages are suited to children and parents being nude around each other?" 55 percent answered "No age," suggesting a conviction that even infants ought to be decently attired at all times. Almost 40 percent thought parents should never take baths with their children, no matter how young those children are. To label as puritanical the sort of domestic routine that this "scrupulousness" would entail is almost beside the point. What really astonishes is the stringency of the ideal, the almost utopian impracticality of it. How is a

mother home alone with her baby supposed to shower or dress? Should she leave him unsupervised in the other room lest he catch a glimpse of her defiling nakedness?

When it comes to sex play between children, the attitudes of many child abuse professionals these days can be even more censorious. They might be thought of as pre-Freudian, so shocked are they by evidence of erotic curiosity and desire in children, except that they are so often self-consciously post-Freudian: that is, prone to indignant dismissals of the whole notion of infantile sexuality and brimming with conviction that little kids who play doctor, as the euphemism has it, could only have caught the idea from a nasty grown-up. These attitudes have spawned a new and intrusive monitoring of so-called "sexually reactive" or "sexualized" children-which in its worst guise can mean forcing kids who have engaged in consensual exploration with siblings or friends to register as sex offenders or enroll in behavioral therapy programs.

There are now several hundred such programs treating "molesters" younger than twelve, according to Judith Levine, a journalist who has reported extensively on them. Levine has written about a twelve-year-old boy in New Jersey obliged to register as a sexual offender after he groped his eight-year-old brother in the bath and about a nine-year-old boy in San Diego who was placed in foster care for two years after he admitted touching his younger sister's "vaginal and anal areas" and "placing a pencil in her buttocks." His sister, too, was removed from their mother's home for two years.

Of course, the sex-abuse panics of the 1980s also gave rise to a backlash. Organizations such as the False Memory Syndrome Foundation and researchers such as Richard Ofshe and Elizabeth Loftus tried to refute the theory that horrifying memories of child abuse could be suddenly "recovered" intact, hauled gleaming to the surface in the obliging net of total recall. Journalistic skepticism kicked in at last, and helped produce books such as *Satan's Silence* and Lawrence Wechsler's *Remembering Satan*, along with an extraordinary three-part documentary on the Little Rascals case made by an Israeli journalist named Ofra Bikel. Wildly inflated statistics that had been reported in the mid-'80s as facts such as the claims that twenty to fifty thousand children are abducted in the United States each year and never seen again, or that kiddie porn comprises a \$5 billion industry in the United States, or that 40 percent of American girls were sexually abused as children-were by the mid-'90s getting the critical scrutiny that they deserved.

Yet the backlash has done damage, too. It has given aid and comfort and ammunition to some of the more brutish opponents of the entire therapeutic profession, and to Freud-bashers in particular. (That this always involved a profound misreading of psychoanalysis-it was Freud, after all, who introduced the notion that many memories of childhood "seduction" were fantasies, not literal transcriptions of reality-has not stopped Frederick Crews and others for whom the excesses of the recovered memory movement have been a godsend.) It may also have stirred up undue skepticism about real cases of sexual abuse. Backlashes are like that. They sweep up everything that came before them, the sensible along with the bizarre; and they cannot really liberate us from the logic of the previous regime because they are still arguing within its terms.

III.

here were proximate causes, it is true, for the great Satanic day-care scare of the '80s.

Chief among them were the interviewing techniques of some of the child-abuse professionals called in on these cases. It was not merely that they routinely asked leading questions: "Can you remember the naked pictures?" one of the McMartin interviewers prompts a child, though neither picture-taking nor nudity has been mentioned in the interview. It was not merely that they asked these questions over and over again, and with little apparent willingness to accept "no" or "I don't remember" as an answer. It was not just that, with brightly colored puppets and anatomically detailed dolls and wheedling hypotheticals, they encouraged imaginative speculation about events rather than the free recall of them. ("Let's pretend and see what might have happened.")

No, they were even more egregious. They overtly rewarded those who "disclosed" with hugs and lavish praise, and they bullied those who did not, telling them that all the other "smart" kids had owned up to the "yucky secrets" at McMartin. Even now, reading excerpts from those interviews can make you suffer for the children all over again. "Are you going to be stupid, or are you going to be smart and help us here?" the interviewer demands of an eight-year-old boy, who has just denied having ever seen anyone play "Naked Movie Star" at the McMartin school. After a few more vain attempts to winkle out an allegation, the interviewer turns to the puppet who is supposed to be the boy's stand-in and says: "Well, what good are you? You must be dumb." When a child twice says he has no memory of the "naked pictures," his interrogator instructs him to "think about that for a while, okay? Your memory might come back to you." Salacious details are often supplied by the questioner him- or herself, as in the following exchange about the elderly director of the school:

Interviewer: Who do you think played that game [horsey]?

Child: Ray and Miss Peggy.

Interviewer: Ray and Miss Peggy? Did Miss Peggy take her clothes off?

Child: Yeah.

Interviewer: I bet she looked funny, didn't she? Did she have big boobs?

Child: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. And did they swing around?

Child: Yeah.

In many of the other day-care abuse cases across the country, too, transcripts show social workers and police investigators cajoling and browbeating children who said they were not molested, bribing them with promises that they can go home to mommy and daddy or get their teacher out of prison if only they will tell. Sometimes the emotional rewards offered to those who do "disclose" give off their own unsavory odor. "Do you want to sit on my lap? Come here, I'm so proud of you," says one social worker in the Kelly Michaels case. "I love big girls like you that tell me what happened that aren't afraid because I'm here to protect you.... You got such pretty eyes.... I'm jealous. I'm too old for

you."

For the most part, these interviewers were not merely nasty or inept. Many of them were deeply and sincerely committed to their mission of child protection. Unfortunately, that mission often required them to accept the doctrine then in vogue that a denial of abuse may be the best indicator that abuse has occurred. By that logic, believing the child could mean believing what a child did not say, what, in fact-out of fear or shame, the thinking went-he might insistently and repeatedly refute. Consider the following exchange between two adult investigators on the Kelly Michaels case and a four-year-old boy:

Interviewer: Did she put a fork in your butt? Yes or no?

Child: I don't know, I forgot.

Interviewer: ... Oh come on, if you just answer that one, you can go.

Child: I hate you.

Interviewer: No you don't.

Child: Yes I do.

Interviewer: You love me I can tell. Is that all she did to you, what did she do to your hiney?

Interviewer #2: What did she do to your hiney? Then you can go.

Child: I forgot.

Interviewer #2: Tell me what Kelly did to your hiney and then you can go. If you tell me what she did to your hiney, we'll let you go.

Child: No.

Interviewer: Please.

Child: Okay, okay, okay.

Interviewer: Tell me now . . . what did Kelly do to your hiney?

Child: I'll try to remember.

Interviewer: What did she put in your hiney?

Child: The fork.

In other exchanges, the interviewers seem scarcely to listen, so wedded are they to their own version of what must have happened. Consider this tone-deaf back-and-forth

between a social worker and a child, again in the Michaels case:

Interviewer: Do you think that Kelly was not good when she was hurting you all?

Child: Wasn't hurting me. I like her.

Interviewer: I can't hear you, you got to look at me when you talk to me. Now when Kelly was bothering kids in the music room....

Child: I got socks off.

Interviewer: Did she make anybody else takes their clothes off in the music room?

Child: No.

Interviewer: Yes.

Child: No.

You don't have to believe that young children make inherently unreliable witnesses, or even that they are significantly more suggestible than adults, to conclude that this sort of grilling-especially when it takes place in an atmosphere of rising panic, replicated at home by parents who can't seem to stop themselves from believing the worst-is likely to elicit some falsehoods.

Recently, a group of psychologists led by Sena Garven at the University of Texas in El Paso devised an experiment in which they tried to recreate the McMartin interviewing techniques, based on their reading of the interview transcripts. Sixty-six children between the ages of three and six received a visit at their preschool from a jolly graduate student who introduced himself as Manny Morales. He read them a story, placed a sticker on each child's hand, and gave each a cupcake. A week later, 36 of the children were questioned about this incident by interviewers who used the full arsenal of McMartin techniques. The other 30 were asked merely "suggestive" questions. Of the kids in the first group, 58 percent made false allegations against Manny-saying, for instance, that he stole, threw a crayon, bumped a teacher, or told the child a secret that she wasn't supposed to reveal to anyone else. By contrast, just 17 percent of those who were asked merely suggestive questions, with no social incentives to fabricate, did so.

IV.

In the end, though, proximate causes only get you so far. Bigger explanations are demanded. The interviewers in the day-care cases may have been overzealous, and the stressed-out parents may have been easily spooked, but what primed the rest of us to believe these stories? Surely there were larger reasons for an entire culture's preoccupation with child sex abuse; and these are precisely what two astringent and important books-Moral Panic by Philip Jenkins and Erotic Innocence by James R. Kincaid- seek to provide.

Jenkins and Kincaid are less interested in addressing the objective threat of child

molesting than in asking why at particular historical moments-and with no solid evidence that it is on the rise-it can seem so much more omnipresent and alarming than at others. "Prominent among what are accepted as self-evident facts in contemporary America," writes Jenkins, "is the belief that children face a grave danger in the form of sexual abuse and molestation. This menace has certain well-known, stereotypical characteristics. Sexual abuse is pervasive, a problem of vast scope; molesters or abusers are compulsive individuals who commit their crimes frequently and whose pathologies resist rehabilitation or cure. Sexually deviant behavior often escalates to violence or murder. Sexual relations with adults invariably cause lasting damage to the children involved; a battery of psychological explanations exists to account for any failure by the victim to perceive harm from the abuse or to recognize its severity." Yet none of these were accepted social facts a quarter of a century ago. And their promotion to that status now is not necessarily a sign that the truth has finally triumphed, that these beliefs are correct whereas the previous beliefs were incorrect.

Why, these books ask, does sexual molestation often dominate our discussions of child abuse-and our talk shows, our TV movies of the week, our custody battles, our middle-of-the-night anxieties-when physical abuse and neglect are far more common and far more likely to kill a child? In a 1997 survey of substantiated child abuse cases in 31 states, for example, the largest number of cases-54 percent-were instances of neglect. 22 percent were cases of physical abuse, and 8 percent were of sexual abuse. (The rest were considered cases of either emotional maltreatment or "other.") In 1996, a federal government survey (based mostly on data from the National Incident Study on Child Abuse and Neglect) put the percentage of sex abuse at 12 percent of the approximately one million substantiated or strongly suspected cases of child abuse and neglect nationwide.

For Kincaid, these sorts of observations warrant a much more audacious attack on the ways in which "our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it is doing any such thing." He has produced an impassioned argument that, in construing children as "the species incapable of practicing or inciting sex," we inevitably eroticize them, for "defining something entirely as a negation brings irresistibly before us that which we are trying to banish." The result is the oily fear that we can only escape the temptations of pedophilia by concocting demons, staging witch trials, and regarding the eroticization of children as an unspeakable evil about which we must nonetheless speak and speak and speak. "Breaking the silence," as the rabble-rousing slogan has it; though surely silence is no longer the problem. Do permit ourselves the unfamiliar thought that skepticism about our culture's emphasis on sex abuse is not a denial or a trivialization of such abuse, it helps to be reminded just how contingent our current views really are. Jenkins's book, a more sober and straightforward work of history than Kincaid's, is the place to begin. Jenkins argues that theories about sexual abuse, and public concern about it, have not evolved in any sort of linear way, but have fluctuated over the course of the century. To a certain extent, the peaks of anxiety have corresponded to moments at which women entered the workforce and children entered day care in large numbers: the late '40s, the late '70s and early '80s. To a certain extent, too, these panics have been produced and manipulated by moralists who wanted to denounce sexual "deviance" in general, and homosexuality in particular. Yet they have also followed a cyclical pattern. The hysteria of the late '40s, when sex maniacs were, as J. Edgar Hoover put it, thought to be "roving America almost at will," gave way in the

'50s and '60s to an attitude of relative unconcern about sexual molestation; and this attitude in turn gave way to what Jenkins calls the child abuse revolution, beginning in the mid-'70s.

For the psychologists and the child protectionists and the reporters and the law enforcers of each era, only the consensus that had prevailed in the era that preceded them—the underestimation of child sex abuse or the overestimation of child sex abuse—seemed to matter. "In neither our conceptualizing of the problem nor our devising of counter-measures," Jenkins observes, "is there much evidence that we have learned from history." This is depressing. And it is also not depressing, for it holds out the possibility that if we ever do grasp the extent to which we have been locked into a cycle of overreaction and underreaction, we might escape it. The notion of the sexual abuse of the child had to wait, of course, on the notion of the child. As a

practical matter, this meant that it could hardly have been conceived as a distinct category of malfeasance until perhaps the early nineteenth century. And given that sexual pathologies were scarcely theorized before Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis in the late nineteenth century, its appearance was, in the event, postponed until then. As we now know from the work of Phillipe Aries, Lawrence Stone, and others, early modern Europeans tended to treat children like miniature adults, as corroded by willfulness and sin as their elders, and in no particular need of their own protections or their own amusements.

Before the nineteenth century, children were neither honored as creatures of superior sensibility and imagination nor shielded from adult sexuality, as they would be in both the Romantic and Victorian conceptions of childhood. And sex between adults and the people we now call children was far more frequent than it is today, for the simple reason that the concept of children as sexual innocents, and of childhood as a uniquely pure and precious and vulnerable stage of life, did not, for all intents and purposes, exist. As late as the 1880s and 1890s, the age of consent set by most jurisdictions in the United States reflected this idea: it was ten in most states, and in some states even younger.

There are historians who refute this version of things—and who have dug up letters and diaries that suggest parents were more tender with their children, even in the seventeenth century, than Aries in particular would have had us believe. Still, you have only to trace the evolution of children's portraiture, as Ann Higonnet does in her elegant book *Pictures of Innocence*, to feel convinced that childhood did not begin to be idealized, and to acquire its modern sentimental valence, until the late eighteenth century. A vast emotional territory separates the stiff and solemn little aristocrats of Van Dyck from the pink-cheeked, barefooted insouciant of Gainsborough or Reynolds. And by the time you get to the dreamy moppets of Millais's mass-produced prints *Cherry Ripe* and *Bubbles*, in 1879 and 1886, European culture is plainly more enamored of infantile innocence. Of course, the idealization of childhood—the Romantic notion that "heaven lies about us in our infancy"—can co-exist with manifold cruelties to real children. By the late nineteenth century, however, official tolerance for such contradictions was waning. The first child protection organization, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, was established in 1874. By 1910, there were more than 300 such societies across the country. Meanwhile, a popular movement of the 1880s and 1890s helped to raise the age of consent in most states to sixteen or eighteen.

(The paradoxical result, as Jenkins observes, is that the age of legal consent was steadily rising while the average age at which adolescents experienced puberty steadily fell between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries: biological maturity and legal maturity had diverged.) By the first decade of the new century, a typical Progressive-era coalition of feminists, social workers, and moral reformers, backed by the muckraking press, had succeeded for the first time in defining the sexual violation of children as a social problem. Indeed, anyone who thinks that our generation was the first to discover the true extent of children's sexual vulnerability will be taken aback by the frank and fretful tone of the first public discussions about child molesting, at the turn of the century. The authoritative textbook *A System of Legal Medicine*, which appeared in 1894, contained the radical claim that "rape of children is the most frequent form of sexual crime." In 1893, in his popular tract *Traffic in Girls*, Charlton Edholm sneered at the idea that a child could give informed consent to sex. Indeed, in his sympathy with child-victims, Edholm is recognizably modern: "When a big burly man fifty years of age is brought into a court of justice and confronted by the little ten-year-old victim of his lust, if he can prove that the child, for a paper of candy, consented to an act of which her childish mind is ignorant, that jury of twelve men-probably fathers of little girls themselves-will hold the child guilty and the man guiltless."

Vice investigators confirmed that child prostitution was flourishing in many cities. As one such smut-hunter in Philadelphia put it, "numbers of boys in knee pants are commercializing themselves openly on the streets for the practice of perversion." Stephen Crane even planned to write a novel about these boys-Flowers of Asphalt-though he later abandoned it on the advice of squeamish friends. By the turn of the century, it was known that children could and did contract gonorrhea and syphilis. Chicago's county hospital maintained an entire ward for children with venereal diseases. (Not everyone, though, was willing to accept the implications of these facts. In 1915, at a clinic in St. Louis, doctors diagnosed 66 cases of venereal disease in little girls. Unable to credit the idea that the children had become infected through sexual activity, they decided that badly designed toilet seats were to blame-which may have been the origin of this particular canard.)

By the early 1920s, organized feminism and the Progressive-era reform coalitions were on the wane, and the anxiety that they had provoked about child molesting faded with them. Only in the late '30s and early '40s did it begin to build again, in the wake of several wellpublicized murders of young girls in New York and California-one committed by a man who had spent much of his life in prison for sex crimes. Those crimes were real, and horrible; but Jenkins's point is that the coverage of them, and the response of legislatures and law enforcement agencies to them, had almost nothing to do with the objective threat posed by sex murderers, who were as rare as they were grisly. The reaction had more to do with cultural jitters about defenseless women and children left on their own while men went off to war. Indeed, the most alarmist articles about sex crimes to appear in the popular press before the 1980s appeared in the late '40s. In 1949, *Colliers* magazine reported that sex crime "by the rapist, the sex psychopath, the defiler of children" had "virtually gone out of control." Bands of pedophiles were "roaming about, abusing, molesting, luring and perhaps one day killing.... The sex hoodlum, hanging around schools with comic books and bubble gum to lure his victim, has imbued parents with a stark new fear." J. Edgar Hoover himself signed his name to an article called "How Safe Is Your Daughter?" that ran in *American*

Magazine in 1947: "The most rapidly increasing type of crime," he claimed, "is that perpetrated by degenerate sex offenders.... [It] is taking its toll at the rate of a criminal assault every forty-three minutes, day and night in the United States ... depraved human beings, more savage than beasts, are permitted to rove America almost at will."

A crime wave is always relative. If you live in rural Japan, a single murder in your village will seem like a plague; if you live in New York City, last year's murder rate will seem like a blessing. But as Jenkins points out, the late '40s were actually "one of the safest eras in American urban history, when rates for all forms of violent crime were enviably low by the standards of later decades." To sustain the idea of an unprecedented sexual menace out there, law enforcement officials had to tweak the numbers and massage the categories. And they did—conflating a variety of sexual unorthodoxies with the most brutal of sex crimes. Of 256 juvenile sex offenders—all boys—who passed through New York City Children's Court between 1928 and 1933, for instance, a quarter were being punished for consensual homosexual acts with boys their age. ("Excessive masturbation" and "speaking or writing obscenely" accounted for another 34 percent of the cases.) In New York City, 3,295 people were indicted for sex felonies between 1930 and 1939 but 59 percent of them were charged with statutory rape, which meant sex with any female under the age of 18, regardless of the age of the perpetrator. And Hoover could make his sensational claim that a sex crime took place every 43 minutes only by combining the statistics for forcible and statutory rape. Even at the height of the panic, there was plenty of reliable, countervailing information that should have dispelled it. A number of states had established commissions to investigate the precise scope of the sex-psychopath threat, the existence of which they took as a given. Yet many of these commissions concluded by opposing the reigning consensus on sex crimes, showing that the number of such offenses had been exaggerated, along with the recidivism of sex criminals. The availability of this information did nothing, though, to block the passage of panicked and overly broad legislation, such as the so-called sex psychopath statutes.

Under these laws, a person convicted of a sex crime—and sex crimes included acts that were often consensual, such as statutory rape or the vaguely defined sodomy—could be identified by a panel of doctors as a "sex degenerate" and confined indefinitely in a mental hospital. By 1950, such laws were in place in fifteen states; and fourteen more states would pass them over the next decade. Homosexuals were particularly vulnerable under the new legislation, since sodomy was a sex crime regardless of consent. In several states, no criminal charge was necessary to set the process in motion. A citizen's complaint "There's a pervert on my block!" sufficed. The only good news was that the statutes were seldom used; Jenkins says that the number of "sexual psychopaths committed annually during the 1950s would rarely have exceeded a couple of hundred." If anything, these low numbers ought to have convinced the courts that the sex psychopath laws were superfluous—that they were unconstitutional and unnecessary. V.

But it was not until the early '70s that most were overturned. By then, a liberal backlash had set in. Journalistic reports in the '50s and '60s tended to stress the overreaction to aberrant sexual behavior and the way in which sex-crime laws could be exploited to allow the legal lynching of black men. At the same time, the psychiatric consensus about child molesting had softened, so that molesters were regarded as more pathetic than

dangerous. (And even funny, as in the Dirty Old Man jokes of the '60s.)

At times the Kinseyism of the '50s and '60s—so professorially tolerant when it came to the varieties of human sexual experience—seemed to justify a smarmy, wish-fulfilling defense of sex between adults and children. Wardell Pomeroy, a researcher on the original Kinsey team, wrote that incest could be "a satisfying and enriching experience," resulting in "many beautifully and mutually satisfying relationships between fathers and daughters.... They have no harmful effects." And the equally wishful notion of the molested girl as a practiced seductress who wanted—no, needed—the sex she got (remember Carroll Baker in *Baby Doll*?) enjoyed an astonishing respectability in this liberal era.

For all the manifest creepiness of this view, however, there was something humane and measured about the argument that often went with it: that sexual abuse need not define a person, and need not be promoted into the overarching, allelloping story that it has now become. In the view of many psychiatrists in the '50s and '60s, a hysterical reaction from parents and other authority figures only conveyed the message that any sort of premature sexual experience permanently defiled a child, rendering her dirty and damaged goods. As the sex researcher Paul Tappan contended, lasting psychological harm did not inevitably follow upon an episode of abuse, especially when abuse was defined broadly to include, for example, run-ins with an exhibitionist. "This is not to condone the offense," Tappan wrote, "but merely to emphasize that the implicit danger has been grossly exaggerated, and that the possible traumatizing of the individual is almost always a product of cultural and individual responses to the experience rather than because of the intrinsic value of that experience itself." Well, it all depends. There are forms of sexual abuse which one cannot imagine not leaving psychic scars. But psychic scars are not as common as we think they are. When it comes to indecent exposure, say, or to the kind of sex play between children that makes many adults so uncomfortable, Tappan surely had a point. Today, by contrast, there is a disturbing sense in which our preoccupation with sex abuse seems to place a greater value on a child's sexual purity than on anything else.

Even, at times, a greater value than a child's life. Kincaid provocatively introduces into this context the siege at Waco, Texas. It was carried out and justified in the name of preventing the molestation of children, "suggesting," as Kincaid writes, "that eighty-one deaths can be outweighed by violated innocence." And the insidious idea that sexual abuse seals a singular, inescapable doom can be found elsewhere, too. Consider the outpouring of public support for Ellie Nesler, the woman who shot and killed her young son's accused molester in the California courtroom where he was awaiting trial. Nesler was a folk heroine in 1993. Columnists mama-lionized her; teachers rallied their elementary school students to send her thank-you notes; bumper stickers crowed "Nice Shootin' Ellie." That Nesler would likely go to prison for her crime (she went on to receive a ten-year sentence), blighting her little boy's life all over again, did nothing to complicate this celebration of vigilantism. Or consider the recovered memory movement, in which the memories that count are almost always of sexual abuse, as though every secret sorrow grew from the same root, and every psychic poison seeped from the same vial.

In the late '70s and '80s, when feminists, psychotherapists, and anti-pornography

crusaders started sounding the alarm again about child molestation, they were reacting—and rightly—to the element of trivialization in the previous era's treatment of sex abuse. Some correction was clearly in order. For a time, this took the form of heightened concern and well-considered legislation about child abuse in general. Eventually, though, a certain ideological zealotry began to infuse the movement.

On the right, anti-gay crusaders such as Anita Bryant invoked the threat of pedophilia in the schools to try to ban homosexuals from teaching. On the left, feminists began to argue that "father rape," as Susan Brownmiller called it, was the linchpin of the patriarchy. Pedophilia, in this view, was not a psychological abnormality, it was a cultural malady. Under the right circumstances, any man was capable of rape or child molestation, because every man was naturally, helplessly subject to the same barrage of misogynist stimuli. For young girls, sexual exploitation in the family was a sort of apprenticeship for sexual submission outside of it, and so on.

The radical core of this crazy idea melted away in time, but a residue of it remained, above all in the conviction that the veracity of personal memories of molestation should never be challenged because their status as a kind of religiopolitical testimony superseded any considerations of objective fact. Indeed, as the feminist rediscovery of child abuse melted into the therapeutic ethos of postfeminism, the inner life of the victim took on a kind of sanctity, an irreproachability. A person who had been molested as a child, or who thought she had been, was now a "survivor" of abuse, as someone might be a survivor of war or genocide.

Worse, what merely felt uncomfortable to a given person could constitute a brutal violation—and, if it took place in the family, an act of incest. As the best-selling book *The Courage to Heal*, the mother of all incest-survivor books, explained, child sex abuse could include "being forced to listen to sexual talk," being "fondled, kissed, or held in a way that made you uncomfortable," and "being bathed in a way that felt intrusive to you." The subjective logic of the new self-help books pointed toward a bold new conclusion: if you felt you had been abused, you had been abused. As *The Courage to Heal* put it, "violation is determined by your experience as a child—your body, your feelings, your spirit." (Almost everyone feels violated somehow, sometime.) The conviction that you had not been abused, on the other hand, was merely a symptom of "denial." As Roseanne Barr unfunnyly declared, "When someone asks you, 'Were you sexually abused as a child?' there are only two answers: One of them is 'Yes' and one of them is 'I don't know.' You can't say 'No.'"

All this fervor helped to create various constituencies with a vested interest in publicizing the threat of sexual abuse: child advocacy groups; organizations and companies that promised to help you protect your children from kidnapping; therapists who specialized in recovered memories; clinical social workers, whose ranks had grown from 25,000 in 1975 to 80,000 in 1990; self-help authors; evangelical Christians who believed in satanic ritual abuse; feminist anti-porn activists; right-wing anti-porn activists; even the producers of "stranger danger" videos, of anatomically correct dolls, and of children's books such as *No More Secrets*, *It's MY Body*, and *It's OK to Say No*. Numbers were often fungible for these groups. And in the late '70s and '80s, many of them began circulating alarming statistics about the extent of sex abuse and related crime-statistics that were reported without skepticism in the press.

As both Jenkins and Kincaid show, many of those numbers were based on dubious research or on the indiscriminate merging of crime categories. Some sensationalistic studies lumped together "confrontation by an exhibitionist" or even exposure to pornography-the kind of experiences that would leave only the most delicate and otherworldly among us lastingly traumatized-with rape by a parent. And in the matter of the kidnapping of children, statistics were even more wildly inflated. In the mid-'80s, according to the historian Paula S. Fass in *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*, Senate and House committees heard testimony to the effect that "two million children" disappeared each year and as many as "five thousand were murdered through kidnapping and abduction." In fact, as a comprehensive study sponsored by the Justice Department later revealed, the number of "stereotypical kidnappings"-horrifying cases such as those of Adam Walsh or Etan Patz, in which children were taken by strangers who intended to keep them, held at least overnight, or transported fifty miles or more-numbered between 200 and 300 a year. Of those, somewhere between 43 and 147 children were killed.

A figure such as 1.5 or 2 million abductions each year could be derived only by adding in all runaways, "throwaways" (or abandoned children), and children taken by other family members, usually in the course of custody disputes. This latter group alone, according to the Justice Department's study in 1990, accounted for about 350,000 cases a year. It is a bleak enough statistic on the face of it-but it is worth noting, as the authors of the Justice Department study noted, that "most of these episodes lasted two days to a week, with very few, 10 percent, a month or more." In only 1 percent of the cases was a child permanently spirited away from one parent by another. Now, you might argue that in the service of a good cause, such as the protection of children, exaggeration is not such a terrible thing. If alarming statistics mobilize people and free up funds, if they help to rescue even a few more children from intolerable circumstances, what is the harm?

The harm is considerable. Undifferentiated numbers make it difficult to mount an adequate policy response: abandoned infants, teenage runaways, and children snatched from the mall by malevolent strangers all require different sorts of help. Exaggerated numbers frighten parents unduly, and often about the most unlikely villains-elderly daycare teachers, closet Satanists. And when overblown figures are debunked, as eventually most of them are, the costs to the whole enterprise that they supported are often high. The public reacts with cynicism, a backlash takes shape, and so on. *Moral Panic* is a fine and thoroughly researched work of history, and an enormously useful reminder that we have gone this way before. Like the sexual psychopath statutes before them, the sexual predator and community notification laws of the 1980s and 1990s combine civil and criminal penalties in a constitutionally worrisome way. Like those earlier laws, too, our contemporary versions are big, unwieldy contraptions designed to catch one rare class of criminal: the murderous, compulsive pederast.

In the end, though, the book's cyclical explanation is not entirely satisfactory. For one thing, as Jenkins himself acknowledges, the pattern that he identifies for the twentieth century-in which peaks of public concern about child molesting occur roughly every 35 years-falls apart in our era: "Far from marking a new era of indifference," the late '90s have been "characterized by the furor over sex predator statutes and the fear of

cyberstalkers. The cycle has been broken in our modern era, when child abuse has become part of our enduring cultural landscape, a metanarrative with the potential for explaining all personal and social ills." Anyway, all cyclical arguments about history have something tautological about them. Peaks of interest in a given social problem occur because troughs of interest preceded them; troughs of interest occur because peaks preceded them. Well, yes. But why are some cultural anxieties more susceptible to periodic inflammation?

It could be the case, despite all of the best arguments of scholars such as Jenkins, that panics about sex abuse have recurred in the twentieth century (and that the current panic has persisted) because the incidence of sex abuse is increasing. One piece of evidence that might support this is the rise in the number of step-families in our divorce-ridden age, since some studies have shown that the rate of sexual abuse is as much as eight times higher in step-families than it is in biologically related ones. Over the broad sweep of history, however, this comparison is not quite so apposite. Before the demographic revolution of the late eighteenth century, when the average life span in the West began creeping upward, step-families were as common as grass. (This is why the wicked stepmother is a stock character in European fairy tales.) The only difference was that most remarriages came about as the result of death, not divorce.

Among the very poor, who could seldom afford either marriage (the license, the dowry) or divorce (the lawyers, the gifts to magistrates and other fixers), cohabitation and "blended" families-as we now sweetly refer to them-were the norm. And given that taboos against sex with children were far weaker than they are in the modern era, it would not be at all surprising to learn that what we now call sexual abuse occurred frequently in early modern Europe and America-as often and perhaps more often than it does now. Some historians of sexuality and the family have already concluded as much. "Based on an overview of history," writes Vern L. Bullough, "this author would state that adult/child and adult/ adolescent sexual behavior occur less frequently now than they did in the past."

oreover, the evidence indicating that the rate of sexual abuse has risen in more recent years

since the early '60s, say-is not all that strong. Certainly the reporting of it has increased, but that is not the same thing. And some of the very forces that brought to light many genuine cases of abuse-mandatory reporting laws and a general suspiciousness of funny uncles, doting step-daddies, and men who just adore children-have also inspired a certain number of false reports. This is true not only in the spectacular context of, say, satanic ritual abuse trials, but also in the more routine context of divorce proceedings. While angry former spouses have always been prepared to believe the worst about one another, and to hurt one another, the charge that one parent-most always the father-was sexually abusing their child has become a popular weapon only recently. And since even an unproven accusation can do damage-curtailing visitation, sowing suspicion-truth is not necessarily the object. A study carried out by the University of Michigan Project on Child Abuse and Neglect found that 14 percent-and perhaps as many as 23 percent-of the sex-abuse charges that emerged during divorce cases turned out to be false.

Meanwhile, reports of sexual abuse as a percentage of all child abuse reports have actually been declining—from a high of 16 percent in the mid-'80s to about 7 percent now, according to one national survey. It is hard to know for sure how to interpret this; but one explanation is that the earlier upsurge was a somewhat artificial product of the publicity and the panic about child abuse in the mid-'80s, and that the current numbers are more realistic. Another interpretation can be found in a recent report from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, which surmises that "after over ten years of attention to this problem, it is possible that the reservoir of cases involving years of abuse have been so reduced ... that child welfare is less burdened with such cases. Further, improvements in professional practice and the rapid expansion of child assault prevention services have produced an environment in which cases are identified closer to the onset of the abuse." In other words, social workers and child advocates have simply gotten better at preventing or limiting sex abuse.

What is clear is that over the last century, and especially over the last thirty years, the taboo against sex with children has become much stronger and more overt. As other sexual taboos—on adultery, on homosexuality, on the explicit depiction of sex in movies and advertisements—have crumbled away, the stigma on pedophilia has become all the more marked, all the more precious. It is a kind of bulwark of civilization now—a contemporary dividing line, like that favored by nineteenth-century German philosophers to divide men from beasts. As Paula Fass puts it, "The very need for some sexual boundaries somewhere in a society rapidly shedding earlier taboos made sex with children more repugnant and more socially explosive, increasing both the pressure to create more protective legislation and the tendency to report breaches."

This is the positive—in the sense of morally wholesome—interpretation of our obsession with child sex abuse, and I happen to think there is a great deal to it. For one thing, it helps explain why the most recent panic seems to have set in for the duration. But this argument too, has its blind spots—above all, the failure to acknowledge that the fetishization of this last taboo has a dark side. It seems to lead us toward an idealized and curiously denatured view of children: as saintly Little Evans, dainty and delectable packets of Edenic virtue who never lie and who can be presumed to know nothing about sex. And yet the more we insist on this innocence, the more we eroticize it. The fervently forbidden is almost by definition a goad to desire. Hence the latent and not-so-latent pedophilia that oozes out of our popular culture—Calvin Klein ads featuring strung-out waiflets; neo-Balthusian fashion spreads; kiddie beauty pageants (and the interminable frenzy about JonBenet Ramsey); the ever-popular schoolgirl-in-a-uniform motif of many rock videos and songs; and so on. VII. Ames Kincaid's book is an unusually bracing, even brilliant, exploration of this paradox. It is also, at times, very exasperating. Kincaid's tone is knowing and oddly jokey, and he is a little too fond of what he takes to be the showstopping rhetorical gesture. "It would hardly be an overstatement," he writes, "to say that the subject of the child's sexuality and erotic appeal, along with our evasion of what we have done by bestowing those gifts, now structures our culture." Well, yes, it would be an overstatement. He shows scant sympathy for parents, who may fear some fate for their children not because it is statistically likely, but because it is singularly horrifying; and who may be forgiven for doing so, even as they are reminded of the odds. (Fass's sensible history of child abduction in America deflates the same bloated statistics, but with more delicacy and

tact.) Yet Kincaid's book has the great advantage of situating recent sex-abuse scandals—the McMartin case and others like it, the accusations against Michael Jackson and Woody Allen—in an appropriately larger context, which is the history of the cultural image of childhood. Kincaid, who is a professor of English literature, points out that "the development of the modern child and modern ideas on sexuality grew up over the last two centuries hand-in-hand," so that what we think about when we think about children is often the absence of sexuality.

For the Romantic poets, who drew a dreamy, besotted portrait of childhood that quickly lent itself to popularization, "the child was gifted with spontaneity, imaginative quickness, and a closeness to God." Chiefly, though, the child was defined by what he was not. As Kincaid writes, he was "free of adult corruption; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, mortality, and sexuality; liberated from the light of common day." Early in the nineteenth century, childish innocence had a larger and more spiritual connotation, but by the time of the Victorians its meaning had narrowed, mawkishly, to the absence of carnal knowledge. The innocent child is the erotic child, for innocence is made to be lost. "We see children as among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous and mischievous," Kincaid observes. "We construct the desirable as among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous." Thus we regard children as erotic while regarding "an erotic response to children not merely as criminal but as criminally unimaginable." And the bind this puts us in makes us a little crazy, and leaves us unhealthily preoccupied with the Gothic narrative of child-molesting. Worse, it diverts attention and resources from more prevalent forms of cruelty to children: emotional and physical neglect, physical abuse, abandonment, and the sort of soul-stunting poverty in which such mistreatment often festers, unchecked.

Kincaid finds evidence of erotic innocence in what might seem to be some unlikely places, but for the most part he persuades us that it is there. He is right to say that a fair amount of contemporary pop culture is saturated with "pedophilic nostalgia," a devaluation of maturity nested within a cloying fetishization of childhood. This image has a history, of course: think of J. M. Barrie and the boy who wouldn't grow up—indeed, of the whole tradition of Victorian children's literature, in which the dream of childhood recedes down a gold-tinged river, with a heartbreaking plish-plash of oars. In our contemporary culture, though, it has taken a form that is at once cruder, more commercial, and more selfconsciously psychological.

Every therapeutic discussion of the inner child—so drippily enamored of itself—partakes of this idealization. So, in a way, do the writings of Robert Fulghum, who tells us we learn nothing of consequence after the maximally cute age of five. And, as Kincaid points out, so do plenty of Hollywood movies—and often in mildly more prurient fashion. Consider the much-loved film *Stand By Me*, which appeared in 1986, and featured, in Kincaid's words, four adorable "outcasts with horror-show fathers [who] get in trouble and stand by one another in homosocial devotion. But it's an image frozen in time: the film believes as passionately as J. M. Barrie that life ends at twelve, the adult narrator at the end reflecting 'I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anybody?'"

Kincaid is right, too, to identify a spate of movies in which "a child, most often a boy,

possessed either of no father or a bad one, is isolated, sexualized, and imperiled, whereupon he or she runs into an adult, often a male, who is down on his or her luck, outcast, misunderstood, sensitive, on the lam, romantically irresistible-usually all of these, and always the last... The plot creates a special space, harbors the pair for a few moments from an unfeeling world that soon, however, crashes in and kills or exiles the adult." This has been the basic plot, in recent years, of *Sling Blade*, *The Professional*, *A Perfect World*, *The Client*, *The Man Without a Face*, and other movies. In their portrait of children as redeemers of grown-ups-precocious but cherubic intercessors put on earth to remind damaged adults of what they have lost-these movies have almost nothing to say about the complicated world of actual children.

Indeed, this sort of treatment of childhood can actually be a mask-and not a particularly convincing one-for the resentment of children. For the flip side of the angel-child is the demon-child: the ghoulish cliché of films from *The Bad Seed* to *The Omen* to *The Good Son*, in which the audience roots for the destruction of the enfant terrible, and by proxy for the punishment of all aggravating, demanding, incorrigible, high-spirited, sexually mischievous children everywhere. The nostalgia for childhood and the hatred of children are not unrelated; they are, in fact, intimates. How could they not be? We always resent what we retrospectively fetishize: the world we have lost, but only now speak of so lovingly.

And there is more. Children grow up and leave us, even though we have poured our hearts into them. That is how it is meant to happen, but it doesn't always make the abandonment easier to bear. Children, as Kincaid puts it, "demand everything, give nothing; they are ungrateful ... how sharper than a serpent's tongue it is to have a thankless child!" moans King Lear-and my parents and yours." If we are lucky, if we have done our job right and been favored by fate, they not only outlive us, they outshine us, too. And they remind us that we will die. If there is such a thing as childhatred, then it is very old and very deep, and so entwined with the love and the care of children as to be inextricable from them. And as old and deep as it is, it acquires a particular edge in a society that exalts youth and innocence to a preposterous degree.

These arguments may seem a little fancy and abstract, but it makes sense to think about them in the grimly concrete context of child sex-abuse investigations. In McMartin and similar cases, the pole-star presumptions guiding social workers and police officers all borrowed something from the idealized vision of the innocent child. One of those presumptions was that a child never lies. Another was that a child in possession of what seemed to be precocious sexual knowledge was a child who had been molested.

Now, there has been a great deal of sophisticated research conducted over the last ten years or so demonstrating that cognitive factors (a child's mental development at a given age, the inherent susceptibility of memory, and so on) and social factors (the bias of the interviewer, the pressure exerted by parents and other authority figures, and so on) can all influence children to lie. (They can influence adults to lie, too.) These studies do not necessarily agree on the kinds of circumstances under which children are most suggestible, or on the extent of their suggestibility. Yet there is a broad consensus that preschool kids are disproportionately more susceptible than their school-age counterparts. And the notion that very young witnesses could not lie-or embellish, or fantasize, or misremember-was always too simple, always a disservice to their minds

and their capacities. As Stephen J. Ceci, a professor of developmental psychology at Cornell University and the author of many of the recent studies pointing to the suggestibility of child witnesses, has observed:

Most humans will lie if the "ante" is high enough. For children, some motives are more powerful to prod them to lie than are others. For example, protecting a loved one or avoiding embarrassment appear to be more powerful incentives to lie than are sustaining a game or winning a material reward.... So the question isn't "do children lie?" but rather what are the conditions that elevate the likelihood that they will do so, and how does their risk of doing so compare with that of older persons' proneness to lie under similar conditions? The second presumption that children displaying sexual knowledge had likely been abused might seem sound enough. In many cases, it is surely borne out. But it has also had consequences that are at once subtler and more pernicious. Consider the use of anatomically detailed dolls to prompt shy or frightened children to reveal abuse. This was an innovation of the 1970s, and at first it certainly seemed like an effective and compassionate one. But more recent studies have cast doubt on whether these dolls prompt more accurate recall, especially for the preschool-age children for whom they are usually deployed. The doll is supposed to be a body double for the child him- or herself; but since the vast majority of children this age lack the symbolic thinking required to make such a connection-most two- and three-year-olds, for example, cannot see the relation between a room and a scale model of it-this proposition turns out to be rather dubious.

More to the point, it seems that some children who have not been sexually abused will also play with an anatomically detailed doll in sexually suggestive ways-promptly removing its clothes, touching or grabbing its "genitals," sticking their fingers into various orifices. As the authors of one study judiciously put it, the "average amount of sexualized doll play by presumably non-abused children is not alarming, but there is enough of it to be potentially problematic in clinical or forensic situations." In other words, if you are prepared to see signs of abuse, you may see them even in behavior that, in other contexts or at other times, would be attributed to normal sexual curiosity.

And this is precisely the issue: at a time when there was comparatively little data available on what constituted normal sexuality in children, this vacuum was filled by people with a very narrow view of the possibilities. "Excessive" masturbation, mock intercourse with other kids, exhibitionism, "inappropriate" knowledge of sexual or anatomical terms, "unusual" interest in other peoples' genitals: each came to be seen as a symptom of abuse or some underlying pathology. In some cases, to be sure, these are symptoms, but this does not make the ambiguous cases any less ambiguous, or the entire business of judging what might be "excessive" or "unusual" in these matters any less subjective.

It might seem absurd to quantify such things, but a few recent inquiries have attempted to assess the prevalence of various "sexual behaviors" among children-and their results will surprise only those who assumed there was no such thing. A study that appeared in the journal *Pediatrics* last year asked the female caretakers of 1,114 children between the ages of two and twelve whether their children ever engaged in such activities as touching their own sex parts, trying to look at people when they are nude or undressing, touching or trying to touch their mother's or other women's breasts, and so on. Large

percentages-between 20 and 60 percent, depending on the age and gender of the child, and the specific behavior-answered yes to these and similar questions. The study's authors concluded that "a broad range of sexual behaviors are exhibited by children who [sic] there is no reason to believe have been sexually abused."

And yet one must assume that these estimates are low, since children, especially when they reach the age of six or so, conduct much of their sexual play in private. For this reason, the relevant people to ask are not the parents, but the children-which is not exactly the kind of research that anyone would fund. One study in 1992 did the next best thing: it asked 128 female undergraduates at a small liberal arts college whether they had ever played a sexual game as children, and if so to describe in writing what it was and how they felt about it. 85 percent of the students remembered that, with other kids, they had played kissing games, shown off their genitals, imitated adult sex, or participated in what the study called, intriguingly, "experiments in stimulation." The mean age for this sort of stuff was seven and a half, and most of the women remembered it as normal and pleasurable-not as a psychological time-bomb. "At least a third," the study's sober authors reported with some astonishment, "indicated that they engaged in genital fondling (either with or without clothing), and a few reported oral-genital contact and attempts at sexual intercourse"-which is a long way from what adults like to think of as "playing doctor." In more than half the cases, no adult ever discovered what they were doing. If these women were children today, and somebody caught them in the act, how many would be identified as "sexualized" children and packed off to re-education camp? VIII. Should we, then, unburden children of the alluring innocence with which we have endowed them-not so that we might treat them brutishly, but so that we might see them whole, and thereby love them better? Kincaid thinks so. His proposal has implications for how we think about sex abuse, but its wisdom is much broader. You could say that it is finally about the reconciliation of realism with love.

The endeavor takes us back to Freud, as it should. The Freudian child is himself sexual, so there is no need to project on him an eroticized innocence. He is sexual, that is, but not sexualized. The child's erotic curiosity is a more or less naturally occurring phenomenon, and it is not imposed from the outside by a salacious culture. "If we posit openly that children are activated by sexual energy," as Kincaid puts it, "the evasive screens necessary for eroticizing them disappear; that is, it is necessary that they be 'innocent and pure' if they are to be alluring and also give adults the sentimental stories of denial and projection we find indispensable."

The unflinching and rather wry tone of Freud's writings on infantile sexuality conveys neither pedophilic nostalgia nor moral panic. The objective, rather, is knowledge, the sober acceptance of what is actually the case. "Small children whose attention has once been drawn as a rule by masturbation-to their own genitals," Freud wrote, "usually take the further step without help from outside and develop a lively interest in the genitals of their playmates." Or: "The fable of the stork is often told to an audience that receives it with deep, though mostly silent, mistrust." Or: "It must ... be admitted that infantile sexual life, in spite of the preponderating dominance of erotogenic zones, exhibits components which from the very first involve other people as sexual objects." Or: "Small children are essentially without shame, and at some periods of their earliest years show an unmistakable satisfaction in exposing their bodies, with especial emphasis on the sexual parts." In most adults, a "peculiar amnesia" drops a veil over such memories, so

that most of us forget the "evidence of love, jealousy, and other passionate feelings" that colored our early childhood.

Freud did argue that, after the age of about six or eight, a period of sexual latency lasting until puberty replaces the polymorphous perversity, voyeurism, and exhibitionism of infancy and toddlerhood. But even Freud's latent child is not sexless, not a pasteboard angel. In Freud's own day, of course, the hypothesis of infantile sexuality provoked more resistance—cruder and more know-nothingist resistance, too—than any of his other theories. What is astonishing is how radical the hypothesis seems still, or again, today.

Freud's idea of infantile sexuality created panic because it came to dispel panic. Many of his specific claims about the erotic properties of childhood are no doubt false or open to question, but the disabused air of those claims, their insistence upon the clarity of the mind in confronting the unreason in human life from its beginnings, cannot be gainsaid. It is certainly preferable to the joyless, prudish, inquisitorial mentality that hides behind its concern for "the children," but is really a concern for its own unhappiness, its own inability to live in the midst of all this imperfection.

In Freud, the reality of childhood sexuality is not in the least an invitation to its exploitation. It is, rather, an invitation to a more lucid variety of love. For surely adults will not be prevented from loving children tenderly and respectfully by the acknowledgment that children, too, are creatures of desire. There was a time, a very long time, when men were prevented from the tender and respectful love of women by an insistence on their purity, their fussed-over virginity. But hasn't the understanding that the object of desire need not be chaste, or that chastity need not be the only incentive to desire, bettered and made more moral the terms of physical and spiritual love between men and women? The acknowledgement that women have desires was hardly a call for the abuse of their desires. Its effect, indeed, was quite the opposite.

Love goes badly with illusions, all the torch songs notwithstanding. Love goes better with disillusion, if by disillusion we mean a clearer understanding of the object of love. We owe it to our children not to invent them according to our own needs and our own desires. It is our duty to know them as they are, and to nurture and to protect them on the grounds of what they are. Their enchantment is certainly great enough to survive our disenchantment; and our enchantment has anyway not served them very well. They are not pure. They are merely helpless and human.

MARGARET TALBOT is a fellow of the New America Foundation.

Moral Panic:

Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America by Philip Jenkins

(Yale University Press, 302 pp., \$30) Erotic Innocence:

The Culture of Child Molesting by James R. Kincaid

(Duke University Press, 352 pp., \$24.95) Pictures of Innocence:

The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood by Ann Higonnet

(Thames and Hudson, 256 pp., \$39.95) Kidnapped:

Child Abduction in America by Paula S. Fass

(Oxford University Press, 324 pp., \$27.50)

Copyright New Republic Mar 15, 1999

©1999 UMI Company; All Rights Reserved. Only fair use, as provided by the United States copyright law, is permitted. UMI Company makes no warranty regarding the accuracy, completeness or timeliness of the Publications or the records they contain, or any warranty, express or implied, including any warranty of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose, and shall not be liable for damages of any kind or lost profits or other claims related to them or their use.

[Home](#)[Up](#)[Doc List](#)