

Erotic innocence

The Culture of Child Molesting



JAMES R. KINCAID

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For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

“In the meantime, in between
time—ain’t we got fun”

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Acknowledgments

Some people write good acknowledgments; others write good books. That's what an old editor of mine once let fall: wisdom acquired over the course of a long career, nothing personal. When you come to think of it, though, it takes a bigger soul to do an acknowledgments and make you believe it than to write a book and get good reviews. In order to sound sincere in acknowledgments you have to be truly generous (it can't be faked); you can get good reviews without having any heart at all. I for one have never gotten good reviews. That says it all.

But it is a bad idea to get so relaxed in writing your acknowledgments that you doze into irony, making fun of friends, kidding around, as we all do with those we love best and feel no aggression toward at all, no. I have made that mistake. At one point, I made some jokes about friends who truly had helped me a great deal, sort of, in an atmospheric way. I pretended they had helped me not at all—had, I said (all ludically) gone out of their way to offend me, mislead me, retard my labors, and salt my ground. Just joking. I remember saying that about Gerhard Joseph, N. John “Jack” Hall (who once ran for sheriff), Juliet McMaster, Rob Polhemus, W. J. T. (don't call me “Tom”) Mitchell, Regina Schwartz, self-seeking old Joe Wittreich, Garrett Stewart, Gina Barreca (who really will turn on you if you cross her), Julian Markels, Uli Knoepfelmacher, Hilary Schor, Phyllis Franklin, Jeffrey Robinson, that thing Joel Conarroe, and many more I now can't remember ever meeting.

To my amazement, dozens of scholars, almost all of greater stature and experience in the world than those I had so affectionately

mocked, missed the irony and wrote to me letters of commiseration. I quote but two, make that three:

I think it shows what times we live in that such as those you name can rise to where they are at. I deeply sympathize with you and I hope you know better now where your trust should be placed and not in that lot again.

I have as it happens had similar experiences with many of those who betrayed you and hate them even more than you, as their crimes against me were greater. Who is N. John Hall?

What the hell did you expect, you simple son of a bitch?

I therefore take pains here to be free from irony and to identify clearly those who did help me and to distinguish them with clarity from those who tried but failed, those who refused, those who were willing but not asked, and those I thought about asking but decided no I wouldn't.

Those who helped (really) were the late Arthur Adrian, Sherman Alexie, Nina Auerbach (yes!), Gina Barreca (why not?), Kent Baxter, Mark Behr, Virginia Blum, Joe Boone, Leo Braudy, Les Brill, Jerry Bruns, Terry Caesar, David Cherin, Patricia Cherin, Cathy Comstock, Joel Conarroe (gasp), Lawrence Driscoll, Martha Grace Duncan, Shantanu Dutthamed, Kevin Ennis, Duncan Faherty, Keith Fitzgerald, James Fleming, Bill Germano (no matter what they say), Pamela Gilbert, John Glavin, Ron Gottesman (responsible for defects in taste), Tim Gustafson, N. John Hall (preposterous), I. B. Harrison (who merits far better company), Anne Higgonet, Al Hutter, Richard Ide, Wendy Jacobson, Heather Menzies Jones, John Jordan, Gerhard Joseph (you'll find him in the morning sun), Valerie Karno, Walter Kendrick, John Kennedy, U. C. Knoepfelmacher (gotta love him), Judith Levine, Joseph Litvak, John Maclean, Peter Manning, Julian Markels, Christy Marx, Carol Mavor, Teresa McKenna, Juliet McMaster, Roland McMaster (no relation), Buck McMullen, Barry Milligan, Tania Modleski, Richard Mohr, Barry Moser, Colby Nelson, Rich Nicholls, John Nuckols, Paul Petersen, Rob Polhemus, Michael Preston, Cathy Preston, Harly Ramsey, Mike Reynolds, Adrian Richwell, J. E. Rivers, Beth Robertson, Jeffrey Robinson, Susan Scheckel, Hiliary Schor (as always), Regina Schwartz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (beyond all), Linda Shires,

Don Solomon, Mark Spilka, Matthew Stadler, John Stevenson, Garrett Stewart, Chris Stone, Larry Swingle (even he), Alan Thomas, Richard Tithecott, Robert Weil, Pat Winter, Julian Wolfreys.

Some will say the list is too long and, for all my preliminary noises, makes no discriminations, mixes in the distinguished with the dubious, the scholarly with the citizenry, those actively engaged in the project with those unaware that it was afloat. But that's not so. All these friends (many are friends) were involved in the same way and to the same extent, apart from a few who did more or less than the average: Eve at the top and Hall at the tail. That's the way life is.

And I will now name those who did nothing whatever or less, just as I said I would: Gerhard Joseph, Larry Swingle, N. John Hall, Gerald Bruns, Camille Paglia, W. J. T. Mitchell, Harold Bloom, and that wretch McMaster (take your pick). Some made both lists—not an error, human variability.

I should thank my Duke University Press editor, Ken Wissoker, who had the wisdom to spot this book and publish it afterward.

Beth Vesel, my dear agent and friend, got this book going not only by seeding the idea but by helping give it form and cheering for it even when it was at its most gangling and offensive. Her intelligent energies and good nature never flagged.

My immediate family deserves mention, among them my wife, Nita Moots Kincaid, and my children, who are Matthew, Anne, and Elizabeth, in order of age. I have a granddaughter, Whitney, who appeared at many points in the first version of the manuscript. One Duke reader said, "I think one mention of Kincaid's happy little granddaughter is too damn many." I would have felt more keenly my gratitude to Ken Wissoker had he told me to ignore that. Still, I must say that, little as my wife and children were willing, despite their talents, ever to come within miles of this book, I appreciate them all the same. It can't, after all, be easy to be the wife of a guy spending year after year inquiring into the subject of children and sexuality: searching out porn shops for underage material, scanning the World Wide Web for its darkest sites, eyeing the little ones in grocery stores, reading outlawed texts, and not all of them scholarly. And imagine what it would be like to be a child in such an environment and with such a patriarch. How could you have friends over or do anything but hide on parents' night? I ad-

mire them and their enduring wit. And my mother too, who blames nobody. I owe a special debt to Matt, who did the work on the illustrations that was beyond me, which amounted to all of it.

Glad-souled Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deserves much more from me, considering all she's done and allowed and made possible, than this dedication and my loud and forever devotion; but if she got what she deserves, the wealth and heart of the whole profession would tilt dangerously toward Durham. We can't have that. I feel that a dedication and a few tasteful greeting cards now and then are about right.

This book was written with the spirit of my brother hanging out among its most incautious moments, those I love best as I loved him beyond any best.

Erotic Innocence —————

Introduction

I cannot say how truth may be;
I say the tale as 'twas said to me.
—Sir Walter Scott, “The Lay of the
Last Minstrel”

There are, and have been, many stories
in the culture and in other cultures
through which people examine, and
do other things to, their lives.—Adam
Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being
Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the
Unexamined Life*

Our lives are stories that are being
told. The trick is to horn in on the
telling.—Anon.

Geraldo, Oprah, Sally Jessy, and many another daytime talk-show host are being flashed on the back screen, mouths flapping soundlessly. In the foreground, Morley Safer introduces an episode of *60 Minutes* (May 1, 1994) by pointing out the gulf separating his prime-time news program from the talk shows. Speaking with complacent outrage, Safer tells us, "Unspeakable things are reported, re-created, and dissected almost hourly on a strident collection of talk shows. Amidst all the noise and freakishness are the victims, the victims of the most unspeakable of crimes, childhood sexual abuse." There's a whole lot of unspeakableness going on.

Safer carefully distinguishes his after-dark show from the daytime talkers,¹ just before joining with them in speaking the unspeakable. This particular *60 Minutes* episode removes (for the first time) the muzzle on Roseanne Arnold's family.² Now they reveal all, refuting point by point Roseanne's claims (first made on Sally Jessy's show) that she was "very much an abused child," able to track down clear memories of molestation back to the age of six months and still going. "Utter nonsense!" say her parents, her brother, and her two sisters. Granted, Jerry Barr is a "tushy-toucher"; he freely admits that, and, as one daughter says, "The punishment ought to fit the crime," whatever that means. Anyhow, the whole family (with the one famous exception) insists that Mom is guiltless and that Jerry's mild crimes do not include doing what the crazed Roseanne said to Sally Jessy in broad daylight he did: molesting Roseanne's daughter while Mom was tying the knot (loosely) with Tom Arnold, or putting his hand down sister Stephanie's pants. Jerry may have gotten into a fight with Stephanie

and pushed her down on the bed—Stephanie tells us about that—but the family is agreed, on examining the details and exploring them with us, that such things cannot reasonably be called molesting. And *60 Minutes* lays all this before us, withdraws, and leaves us to judge.

You see the point: *60 Minutes* may have been scooped on Roseanne but managed to outbid Sally Jessy for the follow-up, leaving her, Phil, and Oprah to manage as best they could with day-care scandals and satanic cults. Despite Safer's unctuous sarcasms, this bold breaking-of-the-silence surrounding child molesting is really much the same wherever you find it. And you find it in all its soft-core particularity everywhere: in cinemas, bookstores, schoolrooms, lecture halls, psychotherapists' offices, Marge's garage, Fred's hair salon, and in us. The media doesn't mind saying what cannot be said because we long to hear it; and we long to hear it because it's what we're saying too. The media is not so much a source as a friendly satellite bouncing back to us the story of child molesting we often hear, tell ourselves, and find so satisfying that we love even the echoes.

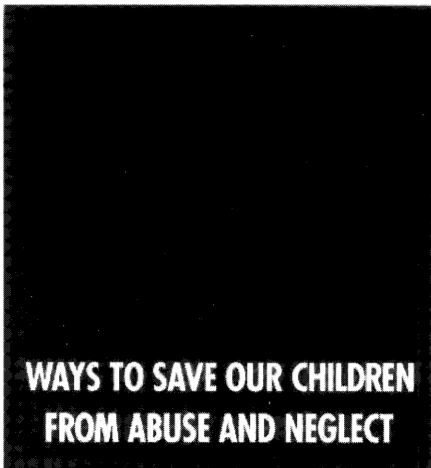
This book is a study of such storytelling: where it comes from, what forms it takes, what it does for us and to our children. Few stories in our culture right now are as popular as those of child molesting, and I wonder why this should be so. We are likely to say that the reality of sexual child abuse compels us to speak, to break the silence; but I would like to poke at that compulsion and at the connections between "the reality of sexual child abuse" and the stories we tell about it. Why do we generate these stories and not others? What rewards do they offer? Who profits from their circulation, and who pays the price?

This talk of "stories" does not mean that I regard child molesting as unreal; reality comes to us in the form of stories. When we fish for truth, for reality, for a memory, for the child within, for instructions on how to behave, for clues on the world we inhabit, we haul up a story. Look at yourself in the high-school yearbook, in the mirror, through the eyes of others, and you begin listening to stories. When we ask, "What's what?" we get back, "Once upon a time. . . ." So we understand having breakfast and having fun, doing our jobs and doing our duty, making mistakes and making love. We live and have our being within stories.

SCARED



SILENT



This pamphlet, prepared by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, was issued as a supplement to the television documentary *Scared Silent: Exposing and Ending Child Abuse*, hosted by Oprah Winfrey.

I recognize that those caught within the terrors of child molestation are likely to regard what they are telling us not as a narrative but as truth. The victimized and those accused, along with those close to them, may deplore the recasting of their pain as a story, feeling that stories have a kind of malleability denied to their experiences. Such resistance is a signal both of the depth of the pain and, I think, of the success our current story has had in selling itself as natural, as pure fact. But the commonsense notion that some hit-you-in-the-nose truths are simply *there*, plain and simple, is what allows our mainline

story to pass for truth. The question, for me, is not whether truth and pain (joy and falsehood) are delivered in stories, but whether we have some choice in stories and some ability to see what our current stories are doing for us. Some stories have a very narrow focus and cause damage and confusion even as they seek to give certainty. Somewhere out there may be a healing story, of use both to us and to our children.

The particular stories that interest me here are not personal but general, a set of remarkable cultural narratives that give form to our actions and our ways of seeing children, sexuality, and transgression. These general stories are not invented by individuals but circulate like rumors or viruses. We are thus never outside these stories but always live within them, not just telling the tale but playing our parts in it. But again, why these tales and not others? And why do we tell them with such enthusiasm? Put another way: how do we know what we know about child molesting and how do we purchase our certainty?

And why, to deal openly with a vexing issue, speak of “we”? We who? I use the first-person plural to include myself, of course, but also to indicate that I am speaking of stories that blow through all of us and of locations on a map where we find ourselves without being aware that we are anyplace in particular or that where we are conditions what we see. Some geographies exact a lot from us. We are aware of that when we are on top of Everest or in Las Vegas, but I am trying to get at the commonality formed by a set of culturally and historically specific stories that we are told and tell, quite earnestly, without recognizing their source or their consequences. “We” is the we watching *60 Minutes*, protecting our children, chemically castrating “sexual predators.”

But the “we” is both variable and relatively free. There are within the community a variety of views, so that sometimes my “we” may not include you (or me) but may refer only to a particularly potent or vocal (or even loony) subset of the majority view. “We” may sometimes translate as “men” or “old men” or “white men” or “heterosexuals” or “Christians” or “middle-class sorts.” Sure. I am not above trying to persuade myself that I am outside this “we,” and that by focusing often on its most ghoulish excesses I am, in part, demonstrating what I imagine to be my superiority to this snarling clan. I am aware, though, that these feints are both feeble and common, and that we

are all implicated in a contemporary discourse on children, sexuality, and assault so mighty that it comes close to defining our moment. I trust that we can, you and me, do something with that awareness, that we (all of us) are not so eager to escape acknowledging our membership in this we-club that we skid past the point: we got ourselves into this mess and we can get ourselves out. We are not roped to paranoid conceptions of Power or to historical determinism; we need only tell different stories. We can do that.

For a long decade or so, we have been uncovering stories of sexual child abuse in the United States, discovering the alarming reach of these stories, their range and variety, only to have the pendulum swing. Suddenly, we hear that memory is suspect, that accounts of molestation that come from children are dubious, that therapists may be crooks, that Freud himself is wobbling. As we up the voltage and try to deal with the dilemma by more carefully tagging the offenders, the counterreaction grows as well. How can we locate in this bog a solid place to stand? That the stories proliferate and double back on themselves does not indicate indifference, certainly; but it may suggest that our stories are providing us with something other than solutions.

We are forever assuring ourselves that we are in denial, avoiding the issue; it takes, we say, great courage to speak out on a problem most people ignore or repress. That's an odd diagnosis, considering that these stories come at us (and from us) like killer bees. Take a look at these tales as they circulate, and two things are immediately apparent: their redundancy and their strength. When we locate a good story, which we do every week or so, we chew on it ferociously: Michael Jackson, pedophile priests, recovered memory, six-year-old molesters.

I begin with two preliminary assumptions. The first is that these stories are doing something for us: we wouldn't be telling this tale of the exploitation of the child's body if we didn't wish to have it told. The second is that what these stories do for us is keep the subject hot so we can disown it while welcoming it in the back door. These stories are not told simply to solve a problem but also to focus and restate the problem, to keep it alive and before us. If the stories we tell about child molesting were designed to enlighten us or to attack the problem, we might say, they would extinguish themselves.

Of course we all are concerned with the way our children are being abused. I think, though, that this concern for our children has to do battle with the way we tell about our concern, the way we give form to the popular story of “the child.” Our storytelling has become so formulaic and so “natural” that it channels far too much of our concern into self-gratification. In the case of child molesting and its culturally approved narratives, we have stories that allow us a hard-core righteous prurience; it’s a scapegoating exercise we have come to depend on. Through these stories of what monsters are doing to children, we find ourselves forced (permitted) to speak of just what it is they are doing; we take a good, long look at what they are doing. We denounce it all loudly but never have done with it, and are back denouncing it the next day, not ignoring the details. We reject this monstrous activity with such automatic indignation that the indignation comes to seem almost like pleasure.

This is a study of these stories and where they come from, of the Romantic heritage of “the child and its body” and our current reckless expenditure of this dangerous nineteenth-century inheritance. These stories seemed sweet and beneficent to Wordsworth, Dickens, and Beatrix Potter; but they have soured over time. It’s not so much that they became silly and sentimental, though they may have, but that they took a turn into nightmare. These are nightmares we deal with pathologically: through disavowal, projection, and displacement. I seek here to rob these stories of at least some of their power by exposing them and their functions. What is at stake is our own honor (and health) as adults and the bodies and future of our dear children.

If the talk we are talking, then, is continuous with the problem it is addressing, if the solutions are mixed in with the dilemmas, it is time to talk about the talking. It should be clear, though, that there is no position inside the present discussions of children, sexuality, and power that will allow me to assess with easy objectivity what those discussions are doing. Still, while it is impossible to avoid common ideas altogether, since that would mean moving to Jupiter, I will try as best I can to resist the assumptions we hold most dear, suspecting that they might be cohabiting with the predicament itself.

It is for this reason that I shun the most compelling ritual gesture of all: acknowledging that of course sexual child abuse does exist,

and on a very large scale. I do not deny it; I just do not want to begin the discussion in the territory left to me once I offer that disclaimer. I think, in fact, that this disclaimer is a vital part of the discourse that eroticizes the child and keeps us blind to what we are doing. It forces the discussion into channels of diagnosis and cure, mandates assumptions about what is and is not important, allows us to see some things and blinds us to others. I do not offer one more set of tips on how to determine whether or not child molesting happened. I am writing about another set of happenings: what happens to us and to our children as we tell our stories of the child and of sexuality.

It is not to the point to keep acknowledging that “molestation happens.” Even the most skeptical books analyzing the current scene begin the discussion by saying, in effect, “Please don’t misunderstand me; I know millions of children are sexually molested.” That we feel compelled to ward off such misunderstandings suggests that our discourse has a very narrow range, a range that is conscientiously policed. Within that range, only variations on a single story can be heard, and it is this story, I believe, that walks the same beat as the molestation against which it protests. When we seek to adjust the protesting stories by removing from the plot a dubious point—recovered memory, satanic abuse, or alien abductions—we do nothing to disrupt the circuitry, only further remove from reach its generating source.

Such disclaimers seem to me custodial, ways of cleaning up little messes here and there, scouring away anomalies in or threats to our belief system so that the main narrative can go on doing its work for us. Offering judicious qualifiers and calming assurances, I can lay claim to virtue and buy a ticket for my argument on the same old bandwagon.

Lurking in the discussion so far have been some questions we don’t often ask, probably for very good reason. Take the current headlines on this subject—the latest accused celebrity or day-care center trial—and ask about the source, nature, and size of the pleasures we take from such stories. What accounts for the popularity of these feverish tales about the sexuality of children and assaults on it? What is it that so magnetizes us? Why do we tell the stories we tell and not

others? Those are plain questions; but we don't attend to them. We prefer others:

1. How can we spot the pedophiles and get rid of them?
2. How can we protect our children in the meantime?
3. How can we induce our children to tell us the truth, and all of it, about their sexual lives?
4. How can we get the courts to believe children who say they've been sexually molested?
5. How can we get the courts to believe adults who recover memories of being sexually molested as children?
6. How can we get ourselves to believe others when they say they remember being sexually molested years ago?
7. How can we know that people are not making these things up, misremembering?
8. How can we know that bumbling parents, cops, and (especially) therapists are not implanting false memories?

Although some of these questions seem to take revenge on other questions, they all have one thing in common: they demand the same answer: "We can't."

Perhaps that helps explain why both the standard and the backlash stories are so popular: they have about them an urgency and a self-flattering, righteous oomph. Asking these questions, I get the feeling that I care and that I'm on the right side in the vital issues of our time. Even better, these open-ended, unanswerable questions generate variations on themselves and allow us to keep them going, circulating them among ourselves without ever experiencing fatigue.

We have figured the crisis of sexual child abuse as a demonic trap, a tale of terror from which there is no escape. What we have here is an "epidemic" of child molesting, a "National Emergency,"³ but we seem to have devised the problem as an untreatable disease. Though we have created hundreds of public and private agencies to distribute information, educate children and parents on reliable means of protection, track down the missing, and generally raise awareness, we seem to regard all that as akin to stifling an earthquake by sitting on it. We locate more pedophiles, jail them faster and longer, castrate

them, track them, and where are we? Still with “a rising epidemic of child abuse,” according to Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala in September 1996.⁴ We have plotted the mystery story so that it can have no solution and no ending.⁵

First of all, we often speak of sexual child abuse in the passive voice — “There is a growing awareness”; “It is generally acknowledged” — as if the story had no locatable source. Second, we make the plot of child abuse unavoidable: everyone has a role. As many healing books tell us, if you have an inkling that you may have been sexually abused as a child, then you probably were and should proceed on that assumption.⁶ Such inklings may be inferred from symptoms you develop, symptoms you can find out about (if not develop) by consulting any of a number of lists that will allow you to trace backward from problem to source. If you find yourself anxious or depressed, suffering from low self-esteem or overconfidence, feel uncomfortable being touched or like it too much; if your child has trouble concentrating, eats too much or too little, has fears or phobias, has noticeable changes in behavior, or is incorrigible, the cause is clear. As Roseanne, who knows, told Oprah, “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.’”

You can’t say no, can’t write yourself out of the victim role. Worse luck, you may find yourself cast in opposition, as perpetrator. If you have children of your own or know those who do, if you are a priest, coach, baby-sitter, teacher, or someone walking down the street, you may fit the part. Once cast, you’re stuck. You cannot plead incapacity for the role. As many experts tell us (and as the police know for sure), those who challenge these charges are in denial, poor risks for rehabilitation. Only the guilty plead not-guilty, so it is best not to be in denial.

The story is, in short, cagily baited, mysterious, self-perpetuating, inescapable. It is a story of monsters and purity, sunshine and darkness, of being chased by the beast and finding your feet in glue, of tunnels opening onto other tunnels, of exits leading to dead walls. Our story of child molesting is a story of nightmare, the literary territory of the Gothic. On the face of it, the Gothic is not a promising form for casting social problems. Instead of offering solutions, such

tales tend to paralyze; they do not move forward but circle back to one more hopeless encounter with the demon. Why would we want that?

Gothic narratives always seem to serve a culture under stress. I do not want to draw sensational parallels to Salem, Nazi Germany, or the McCarthy-ridden 1950s; but the stark moral drama offered by our child-molesting stories does suggest the possibility of scapegoating, or at least of a cover narrative camouflaging needs so dark and urgent we want neither to face them nor to give them up.

The Gothic assumes and creates a terror so urgent it excuses the most brutal appeals. In *Dracula*, the champions of virtue pound a stake slowly through the heart of a beautiful, writhing woman (albeit a vampire), then decapitate her—and we cheer. Similarly, in 1994 the fastidious *New Yorker*, anticipating what is now a fad, ran an editorial entitled “Help for Sex Offenders,”⁷ advocating “the castration option” (the magazine prefers “orchietomy”). Any dark historical precedent for such state-managed “help” is merely a “spectre”; the idea that castration is brutal is “based on misconceptions.” The procedure, the editor points out, is scarcely invasive, testicles made of soft tissue and nerve endings simply giving way to high-quality silicone balls. The *New Yorker* rhetoric might be called Orwellian Gothic: it leaves no room to protest that offering a man a choice between prison and castration is not asking him what he “wants,” or that dressing up forced castration as “aid” for the sexually compulsive is genteel nightmare. Within a few years, of course, such castration talk became general and lost the need to justify itself.

Just as savage is the glee that greets the news of the suicide of those accused or convicted of sexual crimes involving children: joy at the efficiency of it all or rage that our delight in their torture has been cut short.⁸ We include within the Gothic circuitry even prisoners, who are provided a role that allows them rewarding social responsibility, making the murder of jailed sex offenders not uncommon.⁹ The recent translation of “sexual offenders” into “sexual predators” transforms these particular criminals into ogres, beyond redemption and with no claim on human civil rights.

We also tell ourselves that these predators are wily and numerous, which means our story will never lack for villains. We guarantee a

supply by regarding almost all allegations of sexual offenses made by children as true, which means that the accused are always guilty. The famous (if fallacious) “cycle-of-abuse” notion,¹⁰ which holds that the abused are bound to abuse others when they get the chance, means that the number of predators will increase geometrically, like werewolves.

But the Gothic answers also to more particular needs of our current culture. For one thing, it feeds the not unpleasant idea that we are in the midst of a “moral and spiritual decline,” a point 76 percent of us agree with, according to a *Newsweek* poll conducted in June 1994.¹¹ Stark moral dramas of innocence corrupted seem to fit both conservative Golden Age myths and fundamentalist Christian patterns now finding a ready audience. Sexual child abuse allows us to brandish our own virtue by locating for us a demon, a creature harder to find since the collapse of the “evil empire.” Some have suggested that the current obsession with childhood horror is a handy replacement for a hell we only pretend to find plausible.

The child-molesting Gothic story also appeals because it explains so much, explains everything. It is the semiotic shorthand that tells us to look no further: having been on either side of the child-molesting scene defines us completely. It tells us who we are. The fact that the heroine in *Forrest Gump*—and in a hundred other recent narratives—was abused by her drunk, lower-class father explains to our full satisfaction why she is suicidal, drug infested, looking for love in all the wrong places, and willing to settle for the dim-witted hero.

It is also notable that the story offers to the abused the role of the blameless victim, responsible for little and able to understand and explain his life in very satisfactory terms: mistakes and misfortunes rest at someone else’s door; only the successes are his doing. Such a position seems to unite, in strange fellowship, the best parts of the Horatio Alger myth with a Calvinistic determinism. Even monsters can sometimes play the victim role in this scheme, since our story dictates that monsters are the way they are because they are or were themselves victims. This tight circle is as hard to crack as it is self-indulgent.

Finally, the Gothic draws our attention to the personal and the psychological, away from structural social problems and away from

what may be more pressing pains in our culture. Casting child molesting as a major dilemma and that dilemma in purely individual and psychological terms focuses our attention on isolated horrors. It encourages us to think that what we need is more outrage and more FBI sting operations.

However it is measured, sexual child abuse is a small problem (only 14 percent of cases) compared with other forms of child abuse,¹² not to mention neglect, abandonment, inadequate nutrition, poor education, and the absence of job opportunities, a fair chance, and hope. There's a way in which we know that. And even with sexual child abuse, we do not pretend that we are getting the problem under control; quite the contrary. We know we are dramatizing the issue, making it into a spectacle. We might even know that what we are doing isn't pointing to an ending but to a continuation. But these are forms of knowing that haven't yet found themselves a story to tell, at least not one we want to hear.

You want to see an idea (a fact, even) that will never find a story? Here's one from Vern L. Bullough, a historian of sexuality: "Based on an overview of history, this author would state that adult/child and adult/adolescent sexual behavior occur less frequently now than they did in the past."¹³

Now for a blunt statement of my argument.

Our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing. We have become so engaged with tales of childhood eroticism (molestation, incest, abduction, pornography) that we have come to take for granted the irrepressible allure of children. We allow so much power to the child's sexual appeal that we no longer question whether adults are drawn to children. We may be skeptical of the therapy industry and its ability to manufacture so easily people with recovered memories of childhood molestation; we may regard the attacks on the clergy with suspicion; we may think many of the day-care center trials are witch hunts; we may have our doubts about rings of Satan-worshipping child killers; we may know that very few children are abducted by trench-coated strangers—but one thing remains indubitable, and we

are all taught to know and believe it: adults by the millions find children so enticing that they will risk anything to have sex with them. What makes such an idea plausible?

It would hardly be an overstatement 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. It would not be an overstatement to say that the way we are handling the subject is ripping apart our young people. I do not deny that we are also talking sincerely about detection and danger. We worry about the poor, hurt children. But we worry also about maintaining the particular erotic vision of children that is putting them at risk in the first place.

Is the erotic appeal of children really such a mystery to us? Is pedophilia really so "unspeakable"? Why is it that the figures given for abused children keep climbing without arousing suspicion? Why is it that we now include in our pool of likely child molesters not just misfit middle-aged males but distinguished grandparents, gymnastics coaches, priests, women, teenagers, and, most recently, children themselves. While we maintain the monstrous and perverse criminality of the act, we also move to make it universal and inevitable.

We have made children lovable, which is fine, but we have also failed to make it clear to ourselves just what that means. What is our loving to consist of? And what is it in the child that we are to desire to love? What are the forms of the desirable in our culture?

We see children as, among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous. We construct the desirable as, among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous. There's more to how we see the child, and more to how we construct what is sexually desirable—but not much more. To the extent that we learn to see "the child" and "the erotic" as coincident, we are in trouble. So are the children.

How did we get ourselves into such a fix? One way to put it is that the development of the modern child and modern ideas on sexuality grew up over the last two centuries hand-in-hand, and they have remained close friends.¹⁴

The Romantic idealization of the child—"Mighty Prophet, Seer

Blessed!”—was meant as a poetic figure, a metaphor, but it soon developed a quite literal, material base. For the Romantic poets, the child packaged a whole host of qualities that could be made into a poetics and a politics: the child was everything the sophisticated adult was not, everything the rational man of the Enlightenment was not. The child was gifted with spontaneity, imaginative quickness, and a closeness to God; but that’s as far as its positive attributes went. More prominent were the negatives, the things not there. The child was figured as *free of* adult corruptions; *not yet burdened with* the weight of responsibility, mortality, and sexuality; *liberated from* “the light of common day.”

This new thing, the modern child, was deployed as a political and philosophical agent, a weapon to assault what had been taken as virtues: adulthood, sophistication, rational moderation, judicious adjustment to the ways of the world. The child was used to deny these virtues, to eliminate them and substitute in their place a set of inversions: innocence, purity, emptiness. Childhood, to a large extent, came to be in our culture a coordinate set of *have nots*, of negations: the child was the one who *did not have*. Its liberty was a negative attribute, however much prized, as was its innocence and purity. What is purity, anyhow? Ivory soap used to say it was 99.44 percent pure, leaving one to suppose that there was 0.56 percent of substance there in the foam, and 99.44 percent of—nothing at all?

As for innocence: at one point a theological trope, in the nineteenth century it became more and more firmly attached to this world and to this world’s sexuality. It was, further, a characteristic that outran any simple physical manifestation: innocence became a fulcrum for the post-Romantic ambiguous construction of sexuality and sexual behavior. On the one hand, innocence was valued deeply and guarded by criminal statutes (albeit often bendable ones); on the other hand, innocence was a consumer product, an article to possess, as a promise to the righteous and the reward to the dutiful. It came to you in heaven or in marriage, a prize. We were trained to adore and covet it, to preserve and despoil it, to speak of it in hushed tones and in bawdy songs.

Freud (or the usual way he is read and allowed to operate) did little to disrupt this historical pattern. In sexualizing the infant and then making sexuality merely “latent” in the slightly older child, Freud, by

this now-you-see-it-now-you-don't, smoothed the way for our contemporary crisis. By conceiving of infancy in terms of stark sexual drives, Freud put the essential connection so directly as almost to threaten it: If we posit openly that children are activated by sexual energy, 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. But Freud carefully protected our main story by driving under cover the sexuality he had just implanted, thereby giving us cake without calories: the child is both sexual and pure. Freud upset no applecarts; he provided a useful and dangerous way of telling one story and living another. The latent child, empty of the sexuality by which he had earlier been defined, is haunted by an absence, by an amputation that may seem to leave the child incomplete, unnatural.

The same goes for purity, of course, another empty figure that allows the admirer to read just about anything into its vacancy. The constructions of modern "woman" and modern "child" are very largely evacuations, the ruthless distribution of eviction notices. Correspondingly, the instructions we receive on what to regard as sexually arousing tell us to look for (and often create) this emptiness, to discover the erotic in that which is most susceptible to inscription, the blank page.

The consequences of this insistence on an empty innocence are often perilous, especially when they are reduced to commonplaces, so that what at first seemed odd becomes obvious. Take, for instance, the assertion that children's accusations of molesting must necessarily be true, an assertion based on the belief that innocence is incapable of inventing ideas of that sort: "How could a child her age *know* of such things? She could scarcely make them up!" Such a view renders guilty anyone accused until innocence is proved, as Lillian Hellman knew when she wrote these lines for *The Children's Hour*.¹⁵

Another example: the cry that child molesting is worse than murder has been heard so often it has become a tired slogan, self-evident and vapid. Certainly it is better to take the child's life than its virtue, we feel, and we needn't waste time saying it. The 1993 siege of the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas, was initiated and then justified through stories of child molesting, suggesting that eighty-one

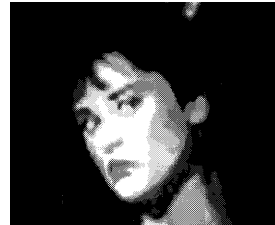
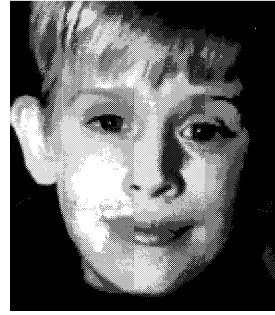
deaths can be outweighed by violated innocence.¹⁶ But if we teach ourselves to regard the loss of innocence as more calamitous than the loss of life, whose needs are we seeing to? Who is it wants the innocence and who the life? Ask any child. Are we defining the child's innocence in the way older societies defined women's virginity?

When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray
What charm can sooth her melancholy?
What art can wash her guilt away?
The only art her guilt to cover,
To hide her shame from every eye,
To give repentance to her lover,
And wring his bosom, is—to die.¹⁷

Do we feel that a defiled child is of no use to us and might as well be dead?

We seem stuck with a vacant child that is both marginal and central to our lives: easily disposed of, abused, neglected, abandoned; and yet idealized, treasured, adored. The eroticizing of empty innocence seems to have left us ashamed and transfixed, unable to change and unable to resist the cultural directives that instruct us to long for children precisely in reference to what they do not have.

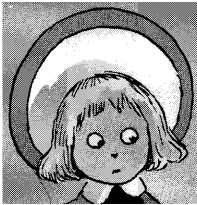
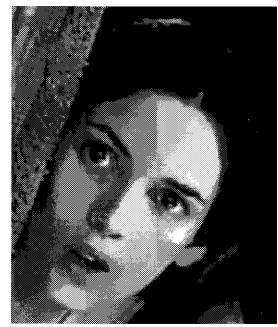
Bodies are made to conform to this set of cultural demands. Heathcliff and Cathy (aged twelve) are symbols of titanic passion; Shirley Temple was enticing until she reached puberty, and instantly became a Republican frump; Rick Schroder lost our interest when he stopped calling himself "Ricky"; Macaulay Culkin soon teetered over the brink of unerotic oblivion; Tom Sawyer's later adventures do not interest us. On a recent talk show, Schroder put it bluntly: "You go through puberty, and you're no longer desired."¹⁸ Baby-smooth skin is capable of inciting desire; unsmooth, or contoured skin is not: is this because flatness is innately more titillating than texture, or because flatness signifies nothing at all and thus doesn't interfere with our projections? In the same way, desirable faces must be blank, drained of color; big eyes round and expressionless; hair blond or colorless; waists, hips, feet, and minds small. The physical makeup



Compare the large eyes, generally narrow chins, high cheekbones, and empty come-hither expressions. Pictured are Alicia Silverstone, Betty Boop, Macaulay Culkin, Jay North, Elijah Wood, Winona Ryder, Sandra Bullock, Ricky Schroder, Shirley Temple, Buster Brown, Demi Moore, Marilyn Monroe, and Patty McCormack.

of the child has been translated into mainstream images of the sexually and materially alluring. A recent study of ideal desirability using a computer program called FacePrints found that “the ideal 25-year-old woman . . . had a 14-year-old’s abundant lips and an 11-year-old’s delicate jaw,” that small lower face providing also the prominent eyes and cheekbones of children.¹⁹ We are told to look like children if we can and for as long as we can, to pine for that look.²⁰

This imaginative dwarfing of cute adults into children suggests the extent to which “the child” is both a fetish and a flexible construction that is, to a large extent, independent of outside standards like age. Adolescents are stuffed back into childhood when it serves our purposes, as it often does when we are talking of molestation or crime. Victims of crime as old as eighteen or nineteen can be thought of as children, whereas perpetrators as young as six can be thought of



and treated as adults. Such analogical playing with categories follows our needs. For instance, thinking of an eighteen-year-old molestation victim as a child allows us to create a composite image that gives us innocence as well as sexual capacity. The child is functional, a malleable part of our discourse rather than a fixed stage; “the child” is a product of ways of perceiving, not something that is *there*.

And we perceive what we want to, what we desire. It bears repeating: both men and women rate “younger-looking faces and faces with ‘babylike’ features” tops on the “physical attractiveness” scale.²¹ Compare the waif or schoolgirl images in fashion magazines with actual waifs in playgrounds and homes. Line up the images of kids from television sitcoms against the centerfolds in *Hustler* or *Penthouse*. Compare Culkin, the young Jay North, Patty McCormack, Shirley Temple, Elijah Wood, and Ricky Schroder with Marilyn Monroe, Alicia Silverstone, Demi Moore, Winona Ryder, and Sandra Bullock. They all look

like cartoon characters: Buster Brown or Betty Boop—images vacated so we can write our passion there.

It is worth noting that these hollow child images not only focus and allow desire but also erase various social and political complications, performing essential cultural work that is not simply erotic. By formulating the image of the alluring child as bleached, bourgeois, and androgynous, these stories mystify material reality and render nearly invisible—certainly irrelevant—questions we might raise about race, class, and even gender. Such categories are scrubbed away in the idealized child, laved and snuggled into a Grade-A homogeneity.

When poor children are allowed to play this part, as they sometimes are, they are helped into the class above them; boys and girls leave difference behind and meld together; children of color find themselves blanched to ungodly sallowness. In all our stories, there is but one erotic child, and its name is Purity: without color, station, or gender.

Fourteen-year-olds used to win beauty contests held for adults. Now we hold child-molesting trials. There is no direct connection between those two facts—other issues, events, and needs intervene—but there are, I submit, links between desire and our attempts to regulate and deny it through legal spectacle. More is involved; our compassion and pity play a part, hardly qualified even if some of that pity has been for ourselves. But it is still true that the trials feed the talk, and that talk is more important than we have yet allowed ourselves to see. The trials don't have to do it by themselves, of course: films, television movies and sitcoms, the newspapers, advertising, and sensational best-sellers all tell us there are terrors everywhere about us, a multi-billion-dollar kiddie porn industry, and a vast network of pedophiles.

Or so we say. As everyone who has inquired and all police agencies know, the “kiddie porn industry,” if it exists at all in this country, is a puny cottage industry. But we pay the FBI to conduct stings and tell ourselves that vast porn rings exist. Missing children are missing more than 99 percent of the time because they have run away or been spirited off in a custody battle. But we put up posters, look at milk cartons, and imagine an abductor on every block. The talk feeds the desire, which in turn feeds the talk—and the need to blame somebody else. We are instructed by our cultural heritage to crave that which is

forbidden, a crisis we face by not facing it, by writing self-righteous doublespeak that demands both lavish public spectacle and constant guilt-denying projections onto scapegoats.

A country that regards children as erotic and also regards an erotic response to children not merely as criminal but as criminally unimaginable has a problem on its hands. It is to our credit that we maintain the tension and try to find stories that might somehow protect the children from what we conjure up as a barely corraled lust eager to feed on everyone under fifteen. The trouble is that these stories of protection are also stories of incitement; the denials are always affirmations. The stories we tell of the monsters are also stories of home and family (our home and our family), and when we speak of the unspeakable, we keep the speaking going.

For all the pleasure it offers, this talk has some effects we might consider undesirable. Since I have much to say about that sort of thing later, I'll make do here with a list:

1. It directs our attention away from more pressing ills.
2. It allows us to continue eroticizing children while denying we are doing any such thing.
3. It creates the sexualized child we pretend we are sanitizing.
4. It projects onto others a whole host of failures we may be experiencing as parents and as a culture.
5. It attacks working mothers most viciously.
6. It raises such fears of touching that any form of intimacy may seem hardly worth the risk.
7. It gives the police and policing agencies Godlike power.

A corrective and skeptical counterstory has, of course, been developing—what traditionalists call a “backlash”—and we like to think we see things now with a clarity that is perhaps not unflinching but growing in sharpness and focus. But turning the accuser into the accused, swapping villain and victim, does not, when you look at it, seem like a radical transformation. The Gothic game stays basically as it was; everyone just switches sides: the accused now deserves sympathy and the accuser condemnation. The primary discourse sticks, fueled now by a rejuvenated energy serving the same old needs.

Under the new dispensation, we expand the list of perils facing children to include bumbling rescuers—psychiatrists, therapists, and social workers—carefully restricting our analysis so that others (the culture at large, you and me) are not implicated. Our admission costs us nothing. As Freud saw so clearly, the idea of childhood trauma (being sexually molested) provides a self-sustaining explanation for present miseries: it is simple; it invokes and justifies self-pity; it gives absolution. Many of us have good reason to recall past traumas.

The recent shift in focus away from recovered memory to the erratic functioning of memory and its ability to give us not only what is somehow *there* but also what we want to be there is, in a general way, a rediscovering of what Freud told us about memory nearly a century ago. But why do we want to tell these stories about “false” memory? Why are we telling stories that throw doubt on the accuracy of recovered memories and on the competence of professionals who assist in resurrecting them? What needs can such skeptical, revisionist stories be serving?

What if we said memory was itself a storytelling agency, a collection of narratives we can call on for various purposes. Everything in our past, everything lodged in memory, is available to us as a story (an almost infinitely rearrangeable story). We generally assume, despite what we secretly know, that anything coming from memory is authentic, since that channel (the conduits carrying material from memory to consciousness) has been invested with authority: it tells the truth.

Hence it is no surprise that we believe it when our memory tells us we were victims or perpetrators of sexual molestation. I believe memory will make the story of child sexuality available to nearly anyone in this culture, not because *it happened* (though it may have) but because all our memories are riddled through with this story of the powerful eroticism of the child. It is a story we all hold in memory; we cannot be of this time and place and be free of it. Our memories store not only personal but also cultural stories, that is, and it is an easy step to make the cultural into the personal in quite literal ways. Some cultures (the Irish, for instance) make this mandatory. And note how easily family legends (the stories of a small subculture) become “memories,” even if they happened to somebody else or to no one: our memories give to all of us cute things said, exciting adventures,