

Pedophilia Chic

By Mary Eberstadt

When most Americans hear the word "pedophile," they usually think of men like the self-described "child-molesting demon" Larry Don McQuay, who was released from a prison in East Texas in April and driven to San Antonio to begin a closely supervised, but nonetheless semi-free, new life. And when most Americans think of men like McQuay roaming the streets, they react much as did the outraged, screaming-in-the-streets, placard-carrying citizens of San Antonio. About the mildest thing said by one of them was "I sure hope there will be more indictments" to send McQuay back to jail-this, from the chairman of the state Board of Pardons and Paroles, under whose auspices McQuay was released. The local victims-rights groups were less restrained. As the president of one such group put it, in a straddle between threat and hope, "In this city, he's not going to be safe"-thus summarizing neatly the vigilante desire that most parents, when contemplating a figure like McQuay, would doubtless second.

In addition to a spate of high-profile cases like McQuay's, the past few years have also witnessed an ongoing public obsession with child abuse in any form; a Congress that, at the urging of the White House and Justice Department, has toughened the penalties for child-pornography trafficking; and Bill Clinton's signing of the constitutionally complicated Megan's Law, which makes it impossible for those once convicted of child-sex offenses to move anonymously into an unsuspecting neighborhood.

And yet a funny thing happened on the way to today's intense fear and loathing of Chester the Molester. For even as citizens around the country have sought new ways of keeping the McQuays of the world cordoned off from the rest of us, and even as the public rhetoric about protecting America's children has reached deafening levels, a number of enlightened voices have been raised in defense of giving pedophilia itself a second look.

After all-or so some of these voices have suggested-what if pedophilia is in fact a victimless crime? What if teenagers, and even children, are more in control of their emotions, their bodies, their sexuality, than the rest of us think? What if sexual relations with adults are actually "empowering" to the young? What if pedophiles and would-be pedophiles are in fact victims themselves-exploited by the cunning young people they befriend?

There are also the matters of civil liberty. Is it fair to send people to jail for owning, trading, and obsessively consuming child pornography when no one is really injured by such practices? And what about the notion of an "age of consent"-isn't it an anachronism, in this age of adolescent sexual precocity? Shouldn't it be lowered to a more realistic standard? Say, to fourteen? Thirteen? Twelve?

Once upon a time, the reader losing sleep over questions like these would have had to travel to Times Square, or the local porn shop, or perhaps the nearest branch of the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). But no longer. Now he need only subscribe to the right stylish magazines, the right cutting-edge publishers, and be familiar with the work of the right celebrated authors. It is hard to know what to make of these piecemeal attempts-which amount to nothing so elevated as a movement-to rewrite what most of the rest of us persist in thinking about adults whose sexual interests run to kids. Call it the last gasp of a nihilism that has exhausted itself by chasing down every other avenue of liberation, only to find one last roadblock still manned by the bourgeoisie. Call it pedophilia chic.

Calvin Klein's Leather Daddy

For laymen, the best-known example of this phenomenon was last summer's much-reviled and ultimately abandoned ad campaign for Calvin Klein jeans. In fact, as the record will show, when measured against other recent soundings on the subject of adult-child sex, that ad campaign itself appears-pun intended-mere child's play. But first, a review of the facts.

Just about a year ago, the company launched a series of print and television ads that were, according to almost every critic who reviewed them, bizarrely and upsettingly reminiscent of child pornography. Even for a public made blasé by exposure to Calvin Klein's many other provocative images, the seediness of this latest effort proved just too much. There were, first, the images themselves: teenage models-most looking bored, with legs spread apart and underwear revealed-lounging around semi-dressed. There was also the matter of setting. The cheap wood paneling and shag carpets were supposed to suggest a suburban rec room-another visual convention, it seems, of the child-porn genre.

By common consent, the scripts for the TV ads-which ran only in New York before being withdrawn-were even more compelling evidence of the campaign's indebtedness to the pornographic canon. In those ads, an offstage male voice seemed to goad the young models into responding through a combination of wiles and special pleading. "You take direction well-do you like to take direction?" the voice asked a girl. The lines to boys were smuttier still. "You got a real nice look. How old are you? Are you strong? You think you could rip that shirt off of you? That's a real nice body. You work out? I can tell." And so on.

Though girls and boys alike appeared in the ads, it was clear to any savvy viewer that the boys, rather than the girls, were the main event. For one thing, there was nothing really new about the girls. As a critic for *Adweek* remarked at the time, "Girls have been objectified forever. It's not shocking, sad to say." (It is particularly unshocking in a Calvin Klein jeans campaign; after all, it is now fifteen years since an underage Brooke Shields was used to suggestive effect.)

No, what was new in this latest effort was the question of who those boys were posing

for. As James Kaplan noted acidly in New York magazine, "What especially got to many people was the images of the boys, scrawny and white-chested, posing like pin-ups, their cK Calvin Klein jeans partially undone. . . . That was really groundbreaking advertising."

The talent, too, was cutting edge. The ad campaign was shot by the well-known photographer Steven Meisel (who is credited, among other work, with the photos in Madonna's Sex book). Meisel in turn made another personnel choice of celebrity interest. As the Washington Post reported later in September:

When President Clinton railed against those notorious Calvin Klein ads . . . he probably didn't know that the off-camera voice in the television versions belonged to a gentleman named Lou Maletta-aka the Leather Daddy. Since Calvin Klein proclaimed loudly in his defense that there was no pornographic intent to the ads, Maletta was certainly an interesting casting choice. . . .

Maletta, 58, is founder and president of the New York-based Gay Cable Network, which produces "Gay USA," a news show; "In the Dungeon," "about the New York leather scene"; and "Men & Films," which features excerpts from gay porn videos, and for which Maletta's Leather Daddy character was created.

The next day, the Post was forced to publish a correction: At the last minute, and for reasons unclear, Klein himself decided to replace "Leather Daddy" with a professional voice-over actor. Interesting though that decision may be-at the very least, it does seem to imply an awareness on someone's part that there was such a thing as going too far-it is not nearly as significant a choice as that of commissioning Maletta in the first place. What that choice signified was what any sophisticated viewer would already have discerned-that the ads had an obvious man-boy sexual subtext.

The second interesting fact about the outcome of the Klein affair was the inadvertently revealing rationale put forth by company officials. The main idea seemed to be that teenagers are more sexually sophisticated than many adults want to believe. "The message of the cK Calvin Klein jeans current advertising campaign," as a full-page ad in the New York Times and elsewhere informed the public, was that "young people today, the most media savvy generation yet, have a real strength of character and independence. They have very strongly defined lines of what they will and will not do . . ." It was this very strength, officials reiterated, that proved discomfiting to the public at large. "The world," as Klein himself told an interviewer shortly after the ads were pulled, "is seeing a reflection of what's really going on."

In a sense, Calvin Klein got it exactly right. All that groundbreaking advertising was indeed reflecting something real, albeit something very different from what the ex-post-facto explanations claimed. What those ads did mirror was something else: the idea that non-adults (particularly if they are boys) are appropriate sex objects for adults (particularly if they are men).

Contrary to what some critics implied at the time, Calvin Klein and his team did not invent the idea of using man-boy sex to grab public attention; they merely submitted it to a commercial plebiscite. Middle America, to the surprise of the fashion moguls, voted the campaign down. But Middle America has only been one testing ground for revisionist suggestions about pedophilia. Other, more sophisticated venues have proved more willing to give the subject a second look.

'A Step in the Right Direction'

Consider an example from the New York Times, which, in an eerie conjunction, appeared within weeks of the Calvin Klein ad blitz. At the time, as readers may recall, the public fear of pedophile predators was being fanned by the discovery of yet another form of outreach: the home computer. In the preceding months, one 16-year-old boy had run away with bus tickets provided by a chat-line "friend"; similar cases of solicitation had become the subjects of FBI investigations; and Congress, heavily pressured by interest groups, had turned its hand to devising legislation that would prevent the exploitation of minors via cyberspace. All in all, it seemed an unlikely moment to suggest that those selfsame chat rooms and bulletin boards had their bright side. But that is exactly what the Times managed to do in a front-page report by Trip Gabriel called "Some On-Line Discoveries Give Gay Youths a Path to Themselves."

Though "a handful of high-profile cases" had "dramatized the threat of on-line predators," wrote Gabriel, kids themselves shared no such fears of the screen. In fact, "all the young users interviewed" for the Times piece "said the threat was exaggerated, adding that they would not be likely to meet blindly with an on-line acquaintance." In fact, if the kids had any fear at all, it seemed to be quite the opposite-that their lines of communication would be shut down by party-pooing parents and legislators. Recent legislation, in particular, this reporter discovered, "has made some gay youths fearful about the future of on-line discussions."

And fearful they should be, if cyberspace is really the lifeline the Times made it out to be. A "distraught youth" in California was "on the verge of suicide" until reaching one "Daniel Cox, 19, a regular on an Internet chat channel dedicated to gay teenagers" at 3 a.m. Cox ministered to the California youth, and the next day "the young man was back on line and doing O.K., Mr. Cox said [emphasis added]." This apparently happens all the time. As another of these selfless do-gooders put it-one Michael Handler, "17, a moderator of the Usenet news group for gay youth"- "We want everybody to be who they are and be happy and not kill themselves because they feel they're some sort of abomination."

Another teenager, Ryan Matsuno, "typed out a plaint of loneliness" one night, only to receive "more than 100 supportive E-mail letters" within the next few days-letters that "gave me courage" and "the initiative to go through with telling my mother," according to Master Matsuno. Still another teenager, we are told, used his computer skills to outwit that rarest of things in cyberspace, an actual predator: "Dan Martin, a gay 17-year-old in Fresno, Calif., said he talked for a year on line to a man claiming to be 21. Occasionally

the conversation turned to sex. When Mr. Martin suggested a meeting, the man refused and confirmed Mr. Martin's suspicions that he was really middle-aged. 'After I confronted him, I never heard from him again,' Mr. Martin said."

In sum, according to Gabriel, "sites for gay and lesbian youth are the source of some of the most stirring stories in cyberspace."

These touching dramas, the Times report continued, are social-worker approved-certainly by one Frances Kunreuther, director of "a social service agency for gay teenagers in Manhattan," who says, "I think the Internet is a step in the right direction." At the same time, though, the social workers also "cautioned that cyberspace could not substitute for face-to-face contacts." But wait: Aren't face-to-face contacts exactly what most people fear when they think of kids in sex-saturated "chat rooms"? Well, no matter. And no matter too, apparently, that anyone logging on as a teenager could be 17, or 70-or 7. The only thing that matters, or so it appears from reporter Gabriel, is that "the electronic curtain is not a closet"-this, from one Reid Fishler, founder of an Internet site called the "Youth Assistance Organization," who is said to be 19.

'A Danger to His Students, or Only to Himself?'

Another place willing to ask some hard-nosed questions about grownups who are sexually interested in kids is Vanity Fair magazine. For the most part, its glossy pages seem an unlikely territory on which to argue in earnest about anything-much less about anything as obscure as whether a high school teacher obsessed with child pornography was in fact a misunderstood victim himself. Nonetheless, it was in a 1992 issue of Vanity Fair that veteran reporter Jesse Kornbluth published what is probably the most heartfelt and sympathetic portrayal of a convicted child-pornography trafficker yet to appear in expensive print.

"Exeter's Passion Play," as the piece was called, concerned the fate of Larry Lane (or "Lane") Bateman, a tenured teacher at the elite Phillips Exeter Academy who was convicted in October 1992 of possessing and transporting child pornography. The preceding summer, a police raid on his apartment had turned up 33 videotapes of child pornography. The police also found hundreds of pornographic tapes featuring adults-that is to say, men-and still other tapes made by Exeter students on assignment from Bateman that their teacher had spliced and doctored to his liking (for example, zeroing in on genital areas). Finally, the police also found sophisticated videotaping equipment, some of which belonged to Exeter, later valued at between \$200,000 and \$250,000.

As Bateman would later admit to the authorities, he had been involved with child pornography for twenty years-buying it, lending it, going out of his way to get it, and above all, viewing it obsessively. Moreover, at least some of the people in his life were aware that he was deeply involved in pornography of some sort; the Vanity Fair piece itself cites at least two. But the question of who knew what, and when, was mostly irrelevant to Bateman's criminal trial, which centered on four specific counts relating to child pornography. That case rested largely on a single witness named Michael Caven

(born Michael Pappas), a one-time student of Bateman's from a high school on Long Island who had now turned chief accuser and informant.

Bateman denied Caven's most damning charges-that he had molested Caven from the age of 16, and that he had taken pornographic pictures of him as a legal minor. But what Bateman could not deny was that in the course of 1990 alone he had sent or given Caven more than 100 pornographic video tapes, and that at least some of these tapes were child pornography. Bateman, for his part, never denied having given Caven child pornography; he only denied having sent those particular tapes through the mail. ("I'm not totally stupid," he explained at his trial.)

And there was more. According to a pre-sentencing memorandum submitted by the U.S. Attorney's office, boys at Exeter had been filmed in the showers and bedrooms without their knowledge, thanks to one of Bateman's hidden cameras. "The boys," the memo noted, "are either wearing undershorts, towels or nothing." Also in the memo, according to the New York Times, was the fact that Bateman spliced pieces of the students' tapes into pornographic films. "Mr. Bateman," the Times reported, "duplicated tapes made by about 20 students for class onto a master tape, giving each segment a name like 'Blonde Zen Lad' and 'Belt Spanked.'"

Surreptitious filming of students, pornographic tape-making, pornographic tape-editing, pornographic tape-swapping with a former student, pornographic reconstruction of homework videos: Not everyone prizes hobbies like these in a boarding school teacher, with or without that library of kiddie porn on the side. Certainly that was the view adopted at last by Exeter itself, which fired Bateman within 24 hours of his arrest. Something of that view seems also to have been shared by federal district court judge Jose A. Fuste, who in January 1993 sentenced Bateman to five years in prison without parole for one count of possession and two counts of interstate shipment of child pornography-a sentence that, though hardly the maximum allowed by law, was a far cry from leniency. (Under a fourth count, forfeiture, Bateman was also forced to surrender his video equipment.) There was also the influential fact that Bateman showed no remorse whatever for his behavior. As a report in the New York Times put it when the sentence was announced: "He said he still did not understand what was 'so wrong' about what he had done. 'If I strangled a child, if somebody had been hurt, if somebody's property had been destroyed, then there certainly would be a victim,' Mr. Bateman said. 'Where are the victims?'"

Where, indeed? It is that question that reporter Jesse Kornbluth sets out to answer, and the way he answers it will likely take some readers by surprise. For the chief victim of the Bateman affair, as it turns out, was not, say, Michael Caven, or the Exeter students filmed in the showers, or even all those little boys who were somehow made to perform in all those movies with titles like *Ballin' Boys Duo*, *Young Mouthful*, and *Now, Boys!* No, the chief victim of it all-perhaps even the only victim, if the story told in *Vanity Fair* is correct-appears to have been Bateman himself.

In the first place, or so at least Kornbluth's essay makes clear, Bateman was a victim of

his accuser, Michael Caven (alias Pappas). Caven, the reporter tells us, was a hustler, an alcoholic, a druggie. He exploited rich, older men (including, we are told, Frank Caven, the successful owner of several gay bars who legally adopted his young sex partner in a moment of drunken inspiration).

In fact, throughout Kornbluth's essay, not a kind or empathetic word appears for the man who claimed to have been abused by Bateman as a teenager. But there are, interestingly enough, many, many words from the Pappas/Caven detractors, and Caven is described by a former colleague in the bar business as "a jerk and an egotist. He was media crazy . . . he loved to get his face in any rag in town." Bateman's friends, he reports, "loathe" Michael Caven. "If he wanted to do Lane a favor, he could have said, 'Get help,'" one snaps. "Lane doesn't deserve to have his life ruined."

Second, or so it appears on this telling, Bateman was the victim of the "brutality" and "frosty environment" of Exeter itself. (This turn looks ironic, for under Kendra O'Donnell, who was appointed principal in 1987, the school would seem to have entered a progressive warming phase; it was under O'Donnell, for example, that Exeter—which now boasts a Gay/Straight Alliance-invited gay alumni to come and speak to the students about their sexuality.) Surely Bateman's firing was hypocritical; after all, we are talking about Exonians, who in Kornbluth's telling at least are a worldly-wise and sexually sophisticated bunch. "The idea that single male teachers might be homosexual and appreciate young men," he writes of these preppies, "would not be a soul-shattering revelation to Exeter students."

And, of course, the hapless Bateman was also a victim of a society that forces homosexuals to act furtively. When faced with the conservatism of Exeter, where "only one instructor has come out," Lane Bateman stayed in the closet. And it was all that time in the closet, it is argued here, that led to his taste for child pornography. "'It's not healthy to be so secretive, but Lane never felt secure enough at Exeter to come out,' explains a friend who has long known of Bateman's interest in pornography. . . . 'He's heavy into fantasy. These sex movies are the legacy of the closet.'"

In case the reader misses the point, Bateman is also provided an opportunity to expound on it himself.

Bateman says he purchased the material that ultimately brought him down several years before he started teaching at Exeter, when he was coming out of the closet and wanted to make up for lost time. "For a few years, you could buy anything, and I bought some films and books that featured young boys," he says. "For me, these pictures were aesthetic, not pornographic. I know people say, these images are despicable—how can you think that? But the key point is that I identified with the boys, not the men. If someone young had grabbed me when I was that age and said, 'Let me teach you something,' I would have said, 'Sure.'"

And here, as with the example of Calvin Klein, we come to the real heart of pedophilia chic: It's about boys. It is boys and boys alone who are seen as fair sexual game. For if

Bateman's cache of child pornography had featured little girls, rather than little boys, it is unthinkable that he would have become the object of a sympathetic profile in the likes of *Vanity Fair*. That a teacher whose sexual tastes run to boys rather than girls could come to command a cultural dispensation for that preference—this, rather than the "legacy of the closet," would seem to be the "deeper meaning" of the scandal at Exeter.

Biased though it was in favor of Lane Bateman, and much as it seemed to suggest that child pornography may be a victimless crime, the *Vanity Fair* piece at least stopped short of endorsing either child pornography or pedophilia per se. It is an amazing fact that these omissions would come to seem positively retrograde in light of an essay appearing two and half years later in yet another stylish, widely circulated magazine, the *New Republic*.

A Good Word for NAMBLA

The most overt attempt by a hip journal to give pedophiles a place at the table came in the form of a May 8, 1995, "Washington Diarist" in the *New Republic* by Hanna Rosin entitled "Chickenhawk." Ostensibly inspired by a "riveting" documentary of the same name about the North American Man-Boy Love Association, "Chickenhawk" opens with the following quote from the film's star, a real-life pedophile named Leyland Stevenson: "He's just like a flower in bloom. He's at that perfect stage, in which he is hermaphroditic. . . . He's in that wonderful limbo between being a child and an adolescent—he's certainly an adolescent, but he has that weird feminine grace about him."

Stevenson, of course, is talking about a little boy. It is a quote intended to jolt the reader, and no doubt for most readers it still does. Having already invited the reader to imagine a child as seen through the eyes of a pedophile, Rosin then proceeds to something more avant-garde still: a chatty review of man-boy love and of the North American Man-Boy Love Association (whose informal motto, as some readers may know, is "Eight is too late").

"Chickenhawk," the author explains, "is worth seeing" because it "succeeds, at least partially, in making monsters human." Though it may be true that Leyland Stevenson is "every mother's worst nightmare," it is also true—at least true according to Hanna Rosin—that Stevenson and his fellow NAMBLA members have gotten an unnecessarily bad rap. "There are no steamy orgies" in the documentary, she notes dryly, "or bound-up boys languishing in NAMBLA's basement." NAMBLA itself, she casually explains, "functions mainly as a support group for fantasizers, with the requisite forums for victim-bonding." Like members of any other group united by common interests, its rank and file have their humdrum clubby moments; they hold roundtables (where they "hug and share persecution stories"), solicit subscriptions, exchange "bulletins." Not only are these activities benign, it seems, but their propriety is enforced by the club itself. "Group policy," we are assured, "strictly forbids contact with live boys or even illicit pictures on the premises."

Next, Rosin praises NAMBLA's "bravery." "After all," she writes, "it is still heresy even to consider the possibility of the legitimacy of their feelings." Today's pedophiles, she reminds us, live in especially unfriendly times. Politically, things could hardly be worse; witness the tough language on child pornography in the Contract with America. Even President Clinton, she notes sarcastically, "was cowed into taking a courageous stand against 'softness on child pornography.'" Yet NAMBLA, despite it all, continues pluckily on: "keeping all their activities above board"-even publishing their New York phone number.

Just as the grownups of NAMBLA turn out to be more innocent than one might expect, the boys, for their part, seem to be far more sophisticated. As Rosin reasons, "it might even be that a budding young stud had the upper hand over the aging, overweight loner." And how old does a boy have to be, in the Rosin/ NAMBLA view, to qualify for "budding young stud" status? Sixteen? Fourteen? Twelve? No? Well, how about ten?

One NAMBLA member in his 20s, an enticing blond with slits for blue eyes, describes a sexual experience he had with a karate instructor when he was 10. "I came on to him. I knew what I was doing. I felt very empowered. I felt I controlled the relationship, which is a good thing for a kid. It dispels the belief that adults are always in power in such relationships. You know, I led him around. I was the one in power."

Well, boys just want to have fun-or, as the New Republic seems to have it, just boys want to have fun. It is "plausible," Rosin muses, that "a teenage boy [emphasis added] might agree to sex with an older man." Similarly, though she notes approvingly that, for example, the age of consent in the Netherlands is twelve, she nowhere advocates changing the age-of-consent laws for girls. And she certainly shies away from suggesting that the figure of the "budding young stud" might be interchangeable with that of a "budding young slut"-a phrase whose appearance would surely have incurred the wrath of a good many New Republic readers. "Chickenhawk" itself, interestingly enough, passed almost without comment from those same subscribers.

'Kids Want to Please You'

Actually, these latest attempts to manage a good word for pedophilia are not quite as au courant as they first appear. Similar themes have been floated for years by a number of self-described, self-consciously gay writers-and not only by those on the cultural fringe, but by several who have crossed over to the mainstream literary market.

Perhaps the most prominent of these writers is the acclaimed novelist and essayist Edmund White. The author of a number of enthusiastically received novels-*Forgetting Elena*, *A Boy's Own Story*, and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*-White has also had a brilliant career as an editor and essayist. He has worked at *Saturday Review* and *Horizon*, been a contributing editor to *Vogue* and *House and Garden*, and written for publications ranging from the *New York Times Magazine* to *Christopher Street*. In 1980, a number of his pieces reflecting on post-liberation gay life were collected into yet another critically acclaimed book called *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*.

On account of its historical timing alone-the book amounts to a city-by-city celebration of gay life published on the very eve of the identification of AIDS-States of Desire remains a fascinating and retrospectively poignant sociological document. But it is a work that deserves to be remembered for something else as well: It is probably the most critically acclaimed piece of reportage in which the taboo against pedophilia has been examined at considerable length and judged archaic-a judgment that moreover passed virtually without comment from White's admiring critics. Throughout most of this reflection, White studiously keeps to an Olympian "on the one hand this, on the other hand that" rhetorical monologue-in which one hand, as in most such monologues, consistently manages to get the better of the other.

Pedophilia, White asserts at the outset of this discussion, is "the most controversial issue" in the lives of many in the gay movement. It is also, the reader is led to understand, a terribly complicated subject. As one gay man-ostensibly not himself a pedophile-puts it in words that the author quotes approvingly, "There's no way to answer it [the issue of pedophilia] without exploring it. We need information and time for deliberation. There are no clear answers-who would provide them?"

White is willing to try. "Those who oppose pedophilia," he posits, "argue that the 'consent' or seeming cooperation of an eight-year-old is meaningless." On the other hand, "those who defend pedophilia reply that children are capable, from infancy on, of showing reluctance." Similarly, "critics of pedophilia contend that children are easily manipulated by adults-through threats, through actual force, through verbal coercion, through money." Here again, the other side is allowed the last-and longest-word:

Champions of pedophilia (and many other people) argue that children are already exploited by adults in our society-they are bullied by their parents, kept in financial and legal subjugation, frequently battered. And they have little legal recourse in attempting to escape punitive adults. . . . They can't vote, they can't drink, they can't run away, they can't enter certain movie theaters, they can't refuse to go to school, they can't disobey curfew laws-and they can't determine their own sexual needs and preferences. Pedophiles find it ironic that our society should be so worked up over the issue of sexual exploitation of children and so unconcerned with all other (and possibly more damaging) forms of exploitation. If anything, the pedophiles argue, sex may be the one way in which children can win serious consideration from adults and function with them on an equal plane; if a child is your lover, you will treat him with respect. [emphasis added]

And where does our narrator locate himself between these camps? "I am not in the business of recommending guidelines for sex with youngsters," he writes coyly, for "I simply haven't gathered enough information about the various issues involved." At the same time, though-or so the author insists-"the question of sex with children remains"; and White makes a final attempt to get to the bottom of it by interviewing an actual pedophile in a bar in Boston.

This man, the author coolly reports, "has a lover of twelve (he met him when the boy was six)." Far from the voracious predator so feared by the general public, however, our

pedophile could scarcely appear more ethereal. He is "thirty-six, dressed in faded denims, his face as innocent and mournful as Petrouchka's. His voice was breathy and light, his manner anxious and almost humble." Lest there be any last doubt of this man's suitability for polite company, White erases it with the ultimate compliment. "I was," he writes candidly, "strongly attracted to him."

There follows a conversation in which the amorous adventures of White's pedophile are fondly recounted. White asks how the man met his present "lover," and the pedophile replies: "At the beach. He was there with his mother. He came over to me and started talking. You see, the kids must make all the moves." In case that point has been missed, White reiterates it a few lines later, this time asking explicitly: "Did your friend take the sexual initiative with you?" "Absolutely," Petrouchka affirms, adding, "I've been into kids since I was twenty-two, and in every case the kids were the aggressors."

What do you two do in bed?" White next inquires. There follows a graphic description, which the pedophile concludes on a mournful note. For there is, as it turns out here, at least one problem with man-boy love that most readers may not have anticipated: namely, that the kids are too loving. "My last lover," the pedophile explains, "told me that he didn't like getting f---d. 'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked. 'Because you liked it so much-I wanted to please you.' That's the problem; kids want to please you."

A second writer who has explicitly addressed the matter of men and boys, this time adolescents, is Larry Kramer, author of the hugely celebrated AIDS play *The Normal Heart* and of an earlier novel called *Faggots* (1978), one of the classics of the post-liberation gay genre. The comparison between Kramer and White is particularly useful insofar as the two authors differ markedly in a number of important ways. Kramer's authorial perspective, as well as his political persona (he is a well-known activist and co-founder of the New York Gay Men's Health Crisis), have made him something of an anomaly in his chosen circles. Between the 1970s and the dawn of AIDS, at a time when most gay figures were proclaiming the joys of post-Stonewall "liberation," Kramer, for his part, was nearly alone in emphasizing its dark side. *Faggots*, for example—a controversial book then and now—concerns the plight of a man looking for homosexual love in the hedonistic heyday of Manhattan and Fire Island. Kramer includes a number of scenes in which older men drug, flatter, and seduce teenage boys. Most prominent among these is a 16-year-old named Timmy, who is initiated into the high life at a party by a series of experienced men and finally "devoured" by ten at one time. In the course of this brutal description—one of several in the book involving adolescent boys—Kramer repeatedly invokes the appeal of Timmy's "beauty," his "teenage skin," his status as "forbidden fruit." One by one, the men at the party succumb to Timmy's charms, including even the most macho of them all ("the Winston Man"), who finds himself "excited in a way that he has not been since" high school.

Timmy's fate in the course of the book, it should be added, is not a happy one. Is Kramer implying that such is the price paid for decadence, or is there tacit empathy in his depictions of Timmy's many would-be "fathers"? It is left to the reader to guess. Much less ambiguous, at any rate, is the role played by Timmy and other "youngsters"

in the world that Faggots portrays.

Another celebrated gay author who broached the subject of sex with minors is the late Paul Monette. Monette's 1988 book *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* garnered a National Book Critics Circle Award nomination and was acclaimed by many as "one of the most eloquent works to come out of the AIDS epidemic" (USA Today). His 1992 book *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* won the National Book Award. It is in this volume that Monette, like Edmund White before him, puts forth what would once have been a controversial thesis about the sexual wants of prepubescent boys. "Nine is not too young to feel the tribal call," he notes early on while recollecting his own childhood adventures with a boy his age. "Nine and a half is old enough," he repeats later, adding the by-now familiar note that "for me at least, it was a victory of innocence over a world of oppression."

Several chapters later, while reminiscing about an aborted affair he had with a high-school student while teaching at a boarding school, Monette sounds another theme that once would have been guaranteed to shock: that of the predatory, empowered adolescent. "Behind the gritted teeth of passion," writes the author of his first sexual encounter with a particular boy, "I heard the ripple of laughter, so one of us must have been having fun. Must've been Greg, for I was too busy feeding on sin and death to play."

"It was Greg who always chose the time," he continues, adding dramatically, "I stood ready to drop whatever I was doing. . . . I lived in thrall to Greg's unpredictable needs."

That is not to say that Monette, at the time, felt himself relieved of responsibility for the affair-far from it. "If I am particular about the fact of being seduced-putting it all on him, the will and the dare and then the control-it doesn't mean I didn't feel the guilt. . . . I had become the thing the heteros secretly believe about everyone gay-a predator, a recruiter, an indoctrinator of boys into acts of darkness." But this self-recrimination, he goes on to reveal, was simply false consciousness. For finally, "I don't think that now. Twenty years of listening to gay men recount their own adolescent seductions of older guys has put it all in a different light."

Have all these trial balloons just passed without comment over the public head? One of the few critics to have taken notice is Bruce Bawer, who in his 1993 book *A Place at the Table* castigates Edmund White in particular for his advocacy of man-boy sex. Such radicalism, Bawer argues, is part of the twisted legacy of the closet-a legacy that has forced "subculture" writers like White to ever-more in-your-face positions on account of their oppression by the rest of society.

But writers have from time immemorial endured oppression-including jail time and execution-without leaping to the defense of pedophilia. And what kind of "oppression" is it, exactly, that confers fame, fortune, critical raves, national awards, and-in the case of Edmund White-a Guggenheim fellowship and anointment as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres?

Pedophile Science

Actually, even the likes of White were being more derivative than they would ever like to believe. Hands down, if you'll pardon the expression, the real big daddy of pedophilia chic could only be the long-dead Alfred C. Kinsey. As Judith A. Reisman and Edward W. Eichel point out in their 1990 exposé *Kinsey, Sex and Fraud*, "It is Kinsey's work which established the notion of 'normal' childhood sexual desire"-a notion that, as their book documents, was field-tested on the bodies of hundreds of children, most of them boys, in ways that might today be considered imprisonable offenses.

How did Kinsey and his team get away with it? "As we can see now," wrote Tom Bethell in his excellent review of the Kinsey facts for the May 1996 *American Spectator*, "science had vast prestige at the time and Kinsey exploited it. Any perversion could be concealed beneath the scientist's smock and the posture of detached observation."

Yet if Kinsey is now suffering a public disrobing, his intellectual heirs display their researches still. For a final model of pedophilia chic-this one tricked out with all the requisite charts, tables, models, and talk of methodology-consider a volume published in 1993 by Prometheus Books. As its name seems to suggest, Prometheus is a publishing house of cutting-edge aspiration, whose backlist reveals its focus on issues like paranormal psychology, freethinking, and humanism. And, oh yes, a trans-Atlantic exploration of the virtues of pederasty called *Children's Sexual Encounters with Adults: A Scientific Study*, by a trio identified as C.K. Li ("a clinical psychologist in Paisley, Scotland"), D.J. West ("Emeritus Professor of Clinical Criminology at Cambridge University"), and T.P. Woodhouse ("a criminological research worker in Ealing, England").

Like our other pioneering looks at sex with kiddies, *Children's Sexual Encounters with Adults* is sexually biased, concentrating as it does on the "startling contrast" between boys and girls when it comes to sex with grownups. ("Surveys," as the authors explain at some length, "find that on the whole boys are less likely than girls to experience bad effects attributable to sexual incidents with adults.") It is not sexual contacts per se that pose problems for children, the authors argue, but rather the cultural prejudices by which most members of society judge such acts. "The damaging effects on children of intimate but non-penetrative contacts with adults," note the authors in a section on "cultural relativity," "are clearly psychological rather than physical and to a considerable extent dependent upon how such situations are viewed in the society in which the child has been brought up."

Again, and as Hanna Rosin and NAMBLA fans everywhere will appreciate, the study also emphasizes the positive side of man-boy love for the boy in question. As one typical paragraph has it:

There is a considerable amount of evidence that some boys are quite happy in relationships with adult homosexual men so long as the affair does not come to light and cause scandal or police action. . . . The great majority [of boys in a 1987 "study"]

came from apparently normal homes, but were pleased to have additional attention and patronage from a devoted adult and willingly went along with his sexual requirements.

Parents everywhere will be relieved to learn that pedophiles themselves are not the predators of popular imaginings, but congenial well-wishers much like Edmund White's alluring Petrouchka. "Men who approach boys," the social scientists write in conclusion, "are generally looking for what amounts to a love relationship." Thus, "they employ gradual and gentle persuasion. The average pederast is no more seeking a rape-style confrontation than is the average heterosexual when looking for a congenial adult partner . . . "

At a time when almost every kind of advocacy comes equipped with statistical batteries, it should come as no surprise that pedophiles and their allies, too, have acquired their own pseudo-scientific apparatus. Only the unsophisticated would be surprised to find such a numerological polemic put forward by a reputable publishing house and advertised in the Barnes and Noble book catalog. But then, only the unsophisticated stand in need of the reeducation its pages offer. And there, to return to the figure of Larry Don McQuay, is where the matter of pedophilia chic would seem to stand. In one corner, enraged parents from across the country screaming for help in protecting their children; in the other, desiccated salonistes who have taken to wondering languidly whether a taste for children's flesh is really so indefensible after all. And they wonder why there's a culture war.

By Mary Eberstadt

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