

By Silence Betrayed: Sexual Abuse of Children in America. John Crewdson.
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John Crewdson's *By Silence Betrayed* may be a groundbreaker. It is a thorough, lucid investigation of the sexual abuse of children in America, and it is clearly a book aimed at the general public. The problem of child sexual abuse, as Crewdson demonstrates, has been so effectively buried that awareness of its magnitude generally has been limited to child protection workers—who have for years tried vainly to call attention to the horrifying depth of this problem, a problem often buried in the pasts or the subconscious minds of the victims, and for countless reasons rarely exhumed: the victim's shame, guilt, or sense of responsibility; the fear of reprisal from an abuser seen by the abused child as an authority figure; the belief—unfortunately too often proved true—that the victim would not be believed.

Crewdson's book, should it reach the wide audience it deserves, may accelerate the slowly growing awareness of what he is convinced is "one of the most pressing problems faced by this society." *By Silence Betrayed* is persuasive; it is difficult to disagree with Crewdson's assessment of the problem's extent or its seriousness. The book's genesis is interesting: ABC-TV's made-for-television movie, *Something About Amelia*, lit up abuse hotlines around the nation and the story printed in the *Chicago Tribune* (Crewdson was then its metropolitan editor) caused him to "think for the first time about child abuse and child abusers." Television and the popular press may well be critical in any attempt to solve social problems: a compelling argument exists that after the failure of legislatures, courts, churches, and educational institutions, television—with such programs as *I Spy* and the evening news—made the successes of the civil rights movement possible. Success breeds imitation, rapidly, in the mass media: perhaps *Amelia* and *By Silence Betrayed* will engender a continuing interest in child sexual abuse.

By Silence Betrayed certainly has the necessary ingredients to capture a large audience. First, Crewdson makes certain the book has current appeal. He begins with a case which received nationwide publicity: in Jordan, Minnesota extensive charges involving two dozen adults generated tremendous interest and immense controversy. The case was at one and the same time at the crest of new attention to child sexual abuse and part of the almost immediate backlash which focused on the difficulties of child sexual abuse incidents and implied that the "problem" had been greatly exaggerated in the media. In fact, the Jordan case should have emphasized the extent of the problem: legal and psychiatric professionals are too often unable to deal with child sexual abuse in any effective manner, unable to help either abused or abuser. No one was found guilty in the case, but as Crewdson shows this does not mean the charges were un-

true. Instead, it demonstrates the difficulty of prosecuting sexual abuse cases.

So, too, does the Raymond Buckey case of Manhattan, California. That children could be systematically abused by people in whose care they had been placed and in whom the parents had implicit trust was a dramatic betrayal, indeed. Surely children were safe at the McMartin Pre-School, for two decades run by the respected Virginia McMartin, who "had received every award for civic service the city had to bestow." The case was convoluted, as was the Jordan case. It continues today, but the charges against most of the defendants have been dropped, a measure of one of the most difficult aspects of prosecuting sexual abuse: should the careers—even the lives—of adults be ruined on the testimony of young children, and how reliable a witness is a young child?

As Crewdson shows, children are very reliable witnesses. However, very few prosecutors—or, indeed, psychiatric professionals—are competent at questioning children. Prosecuting child sexual abuse requires individuals adept at talking to both children and parents. Children are not adults; it is difficult for a child to place an incident in a time frame, for example. Defense lawyers can take advantage of this fact, as well as the fading memories of children, by employing the usual legal delaying tactics—tactics which are perhaps more effective in sexual abuse cases than in any other. And despite the "imagination" of children to which defense lawyers often refer, children are literal minded: "You ask a seven-year-old, 'Are you in school?'" one lawyer says. "And the child will say no. Well, you know darn well they're in school. You know they're in the second grade. What's wrong is that the child is not in school at this moment. She's sitting right here in the courtroom." Good defense lawyers find it very easy to plant doubts in the minds of jurors: juries equate consistency with truthfulness, and it is easy to make a child seem inconsistent.

If few cases are prosecuted successfully, because of the special difficulties involved in such a case, even fewer cases are ever brought to trial. About 70 percent of all accused child abusers plead guilty. This, in itself, indicates something about the truthfulness of children in sexual abuse cases. Indeed, in a study of 100 sexual abuse cases in Boston, only 4 percent of the allegations were ultimately proven untrue. A similar study in Denver showed that "fewer than 2 percent turned out to have been fabricated."

While these statistics may, in a sense, be encouraging, because they do indicate that adults are not being placed at risk by lying, vindictive children (clearly, more children are at risk from abusing adults, than adults are at risk from confused or lying children), the situation itself is far from heartening. Very, very few abusers are ever accused. Indeed, evidence suggests that over half the children in America have, during some time in their childhoods, been abused.

Why, then, do most incidents go unreported? The reasons are many. One of the most infuriating aspects of child abuse—and one of the most puzzling for beginning caseworkers—is that quite often mothers are aware of child sexual abuse by their spouses and choose to side with the spouse. In some cases, a wife will possess a notion of *droit de seigneur*: because she is ill, or for some reason she is unable to provide sexual services for her husband, she feels it is perfectly acceptable that her daughters serve in her place. In the case of stepfathers, a mother is often hesitant, crass as it sounds, to lose the mealticket. Her husband provides the family with security—food, home, comforts. Bluntly, the trade off is worth it. The frequency with which stepfathers are identified as child abusers suggests another problem in child sexual abuse: child abusers are extremely clever.

Sadly, it appears that a child abuser will very often seek out a woman with daughters who appeal to him, that he will marry not out of love for the mother, but because

he has identified a situation which will enable him to meet his needs: sex with a child. It should not be surprising that very often child abusers are respected members of a community, that adults react in disbelief, stating firmly that the accused loved children. Indeed, given the abuser's needs, it should not be a revelation that the abuser finds a situation which allows him (or her), access to children: coach, scoutmaster, day care attendant, pre-school teacher. Abusers often convince themselves that they do have the welfare of the child at heart; that, indeed, pedophiles "don't see themselves as child abusers at all, but as a politically oppressed minority of 'child lovers.'" They reject the term sexual abuse completely. It should not come as a revelation that they prefer "transgenerational sex," a phrase free of negative connotations.

Crowdson's chapter on pedophiles is especially enlightening. It ranges from an examination of the Rene Guyon society to a fascinating analysis of the narcissism so typical of pedophiles. The profile of the typical pedophile is interesting: most are compulsive record keepers, a fact that often aids in their prosecution, and many of them photograph their victims. And a most chilling aspect of the chapter is the revelation that the recent hysteria over missing children, initiated by the TV program *Adam*, played into the hands of pedophiles who were able to become temporary caretakers for parents frightened by the specter of kidnapping and who thus delivered children into their hands. Indeed, of the approximately thirty-thousand children "missing" at any time, over 95 percent appear to be teenagers who have run away from home—in many cases to escape sexual abuse—or have been thrown out by their parents. Most kidnapped children turn out to have been abducted by an estranged spouse. And, in spite of all the publicity, not a single child has been recovered who was "abducted by a stranger." That abusers could turn such parental fear to their own uses is a measure of both their cunning and their need.

Children have most to fear, it seems, from those they know. Crowdson's book supports this fact. Children are often sexually abused by a relative or a close and trusted friend of the family. The abuser is frequently in a position of trust. Little wonder, then, that so few accusations ever surface, that child abuse remains an iceberg, its bulk well beneath the surface. Because abused children often become abusers themselves, the problem apparently grows exponentially. The more it is investigated, the more extensive it appears. Are there solutions? Is there any hope for amelioration?

Crowdson is not too hopeful. In his final chapter, "Society," he quotes the hopeful and the pessimistic, but the pessimists are the most persuasive. Michael Wald, Law Professor at Stanford: "Unless we fundamentally change the type of society that we are there is really no hope for child protection." And Crowdson observes, "If such fundamental change seems beyond reach, it may be because some of the trends that appear to correlate with child abuse—the disintegration of the nuclear family, an increase in the numbers of working couples and single and divorced mothers, more second and third marriages, the emergence of a permanent underclass, and an apparent increase in the number of sexually abused children—show no sign of reversing themselves."

If Crowdson is not hopeful, though, his book is one spark of hope in a dark, dark realm. If any progress is to be made, if children are to be made safer from sexual abuse, books such as this, which investigate the subject thoroughly, objectively, and unflinchingly are a necessary beginning. *By Silence Betrayed* is balanced, it is thorough, and while it is clearly aimed at the general reader, the notes are detailed enough that those interested in reading the original research can pursue the myriad scholarly studies which Crowdson has so thoroughly scrutinized. Indeed, a major virtue of *By Silence Betrayed* is that so much is presented so well. Crowdson has done a masterful job with a difficult and demanding subject.