

**Childhood Sexual Experiences: Narratives of Resilience.** Sally V Hunter. Oxford, UK: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-1-84619-337-8. Price: £24.99. Pages: 212 (paperback)

This important book offers the reader a novel understanding of childhood sexual abuse. The book would be useful as background reading for all practising clinicians, doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychosexual therapists, youth workers and social services. I found the title of the book (*Childhood Sexual Experiences*) rather confusing because the title does not do justice to the gravity of the crimes that are described in the narratives of interviewees. The interviewees' narratives suggested their experiences were abusive, despite the fact they were not framed as such by themselves at the time of the abuse taking place. All participants' narratives describe, retrospectively as adults, their capacity to understand what had happened to them as children.

It was not until page 82 that I felt a sense of triumph in the respondents' voices (what I would call a 'Yes' moment) when 'Heather' describes her "inner steel core that no one can attack". A further key triumph in the narratives comes halfway through the book when one interviewee described how she eventually managed to forgive her abusers. The same interviewee explains that she learned to forgive because she believed that her abusers were also affected by their own acts and that they may have understood themselves as evil. Further triumphs are described as "not feeling trapped by it anymore" and the abuse was not the only thing that defined who they were as people. Fear was a stronger inhibitor for girls and shame for boys against disclosure. It is interesting that out of 22 interviewees, 17 had told nobody about the abuse. [Finkelhor describes traumatic sexualisation as a betrayal and stigmatisation that results in powerlessness and disempowerment together with internalisation of shame.]

Another key point I learned from reading this book was that no men interviewed for the study had taken their victimisers to court. Further supporting the research that men experience the additional burden of stigma and shame as a result of the homosexual nature of the abuse, which they described going to great lengths to keep secret from others. Sadly the justice so badly craved by the interviewees did not always bring closure, and for some of the interviewees the abuse remained an open sore.

Key points that stood out for me in the book was the remarkable bravery, resilience and courage shown by the interviewees who were able to understand at a very young age that if they were the ones in the family 'picked out' or 'chosen' to be violated then their brothers and sisters may not suffer the same fate, although sadly this was not borne out by the research, which showed that most victimisers (especially fathers) were likely to be abusing other children in the family. The book quickly moves from triumph to betrayal for some of the survivors who described how, after gathering the courage together to take their victimisers to court, found the 'closing of ranks' amongst other family members and society resulted in further ostracisation and separation from their extended families.

The betrayal felt most acutely by survivors (described as "worse than the abuse itself") was the failure of their mothers to intervene in the systematic abuse of their own children and thereby put an end to their suffering. Most interviewees described experiencing an immense sense of betrayal by their mothers throughout their lives, especially whilst the abuse was occurring and particularly when they became mother's themselves. What saddened me above all about the narratives described was the overwhelming sense amongst the survivors of

their own sense of guilt that they were somehow responsible for the abuse occurring, that they must have "acted in some way to cause the abuse", and their sense of guilt that because of lack of disclosure they were unable to prevent further abuse happening to others and thereby protect children.

The decision about labelling these experiences Hunter suggests is best made by the person themselves. Incorrect labelling of childhood sexual experience as always abusive or traumatic she suggests may be unhelpful or even stigmatising for the person. Adults who have had childhood sexual experiences should be allowed to come to their own conclusions about the issue of abuse rather than have their experiences named or labelled by someone else. This, she suggests, is because different people have different capacities for resilience. In conclusion, Hunter leaves the reader with a sense of hope for healing, for some survivors at least. It is a worthy but difficult read.

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**The Orgasm Answer Guide.** Barry R Komisaruk, Beverly Whipple, Sara Nasserzadeh and Carlos Beyer-Flores. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-0-80189-396-4. Price: £10.00. Pages: 176 (paperback)

Clichéd the comment may be, but this book really does tell you everything you ever wanted to know about orgasms but were afraid to ask. The 84 questions to which this book offers answers range from the physiological (Does a penis need to be hard to have an orgasm?), through the medical (Can an orgasm cause a heart attack?) and on to questions of technique (How can I intensify my orgasms?) and questions that would not look out of place in a round of 'Trivial Pursuits' (How do we know whether animals climax?). All are fascinatingly answered by the book's authors.

The authors themselves are a highly credible team – four huge names in sexology – and it is therefore no surprise that the answers are very firmly and impressively based on academic research. This is perhaps the only mass-market book I've ever read that includes a full 30 pages of references at the back, together with a disclaimer that these are only a subset of the sources used. This is clearly not just another hastily-put-together book of sex tips, and readers will sense from the start that they can trust the information and insights on offer.

The mention of 'readers' brings me to the only query I have about the book: what is its readership? It claims to be for a broad audience, but its factual content and formal style would make it unsuitable for the more de-resourced sections of the population. It is marketed as a must-read for every couple, but is certainly not a skill-teaching sex manual or an inspirational pillow-book. That said, it would appeal hugely to any layperson fascinated by the science of sexuality, and should be absolutely required study for any health professional in the field of sexology.

Hence, I would thoroughly recommend this book to Journal readers. It arguably brings together in a single work all human knowledge about orgasms, including not only what we as professionals have a duty to know, but also what we as sexual beings will be interested to know. And if our clients are similarly interested – either in general or because they need to solve an orgasmic problem – then this is certainly a book we should recommend.

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