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Minor report

Sex between teenage boys and older men is not always coercive -- and it can be more ecstatic than traumatic.

David Tuller, Salon.Com July 22, 2002

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When I was a tormented young homosexual of 15 (actually, a tormented homosexual wannabe is more accurate, since it would be five more long years before I could muster up the courage to allow myself to be seduced), I went to see "Summer of '42," one of the sleeper hits of 1971. For anyone under the age of 40 or so, the movie, which takes place at a seaside community, tells the story of Hermie -- about my age at the time -- as he fumbles through his first attempts at dating while nursing a crush for Dorothy, the young wife of a soldier away at the front. When the soldier dies, his widow -- played by the achingly lovely Jennifer O'Neill, in her first and only significant role -- pulls Hermie into her arms and, in her grief, into her bed.

At the time, the movie was praised for what it was: a touching coming-of-age tale that explored, with sensitivity and taste, the issue of teenage sexuality and the eternal horny-boy fantasy of being initiated by an older and experienced beauty. I cried while I watched, but mainly because I so yearned for the tender moments that Hermie found -- although I craved a seducer with, unlike Jennifer, a penis I could touch, kiss and hold onto.

It's hard to imagine that a film that spoke to my deepest longings could attain the critical acclaim and popular appeal of "Summer of '42." In fact, in the current era of Catholic Church sex scandals, it's hard to imagine a film like that not being blasted top to bottom for promoting child abuse and all manner of other evils, even if it portrayed as thoroughly mutual the desire of both man and boy to find solace in each others' bodies.

I mention "Summer of '42" because it's been on my mind these past few months as I've watched the priest drama unfold. More than once, as I've read accounts of the misery wrought by these loose-fingered clerics and the bishops who enabled them, I've wondered about others who have chosen to remain silent -- men who, as adolescents, entered willingly into sexual relations with a priest -- and maybe even enjoyed it. At first I chastised myself for this notion; I was clearly a bad and unfeeling person for entertaining such thoughts. But then gay friends of mine began to broach the same idea -- usually gingerly, with an undercurrent of embarrassment or guilt -- and I felt

relieved.

Let me state right here that I don't at all doubt the agony suffered by the victims who have gone public. Their despair and rage is palpable and heartbreaking. And this includes those who were, at the time of abuse or later, struggling to come to terms with their own homosexuality. Gay kids are no more immune from the ravages of molestation and abuse than straight ones -- and they could even, perhaps, be more easily recognizable as potential targets by older men with well-honed powers of gaydar.

But it doesn't take a huge stretch of the imagination -- at least not of my imagination, nor, as it turns out, the imaginations of other gay men of my acquaintance -- to believe that there are some men whose lives were not destroyed, or may even have been enhanced, by adolescent sex with a priest. They have not gone public, nor would I expect them to, especially in the current environment. But that they exist -- somewhere -- I have little doubt.

Obviously, there's never a defense for coerced sex. And just as ethical and legal guidelines restrict sexual contact between psychiatrists and their patients, or between employers and employees, priests should not be fucking their parishioners, of whatever age. After all, those relationships depend upon trust and the careful exercise of authority, which can easily be disrupted when sex enters the picture.

And yet there's a subtle subtext beneath the general reaction to, and media coverage of, the current scandal. And that's the notion that sex between a minor and an adult is inherently abusive and always wrong. Wrong, that is, as an unquestioned and unquestionable eternal truth, independent of time and place and context.

That's why, in the wake of the scandal, Judith Levine has hit such a nerve with her recent book, "Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex." Her suggestion that children actually have sexual feelings and should be allowed a certain amount of sexual freedom has drawn denunciations from across the political spectrum. Likewise, a 3-year-old [essay by Harris Mirkin](#), a political science professor at the University of Missouri, questioning the blanket condemnation of intergenerational sex, sparked outrage among state legislators, who promptly stripped the university of \$100,000 in funding. Here is a sample of what Mirkin, a self-described heterosexual grandfather, wrote to create such an uproar:

"As is usual in sexual politics, issues are framed in terms of nature, and of absolute good and evil ... Definitions are characteristically vague, so that statistics from the mildest activities can be blended with images from the most atrocious. Six and 13-year-olds are grouped in the same category ('child') ... In the same way as adolescents are merged with little children, all sexual activity is equated with violent or coerced sexual activity ... According to the dominant formulas the youths are always seduced. They are never considered partners or initiators or willing participants ..."

In his essay, Mirkin compares society's current hysteria over childhood sexual abuse and pedophilia to previous generations' attitude toward feminism and homosexuality. No one reading his measured, academic prose with an open mind could take what he writes as an endorsement of sex between a 3-year-old and a grown man. His goal is simply to explore how behaviors that violate social norms are dismissed in ferocious terms so as to preclude any rational debate.

Cultures, as Mirkin suggests, tend to treat their own values as timeless and immutable. But most rational people, if pressed, would probably recognize the fallacy of that notion, at least in certain spheres. It's no secret that some societies have valued erotic mentoring relationships between boys and adult men. It's such a cliché to mention ancient Greece -- there's a lot about ancient Greece that no one would want to replicate today -- but it's the obvious case in point. Some non-Western societies have also institutionalized man-boy relations as an important milestone in the transmission of knowledge and authority from one generation to the next.

And every society has its laws. But the problem with the law, especially when it comes to sex, is that it creates rules for a realm of human experience that often defies them. Sexual relations between people are messy, chaotic and fraught with ambiguity -- and every society interprets and regulates them differently. And so, in the developed world today, age of consent laws differ so wildly from country to country -- even, within the U.S., from state to state -- that it renders absurd the notion of some universal understanding of the meaning, and potential danger, of sex between adults and teenagers.

Let me interrupt myself for a moment here to issue what has become, in discussions of this issue, a ritual defense. It's ridiculous to have to say this, but -- for the record -- I don't support sex between young children and adults. Members of the demonized North American Man-Boy Love Association and other proponents of true pedophilia, which is generally defined as a sexual interest in prepubescents, would argue that such a thing as consensual relations can exist in such circumstances. But I don't see how a 7-year old could possibly consent to sex in any meaningful way. As a little boy, I played doctor enough times with Dorothy, the girl next door, to understand that many small children love to explore each other's bodies (although it may be telling that I was much more interested in exploring her butt than any other aspect of her 6-year-old nakedness). But that's a far cry from sexual contact between an adult and a first-grader.

However, adolescence -- let's say starting at 12 or 13 for some boys, at 14 or 15 for a great many more -- is a different matter entirely. Gay men compare coming-out stories like kids today trade Pokémon cards, and over the years I've heard many tales of teenage escapades with older men, of sex with an uncle, sex with a married neighbor, sex with an unknown man driving a shiny Chevrolet, sex with a teacher. Sex in a park at night, sex in a train station toilet, sex in a stranger's home. Sometimes the sex was great, sometimes awful. Sometimes the experience was tender, sometimes rough, sometimes somewhere in between. Most of the time the kids wanted it, like I did; they were just a bit braver, or more desperate.

Or maybe they were simply too horny to stop themselves. Edmund White, the noted gay writer, recounts with relish how he started cruising grown men from the age of 13 or 14 at beaches and public toilets in Chicago.

"I was very oversexed, absolutely driven wild by desire," he says. "I would pick up men, and then they would abandon me as quickly as possible because they were worried that I was jail bait. The first one was a handsome architect, who actually had children older than me. I was absolutely fascinated by him, and I seduced him. I followed him to his car, walked right up to him and started talking to him. My mother was away and I said, 'Come back to my apartment.' And it was terrific."

"It was terrific." Even relaying those words -- though they represent White's honest appraisal of what he experienced -- makes me feel uneasy. I am not immune to the zeitgeist or to expressions of social disapproval, and I have felt a little queasy when I've told people I'm writing about sex between adolescent boys and men. The words "child molester" and "child abuse" hold the same power to disturb and repulse me as they do most people -- as is intended by those who wield the terms indiscriminately to refer to any sexual contact between anyone under the age of 18 and anyone older.

Gay friends warned me to be careful and judicious, not just because the notion felt threatening to them but because they were concerned about the rabid response I might receive. Straight friends have expressed shock at the very idea, although once I lay out my qualified opinions on the subject -- that the point I want to make is that it's absurd to categorically insist that every contact between men and adolescent boys is harmful and wrong -- they concede that there may be room for debate, but still ... And then we quickly change the subject.

The subject remains so charged that more than one academic I called to discuss the issue -- men who hold fairly libertarian views on the matter -- declined to do so on the record. Even men who willingly discussed their positive intergenerational experiences as adolescents requested that I use the kind of personal non-identifications -- "Tony, a graphic designer" -- that pepper Cosmopolitan articles about how to improve your orgasms or determine if your boyfriend is cheating on you.

For Frank, a healthcare professional in his 50s, the relationship he pursued as a 15-year-old with a family friend in his early 20s served as an important introduction to the idea that men could care for each other.

"It was clear that it certainly felt good to both of us," he says today. "In some way it was a real lifesaver, because it made me feel that love and affection and closeness and sex would be possible in my life. We both knew that we had to hide what we were doing -- that it was not going to be like Johnny and Sally going on a date. But when we were together, it was like a little oasis where we could be ourselves. Had I not had that experience, I would have gone that many more years without experiencing myself the way God made

me, which is gay."

Another man, a 38-year-old small-business owner from Denver, fondly recalls the two-year relationship he had with his boss at the pancake house where he worked as a waiter. He was 15 when they had sex for the first time, he says, and it was the fulfillment of something he'd desired for years.

"It was frightening and invigorating and I felt clumsy and awkward," he says. "But he was playful and fun and very gentle. I never felt coerced. As foreign as it was to me I was very open to it. Afterwards, I felt good, like I'd experienced something I'd wanted to for a long time."

His boyfriend, who was 29 when the relationship began, also helped alleviate the isolation he'd always felt by introducing him to a gay social circle and helping him begin a modeling career.

"In high school, I had this haunting feeling that I was different, so it was really liberating to find people who were gay," he says. "It was like, 'OK, I'm gay, I love it.' I wasn't an awkward, out-of-place kid anymore. I felt appreciated for being gay, instead of being an outcast and made fun of. Suddenly I had this new self-confidence. I didn't have to hate myself for being gay."

These men were lucky; they met someone who took their feelings seriously. Many more, of course, have had experiences similar to Edmund White's -- they meet someone whose primary interest is sex, not romance or love.

John, an aircraft maintenance worker, had his first experience when he was 13 with a man of about 30 for whom he was performing yard work. The man, who was wearing a Speedo, invited him inside and showed him books with photos of men wrestling.

"He started rubbing my crotch, and I was both nervous and really excited by it," he recalls. "But as soon as he put his mouth around my dick, I shot, and then he jacked off and I swear I've never seen anyone come so much. I was just amazed. I jerked off about that forever."

John saw him once more at the clothing store where the man worked, and they had sex in one of the changing rooms. After that, they lost touch. And while John, who is now in his 40s, enjoyed the experience, he says he wished the man had talked to him more about what they were doing.

"I was amazingly turned on by it, but I remember thinking a year or two later that I would have preferred some level of intellectual conversation, where he'd say something like, 'Some guys do it with guys, some do it with girls.' Just something to give me a context to put it all in. I wish he'd taken a more aggressive role in doing that in the moments he had me as a captive audience."

Still, the experience didn't exactly prevent John from pursuing other sexual

contacts. For the next few years, he, like White, aggressively sought out significantly older guys.

"I never felt used," he says. "I really wanted it, and except for the first time I always felt like the aggressor. I'm not a child psychologist and I don't mean to extrapolate my own experiences to anything else, but I do feel like American society has gone crazy over this whole childhood sex trauma stuff."

It would be easy to dismiss these examples as carefully selected and completely unrepresentative, or as the memories and opinions of disturbed men who don't even realize how abused they've been. And certainly it's true that you can't always trust what people claim about themselves, even if they believe what they're saying. But since I've heard the same sorts of comments from so many men over the years, it's not really possible for me to doubt their testimony. Not that it's invariably a positive experience; it would be as ridiculous to argue that as it is to maintain that it always causes horrific trauma.

The standard argument against sex between men and adolescents is that the age gap creates a power differential that is inherently coercive, and at first blush that perspective makes intuitive sense. But the fact is that power differentials exist along an infinite number of spectrums. Rich people have more power -- generally speaking -- than poor people. Beautiful people have more power than plain ones -- Barbra Streisand notwithstanding. Corporate executives have more power than file clerks, although perhaps Enron will change that equation. And let's not forget that men have more power than women. So should rich, attractive, male corporate executives be barred by law or custom from having sex with poor, plain female file clerks? Following that logic, I should be allowed to fuck -- or love -- only my (nonexistent) identical twin brother, and only if he has exactly the same professional standing, income and haircut as me.

What's more, some recent studies have tended to debunk the idea that intergenerational sex always has negative repercussions. In 1998, Bruce Rind, a Temple University psychology professor, and two coauthors published [a review of 59 studies of college students](#) who, as minors, had experienced sexual contact of any kind with an adult. Analyzing the data, they concluded that the assumption of harm from the experience was greatly overstated. In particular, they reported that 37 percent of boys who reported willing sexual experiences with adults recalled the experiences as positive, and a total of 66 percent experienced it as either positive or neutral. Girls, on the other hand, were more likely to respond negatively -- a finding that may upset some feminists but does not surprise Edmund White.

"I think boys can sail into and out of sexual experience with less psychological damage than girls," says White. "I think a woman talking about a 13-year-old boy having sex with a 30-year-old man will imagine a 13-year-old girl having sex with a 30-year-old man, and I do think that can be frightening. But a 13-year-old boy can be six-feet tall and have a 10-inch dick and be much stronger than the

30-year-old man."

The Rind article provoked an outcry against the American Psychological Association, which had published it in one of its journals. Talk-radio queen and moral crusader Laura Schlessinger blasted the study, the researchers and the association, on her show and in newspaper columns.

"The problem for our children and families is the reverent way the media, law, theology and the general public react to so-called psychological scientific revelations," wrote Dr. Laura. "The public must be extremely cautious in accepting and relying upon papers that appear to counter common sense, fundamentals or morality, and long-term understanding of what is socially desirable and basically healthy for any individual."

In other words, if a scientific, peer-reviewed study offends Dr. Laura's sense of morality, or common sense as she defines it -- as the Rind study so obviously did -- everyone else should ignore it, too. Or, better yet, denounce it.

Like Mirkin and Levine, Rind and his coauthors were accused -- absurdly -- of seeking to legitimize pedophilia. A member of Congress even declared the study to be "the emancipation proclamation" of the pedophile movement. In fact, the outraged reaction actually obscured an important point: that many people who as adolescents have sexual relationships with adults don't actually require massive amounts of therapy to overcome the presumed trauma.

You'd think a study that revealed that something previously believed to be uniformly harmful left no apparent negative traces -- at least according to self-reports and standard measurements of psychological health -- would be welcomed. In a subsequent article, Rind traced the current approach to all forms of sex involving an adult and a non-adult to the early 1970s, when the feminist movement first focused societal attention on the real problems of rape and father-daughter incest. The template of coercive sex and the obvious resulting trauma became the prism through which all "age-discrepant sexual relationships" became viewed by both researchers and the larger society, argued Rind.

"Sexual phenomena that have only age-discrepancy in common with incest are reshaped in a narrow, rigid manner to fit the demands of the incest model," he wrote. "Media commentators conclude that willing sexual relations between adolescent boys and unrelated men are invariably profoundly damaging ... Professionals reject or distort data regarding these relations that are inconsistent with the incest stereotype, reaching instead the obligatory conclusion of pervasive harm."

For his part, Edmund White views American society's dogmatic attitudes about sex between men and adolescent boys as a way of dealing with vestigial homophobia now that garden-variety gays have been accepted as

part of the general mix.

"Gays have been domesticated," he says. "I think that 'Will and Grace' and all that has sufficed to turn adult gays who hang out with other adult gays into lovable sidekicks. They're acceptable as long as they have only one partner, are faithful to that partner and are law-abiding -- if they adopt one Korean girl, go to church and pay their taxes and don't do drugs."

But gays whose lifestyles fail to mimic those of the most staid and palatable straight folk, or those who are open and honest about their relationships with younger men, tap the homosexual dread that still exists in most people, adds White. That dread fuels the quick and dangerous labeling of these men as pedophiles. "They're the new pariahs," he says.

And the older straight woman who fulfills the fantasy of a teenage boy? In "Summer of '42," the widow Dorothy mysteriously disappears from the film after sleeping with the love-besotted Hermie. Were the movie a current hit -- "Summer of '02" -- we would have to presume that she had been locked up as a depraved child molester, never to prey again on an innocent 15-year-old boy.



About the writer

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