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## Capturing the Child: Gothic Subject Categories and Erotic Tropes of Appeal. *disClosure* interviews James Kincaid

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Matthew Renfro-Sargent and Tobie Saad

## Capturing the Child:

Gothic Subject Categories and  
Erotic Tropes of Appeal

disClosure interviews James Kincaid

April 2, 2000

Academic consideration of contemporary popular media often avoids engaging with its rhetorical tendencies that appeal to both readers and writers. Therefore, how such appeal is always naturalized and embedded in everyday practice and belief may be overlooked. Proclaiming the emperor to be naked, James Kincaid makes a lively and considered contribution to the public forum. A prolific lecturer and writer in Victorian literature and theory, Kincaid contributes frequently to academic journals and more popular publications, such as *Critical Inquiry*, *The New Yorker*, and the e-journal *Salon.com*. He has also published *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child & Victorian Culture* (1992), *Sympathetic Identifications* (1993), *Annoying the Victorians* (1995), and *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (1998), to name a few. Kincaid is presently Aerol Arnold Professor in the Department of English at the University of Southern California, where his current research program includes the recent history of age categories and how they might be usefully and happily deconstructed.

In Spring 2000, Kincaid joined members of the *disClosure* collective and the Committee on Social Theory as a participant in the Distinguished Speaker Series entitled "Children at the

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Millennium" at the University of Kentucky. There, Kincaid highlighted his inquiry into contemporary and Victorian idiographic constructions of the erotic innocence of children by interrogating narrative form and the politics of closure. Given the recent North American high school shootings a few months before, Kincaid's concern for the interaction between culture and children became quite relevant to understandings of how we, as a society, represent our children. Professor Kincaid was kind enough to visit with *disClosure* for an interview, and we express our gratitude for his time and insights for musing the possibility that less fulfilling narratives will still taste great.

Our interview opens by focusing on the category of the 'child,' moving then to touch on the rhetorical appeal of children's statements in violent crimes, "outercourse" programs, use of the voice in social science research writing, and the lascivious consumption of the Gothic narrative of child molestation that is frequently played out through the contemporary construction of the erotic child, the child as an (empty) category, and, subsequently, as an object of desire.

**disClosure:** Perhaps we can start by looking at the category of 'child.' You identify the category 'child' as evacuated in both *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (1998) and *Child Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Literature* (1994) and then situate the child within the broader spectrum of human development, *vis-à-vis* child-parent relationships. Where does the child-as-evacuated category intersect with notions of innocence and dependency in your discussion of child-parent relationships?

**James Kincaid:** I hear what you are saying about the linkage to the other categories. The positioning of the child as 'innocent' probably served multiple uses at the end of the eighteenth century. But clearly, one of the uses was polemical—the ideological in the most self-conscience sense. 'Child,' as an evacuated category, could be used as a way of centering and rhetorically focusing a kind of anti-Enlightenment strategy and position. Broadly speaking, the child could stand as an image of the metaphysical, the mystical, everything which was opposed to the privileged location of the rational adult, the moderate and seasoned male position we so clearly see in a lot of eighteenth century discourse.

And so the new category 'child' was loaded from the start with lots of very positive and active attributes. There was a child who could be a foil to adults' sophistication. The child also had, in the famous romantic formulations, a kind of positive spirituality and energy that,

as you know, was sort of drained out in the process of maturation to adulthood. So the child gradually became this image of cultural substance. In terms of the family, this new category was one of the ways of centering the bourgeois family in the nineteenth century. Its structure was solidified through protection of the child. And it was the child, as a center of the family-as-fortress, the family as an isolated unit, which determined the duty of every patriarch: namely, to keep the fort intact, because the fort had within it women and children.

But children, in particular, have been what one might say, usefully symbolic. The concept of innocence, for instance, became, as the nineteenth century wore on, less a connection to the divine and more and more figureless and absent. This suggests merely the lack of sexuality, particularly as biological models took hold within popular culture. As a result, the marker of puberty—which is so taken for granted now—increasingly became the boundary between the child and *something else*. The adolescent came into being in the very late nineteenth century as a bridge category to the adult, refiguring the role of parent because of the cultural understanding of an absolute connection between parent and child; the parent as unquestioned authority who guides, controls, is gentle with, or disciplines the child.

From the very beginning, the adolescent did not fit that model. In fact it was a kind of counter to the child, where the adolescent was figured, from the very beginning, as energetic, troublesome—a walking id. The adolescent encompassed or focused all the problems that the family had. This demonizing of adolescents still goes on. We love it when something like Columbine happens, because then our worst fears about adolescents are confirmed and we can say "Ha! Ha! All these kids are really killers." The category adolescent helped to further purify, or make stationary and stable, the category of the child: it drained off energy and substance, leaving the child static and defenseless.

### Unfulfilled Narratives

**dC:** You frame *Erotic Innocence* within the cathartic experience of an exposé or examination of a cultural obsession with the Gothic construction of *those people*—people who are initiating and responsible for child abuse and molestation—as monsters. In your discussion, you detail the Gothic narrative form and a fetishization of the acts that children who are sexually abused play out in recounting their experiences. Often there is an understanding in such confession-oriented



discussions with children, that if something is brought to the surface (from the assumed deep imaginary of the child's psyche), such revelations confirm the reality of the act itself. However, I think you are saying something quite different.

**JK:** When one is challenged, as one should be, to find narratives that might be more generous, that might lead us toward openings, different ways of figuring child molesters. If one takes as a premise, as I do, that the word "erotic" is neither synonymous with an impetus to assault nor necessarily a bad thing, but just something that has confused us horribly in this culture, then we can ask about the connection between narratives of eroticism with narratives of, let's say, good will and compassion, or effective action.

In James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1922), Stephen Daedalus talks about Aristotle's notion that desire is something that attracts us toward its object, something that makes us want to step toward, just get closer to, but not necessarily to assault or complete or fulfill. Now one of the problems of the narratives of desire, in the West, is that they have become either melodramatic or tragic; that is, in literary terms, they move toward fulfillment. The great models we have of desire which do not want fulfillment are comic narratives, in the broad sense, including, say, the new testament of the Bible, which just keeps the story going. Or, more commonly, say, the Marx Brothers, where you think the story is going to end and they figure some way out of the dilemma. You think they are going to get trapped, and they aren't. This has always been the impulse of comedy, to defeat endings.

Another way to put that is to defeat resolution, or fulfillment. So, regarding narratives of desire, rather than wait around until we scrub children free of eroticism and no longer find them attractive and stop casting them in commercials and movies, one thing to do is a combination of enlightenment and rationalism: admit that we find children erotic in our culture—it is not a personal darkness, a depravity within us. The figuring of kids as erotically attractive is the way they have been positioned, from their physical features and the smooth skin, to their helplessness, their innocence, and so forth. How can we best operate with that knowledge? The answer—which is perceptually simple—is to figure narratives which are not narratives of repulsion in which children are unthinkable, untouchable, or empty, but where children are, in fact, attractive but do not figure in narratives of fulfillment. This leaves us the choice between hysterical narratives,

where we have got to keep finding monsters and therefore, become inescapably lost to our children, and narratives where we say, "okay, they are attractive, but so are buildings, and so are cars, and so are dogs, and so are a million things in my life that I can find rich and enjoyable and titillating." I express myself, as we all do, let us say, in that kind of low-grade *voyeurism* so we can watch and enjoy the world around us. But even that word is not very useful, because it is still a subject-object distancing device, and there are ways that we can be more generous and participatory as regards our connection to children. Those narratives are right there for us. There is no mystery as to where they are. So what we need to do—rather than turning to Sophocles or Freud's tragic narratives—is to turn to Mark Twain and others in our literary repertoire who know how to figure the world as more open and less fulfilling.

### Who's Protecting Whom? From What?

**dC:** Can we also consider a cultural understanding of the child who needs protection as a discourse that preempts certain topical discussions, such as sexuality, because of this preoccupation with narratives of fulfillment as opposed to narratives of experience?

**JK:** Although this is tricky, even the old romantic notions nicely said that we can't know the child very well. Children for them are extreme and mysterious because they are godlike; but let's just say that for us they are puzzling. There is no way that we can encompass children with our knowledge in order to protect them anyhow, even if that were a worthy goal. And we do not know much about what is going on inside children. Part of the response to that ignorance might be to back off and see, and try to allow the child, in its own puzzlement, to work out interesting patterns of behavior and performance. That kind of easy participation would come hard to many of us, perhaps. But there is also a way in which most people do that right now. It is not like everybody, every second, is out there figuring children are under siege; and it is not like every kid is terrified either. As anybody who has been around kids knows, most of them ignore lectures about self-defense. Most kids, still, if they meet strangers, go out and hug them—kids at certain ages anyhow. So it is not like we are wrapped into this single narrative right now, and I do not mean to overstate that particular hysterical narrative. The danger of that narrative is it seems to be so powerful among politicians and police, figures who loom large in our culture right now and do so much damage in the name of *protecting the children*.



dC: It seems that the notion of *escaping* that narrative is prevalent, but the economy of the Gothic narrative which affects and is constructed by the politicians, the police force, your book, talk shows and the movies seems quite pervasive. How do we redistribute that? How do we redefine this contemporary narrative for the police, for politicians, and for talk shows to find their own alternative concepts instead of focusing on the process of childhood?

JK: One way to look at it is simply to talk, rather than forming grand schemes ... I am a kind of a pragmatist: I believe in employing local tactics or taking what is at hand and trying to move with it. And so one of the things that is at hand, I think, that is wonderfully useful are programs aired on the Fox Network, such as *South Park*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, and the *Simpsons*, of course, and a lot of shows which are parodies or subversive about children's power, parental virtue, and so forth, characterizing children as leading explosive and interesting lives of their own, which are both horribly sadistic but also unpredictable to us. These are ways, and I know they sound small ... you seek people who are or could be, immediately responsive. You talk. You formulate plans, and then people who are better than me at engaging in political action may devise those kinds of political stories. I think the natural allies are comedians, comic writers, the young, and women's groups, particularly.

It is quite interesting to me that both *Child Loving* and *Erotic Innocence* were open to the very powerful criticism that they did not address issues of gender very successfully and that I seemed to be talking about the child as a kind of ungendered subject. The most useful and receptive groups to these ways of talking have been women, well, or gender critics, but also women's groups. It is remarkable to me that that has been the case, because people hear very quickly about protection and dependency and the kinds of narratives that can only go in one direction: namely, the only thing that you can do with this narrative of protection is more protection. You can up the voltage. And upping the voltage means both creating more demons out there—making the world darker—and also un-empowering the people that you are protecting: enfeebling the people who need the protection.

I think we are right now in a reactionary mode in this country, which is quite anomalous because the economy is so good. It is hard to know what the Gothic story is feeding off of right now. People say we really need the communists back so we have some external monsters on which we can deflect our energies rather than on making them up. In

a kind of utopian way, the specific dangers we are running into now, with the focus topic of children and protection, will not last very long. I think people will hear other voices and realize that the very human beings that they are trying to protect, kids, are the ones that are being hurt, in so many different ways.

dC: How have notions of the child, who both responds to and needs nurturing, changed from the Victorian Age to the Age of Information?

JK: I think that one of the things that has happened, again painting with very broad strokes, is that the Victorians were much more secure about the relationships between parents and children, and about the family, more broadly. I think that for all the problems they had, the formative stages of human development probably took place much more smoothly. I don't know about the English upper class, but certainly, it appears to be that for the middle class and in the working class—the mass of the population—the construction of the family in the nineteenth century did not go without a hitch. There were all kinds of problems. But even things like child labor seem to have run their course. Adjustments were made to refigure the child from an economic category to a biological category.

The fundamental properties of the family weren't, one might say, really put under enormous stress until the twentieth century. Through the wars, the renegotiation of the position of women, one could argue that the category of 'child' did not change much. The position of women changed radically, particularly in the workplace and inside the family. But until very recently, the twentieth century child was pretty much the Victorian child—even with the contradictions, all of the strange mixtures where we can both love and detest children, regardless of the angelica or demonica. Why, all of a sudden, do we have this wave of cultural concern that children face an enormous threat today and the fundamental job of the family is a kind of archaic vigilance required to protect children? Why do we suppose that these dangers are suddenly there? Of course, people do not say that. In a self-flattering way, they say that the problems have always been there, it is just that we now know about them. Pedophiles have always been legion. It is just now that we are waking up to that fact. And in speaking out, we make ourselves feel real good because we are no longer in silence, as the rhetoric of scared silence is quite pervasive.

I think that one possible reason for this is the positioning of the 'child' as empty. It is something to be protected, shielded, and nurtured, all



of those things. This belief was really fundamental to establishing the family as a fortress: that is, you had to conceive the child in this way. Otherwise, there is no point in having the family at all. H. G. Wells mentions this in his novel *The Time Machine*, when he figures that the time traveler looks at the future, and seeing a communal mish-mash of people and figures the future to be a world without dangers. Of course, he is wrong, but that doesn't quite matter. In a world without dangers, there is no need for a family. There is no need to huddle around in this tight little unit.

So one possibility is that the change in the family structure, in the western world—changes regarding working women, and a refiguring of sexuality—elicits a reaction which insists that to make such changes in society poses danger to children. And so we create narratives that empower the family, or rather strengthen the traditional family. One of the ironies in this—which social workers are quick to point out—is that when you start talking about dangers of the world to children, these children are often safer wandering in the woods or anywhere other than in their own homes. Far and away, the most dangerous place is inside the family—of course, when you are inside a movement, you cannot analyze it very clearly. But this does seem to be one of those interesting, hysterical moments in a culture where a wave of anxiety, a construction of a kind of moral panic about dangers to children, particularly sexual dangers, has out run anything anyone could conceivably call logic or reason.

dC: This assessment dovetails with one critique of the Conventions of the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup> and certain legislative initiatives in the United States and the UK which aim to articulate protection for the child: namely, that so-called 'stranger-danger' and other notions which situate the risks to children *out there*, obscure the real dangerous threats lying, for example, within the home, within the family, and-or within an administrative unit or state that feels that it can actually protect the 'child.'

JK: Yes, that is right. And, it is very interesting when concern for the child starts at legislating disciplinary techniques, or television viewing. One can imagine how uncomfortable that would make people in this country. It would be seen as invading the rights of the parents. One of the interesting things people hate to talk about is the practice of corporal punishment on children. Such practices make it very difficult for social workers, and others who are trying to investigate physical abuse. In California, legislators have various problems defin-

ing physical abuse in the legislature because they insist on writing in that "physical abuse" does not include—in California language—"the normal and natural practice of parents spanking children." Well, "normal" and "natural" are very interesting terms, particularly when they occur together. Spanking becomes both normative and somehow instituted by nature. When the legislature starts talking in detail, it becomes really grizzly. Because of the fact that parents have a certain right to exercise corporal punishment, the legislators figure that they better help judges so that, in the end, the law is written to say that it is all right to hit kids with a belt, but not with the buckle end of it. Are we addressing the risk that there is some trench-coated stranger at the playground who is picking up children and beating them with belts? No, this is the "normal" and "natural" functioning inside the home.

dC: Neglect and neglect cases are increasing nationally. However, any incongruence between how and where the state and the family define neglect—different definitions, of course—highlights the centrality of poverty to these debates. For instance, when parents and caregivers cannot work or are recipients of welfare, and, as a result of the welfare-to-work policy, must seek employment or pursue worker's training, yet cannot afford childcare and have trouble feeding their child, these individuals can be reported and charged for neglect. Here, the issues intersect job, community, and welfare policies, not child abuse per se. How do we control for the category of neglect? Do you see this as a problem for state intervention, or is it to be left to the families?

JK: I think that these are systemic problems: adequate childcare, adequate jobs, education. One of the reasons we put so much weight on sexual abuse is that it always gets played out as a kind of melodrama—a moral issue entirely. It is not an economic issue. It is not an issue that involves anything other than Gothic monsters out here and the belief that we can save the children. We are riding to the rescue of the child against this horrifying demon. It is very simple minded, playing out something like the plot of *Dracula*. Whereas, the kind of complexity that you raise of when you speak of protecting the child from neglect, almost always comes down to poverty. So that in a discussion of the problem that we are addressing, such as not enough decent jobs and lack of adequate child care facilities, we moralize in terms of neglect. It is not a question of intervention, but rather providing opportunities to people so that neglect becomes something more like what we would think neglect would be: people who could, but do not, take care of children. Neglect, at least in California—and I think nationwide—is far away the biggest category of child abuse.



dC: It is. With the new welfare policy, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF),<sup>2</sup> "neglect," so defined, may increase, primarily because the government's welfare-to-work policy does not account for the amount of childcare facilities that will be needed to support the implementation of TANF.

### Mainstream Images and the Production of the Erotic Child

dC: Returning to your text, I am curious about the historical production of the erotic child, such as Shirley Temple, Macaulay Culkin, and how the production of the popular media has changed to encompass this eroticization in the United States.

JK: Shirley Temple is such a dominant figure, and there may have been other children. And certainly there are other females too: Deanna Durban and the young Elizabeth Taylor, and so forth. I am not a film historian; I have just read a few accounts. Now, the major figures seem to be these very pretty images, which are sometimes male, sometimes female. They seem to me largely androgynous, including the little boy in *The Sixth Sense*, who has been nominated for Best Supporting Actor.

As we demonize pedophiles more and more, the narrative becomes horrifying, in the sense that only monsters eroticize children. That discourse in itself is kind of titillating—we talk endlessly about it. Take criminal testimony, for example, we need a lot more details in the trial. In the early days, at least, the details of the interrogations of children were often made public, "did you play a naked movie star? What was the naked movie star?" And it went on and on and on. But I think that one might say that as far as demonization and the uneasiness about this goes, the projection onto these presumed innocent images is also heightened. The irony could be that in our anxiety about eroticizing children, what we are doing is raising the stakes, making erotic children more central in our discourses of pedophilia.

One way this gets played out is in the increasing mainstream images of erotic children in advertising and television. Our anxiety finds its ambiguous expression in mainstream films, through the topic of intergenerational sex. It is not always what you think of immediately in these films, but an astonishing number of movies use it: *American Beauty*, *Magnolia*, *Cider House Rules*, and *Happiness*—even comedies, like *Rushmore*, *Election*, and that other Reese Witherspoon movie called *Freeway*—which, by the way, is a great film. But what is interesting about all of these films is that they treat intergenerational sex

in a wide variety of ways, and not always in ways that make people comfortable. In consideration of the example *American Beauty*, one can say that today it is certainly much more blatant and up front than in the earlier hits, in Shirley Temple and Macaulay Culkin's sneakily erotic movies.

We are still fascinated with child actors, though. I think that *The Sixth Sense* is in part based upon the tropes of the misfit and the pretty kid—an old Hollywood formula used over and over again: for instance, in *Shane* or *The Professional*. Sometimes it is a little girl, sometimes it is a little boy, as in *Sling Blade*. But the other films that I mentioned before are much more playful in their use of intergenerational relationships. I do not know what that indicates. It may suggest that the culture is getting much more easy-going about this idea. Superficially at least, we can make fun of it, we can parody it, and we can look inside these patterns of social behavior. I do think that the Macaulay Culkin phase, the endless parade of sort of cutesy, androgynous kids, indicated just a sneaky, playing out of erotic desires. And this could suggest nothing more than just clever filmmakers who sense this national panic and want to attract audiences.

dC: It seems, though, that there is certainly a dulling of cultural sensitivity toward the eroticized child. It is not just evident in the content of the film itself, but in the writing of the film, the complicity of the actors, the viewing audience, and the industry that accepts such films. Can you compare the cultural sensitivity toward erotic innocence today to that of fifty years ago?

JK: Of course, there are different standards, different codings, and different languages. When Shirley Temple crawls up on somebody's lap—her uncle's or daddy's—and says, "marry me. I want to be your wife," audiences might regard this as nothing more than 'cute.' But coding a little girl who wants to marry her father as cute is a curious matter. It all depends on how the eroticism is disguised; if it's done well, then Eros can be slipped in under the cover of 'cuteness.' The disguises may have been different fifty years ago—that was Graham Green's brilliant argument. After all, these movies have plots, and you have to remember that. The plots could be considered a kind of safety curtain between the audiences and their desires. Now, I think we can say that the safety curtains may be provided by the culture.

dC: Is the dulling of our senses creating obstacles for protecting the child and educating the child sexually, or does it help?



**JK:** I do not know whether the dulling of the senses that we are talking about is not, itself, better expressed as a displacement of where our cultural sensitivities are. One of the things fueling this is the increasing prevalence of legislation to protect kids, such as legislation based upon conceptions of the Internet as a vast and dangerous territory, and so forth. There might be room for other ways of doing all of these things. It is hard when you start talking about getting rid of all of these laws and just letting kids go at it. Not too many people are interested in that discussion...

**dC:** Particularly given that today, just about everybody can go into a bookstore and find a text about sexual child abuse which details how to establish one's own victimhood, even if specific incidents of abuse are not remembered.

**JK:** I hope that we are getting out of that phase: establishing identity on the basis of abuse. Of course, people have had nightmarish experiences; but when we are in the middle of the recovered memory business, people say that if you had problems in your life, that was probably it. A notorious book, *The Courage To Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, says that you ought to assume that you were a victim of a sexual abuse, and then work it out. If you get better, it proves that you were. When identity is established that way, when abuse becomes a marker of who we are, it is a really dangerous period for us culturally. It is a tricky business too, because I think some of the people set out to find themselves in such things as the recovered memories of satanic rituals. Do not get me wrong—I know that millions of children in this country are victims of sexual abuse—all I want to say is that we have gone too far in this particular area: there really are not that many Satanists sacrificing children and strangers are not a real danger to kids. Such things as the recovered memory phenomena are creating more problems than they are solving.

**dC:** You wrote an article on the American photo labs practice of arresting parents as child pornographers ["Is this Child Pornography," 2000]—is it not federal law that any photograph that a minor is nude in must be reported?

**JK:** Yes, that is right. It is not the problem of the photo labs. In almost all jurisdictions in the United States, labs are in big trouble if they do not immediately turn over "suspicious" photos to the local authorities. In investigations of the practices of actual photo labs, it turns out that

their compliance with the federal law is quite varied. Mostly, of course, they are worried about lawsuits. But they are kind of in the middle, worried about lawsuits from not only the photographers and their human subjects, but also from civil authorities. And the law is tricky. It has been challenged with fake photos, which may now *also* be considered worthy of prosecution, including morphed or otherwise computer-generated pictures. Janet Reno said that it was not necessary for the child to be nude. The child could be clothed and posed in a provocative or suggestive manner. It also does not have to be a photo of a child who is under age at the time the photo was taken, so long as the child *looks* like an underage child. Pretty soon we have such a mish mash of legislation initiated to protect children. The issues come down to two things: what is a "child" and what is "provocative?"

**dC:** If we make the *scientific* explanation of "child" and "provocative" more detailed, are we not perpetuating this cultural narrative of molestation primarily through the institutionalization of an expertise in the ability to quantify the prevalence of abuse?

**JK:** For a while, so-called experts on satanic ritual abuse would travel national circuits as expert witnesses able to recognize the signs of Satanists. The most notorious case was the Robin Hood Hills murders case in West Memphis, Arkansas.<sup>3</sup> I think we are perpetuating these narratives through scientific explanation. Experts proliferate the details and the detailed explanations are used both by the prosecution and the defense. I had not realized this at the time, but in the West Memphis case, the prosecution was allowed unlimited money to pay for experts, while the defense was limited to one thousand dollars for forensic evidence and expert witnesses. It was partly because they were public defenders, I suppose; but it may have been peculiar to that county. It does seem blatantly unfair. As these questions proliferate, they can become absurd. The photo lab stings—we do not know what children *are*—who is going to judge whether a kid in a bathing suit, for instance, is sexy? Janet Reno was asked such things as, "Well is it necessary that the genital outline is visible? Is that what counts?" And she said, "Not in every case." She is just giving guidelines, of course; she cannot make laws. But still, these are pretty powerful legislations. "Not in every case?" So who, then, is to judge?

I think a lot of people might say that such legislation is absurd, but that has not been the public reaction. The reaction to the amorphous



nature of the legislation seems to have been, on the whole, that questions about the exact letter of the law are attempts to foil its success. The starting assumption is that there are mountainous numbers of pedophiles out there, successfully distributing child pornography, trading it, making millions on it, kidnapping children and the like. Colleagues of mine believed the urban legends about Southern California: that there were people hiding in the bushes at Disneyland who would grab kids, pull them into bushes, and, in a matter of minutes, disguise them, drug them, and ship them out to some terrible place like Argentina, or something, where they would be sold. Well, we have to have such prior beliefs in order then to engage in this campaign. This way, we do not mind how much attention we have to give to what really constitutes—in the sick minds of child molesters—an attraction to a child. The endless creation of experts on these subjects and the endless stories we tell are part of the quasi-pornographic stuff that we produce.

### The Merits of Playing Doctor

**dC:** Your comment about the extent to which campaigns to effect empowerment and may actually accomplish the reverse is interesting. Where, or how, do these issues play out outside of an American context with regards to sexual exploitation and child labor, given that there are, perhaps, more egregious situations which confront the working child internationally than may confront the working child in America?

**JK:** I think you are asking about countries like Pakistan or Cambodia, where grinding poverty does put kids in danger of economic exploitation of all sorts. I don't know if pedophiles pose anything like the threat that comes from *Nike*. But the important point is that a concentration on sexual exploitation in these countries (as in our own) is a way of 'gothicizing' the problem, moralizing the issue in a gratuitous way, and avoiding systemic problems.

The Netherlands' model is interesting. A popular conception of the Netherlands that is as kind of a Sodom and Gomorrah of the modern world and the reference here is Amsterdam. Amsterdam is imagined as a place where just about anything goes: a horrible, blackened place particularly for children where hideous things—such as child pornography are rampant. One thing we never see in the American media construction of the Netherlands, though major television networks will sometimes investigate and talk about sex education, is that they

have very different ethics on child sexuality—remarkably different. They also have almost no sexually transmitted diseases, and almost no sexual problems.

There was a very whimsical, very long piece on *ABC News*—maybe a year and a half ago on sex education films that are shown to school children who are in the equivalent of the fifth grade in the United States. The films had nothing to do with tedious reproduction facts, nor did they have anything to do with disease or danger. They were about how to make love, how to give other people pleasure in a sexual context, and how to masturbate. The most wonderful thing about the story were the interviews with the fifth-grade kids who had seen the film—all of whom spoke wonderfully fluid English. They were asked, "Do you think this is going out to make you want to go out and have intercourse?" And one common response was, "Tee hee [laughing], no, but it looks like its going to be fun, doesn't it?" The interviews were very effective, because the viewing public could see that these were actually kids, and that they found all of this amusing. *ABC* also asked, "What do you think is important about sex?" And the young people's responses were "Well, I want to have fun and I think that it is a way for everybody to have fun." And they would use language like that. And *ABC* presented it as, "Well, geez, what about that..." and just let it go—they did not censor it; they just held it out there.

Again, this is a way of tapping into the ways we construct kids. When we are one-on-one with kids, many people find it hard to dislike them or to find them ominous. And the kids interviewed were not ominous, and there is no way to think that they were going to go out and start engaging in sexually promiscuous behavior. So I think that it is tricky, of course, because once you start putting kids on display, you risk enacting the whole mechanism that we already use in our narrative understanding of who kids are. But the sexual education in the Netherlands is much more open than it is here.

### This Little Thing Called Intercourse

**dC:** We can sit here and talk about alternative ways to educate our children sexually. Yet, in the United States, we will not do it.

**JK:** There is a kind of interesting middle ground. I went to a meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. It was a really interesting group meeting. Anna Freud was in that group, a group of resolutely right-thinking people. In the talk I gave there, I said some-



thing mildly comical about a method of sex education called "anything but intercourse"—which was kind of stupid of me. I don't know if you have heard of that before; it is often called "outercourse." They tried it for a while in Florida, of all places. It teaches kids that, for health reasons and the like, they could have plenty of pleasure doing sexual things with one another that does not involve intercourse. Program coordinators thought that this might bypass some objections to sex education because it would pertain to protecting technical virginity while acknowledging the reality that young people are very likely to want to have physical, sexual contact. And so this would train them to do it.

The reason I made fun of them is that they have little slogans like: "A Little Thing Called Intercourse." It sounds like that Cole Porter tune, "This Little Thing Called Love." But still, you can see that however wacky that might or might not be—it could work. If people would say, "Yeah, that's okay." Why do we not look at this in the face and say, "Okay, go out and do anything that you want—just don't do *this*; it is just too unsafe for now." You could even use religious reasons to advocate for abstinence in support of outercourse programs. Still, my guess is that such programs are not going to go very far in terms of garnering any kind of wide-scale support.

dC: This touches on something you mentioned earlier, that a sense of protection does not acknowledge where it is actually enfeebling. Perhaps the base assumption would be that childhood is supposed to be a state without complications, confusion about issues, or adversity. In terms of experience in children's everyday lives, the rigors of socialization are sometimes culturally constructed as being something which one needs to work against rather than acknowledged as a source of diversity in one's life which may lead to a richer expression of one's humanity. In a cross-cultural context, data has demonstrated that, in terms of their abilities to adapt to new situations, children who are challenged in crisis situations possess greater resiliency than those who are the benefactors of extensive 'protective' legislative initiatives and have been denied any, or granted limited, autonomy.

JK: Absolutely, I think this is so powerful. And again, it lies in the very heart of the Romantic movement. Wordsworth talked about being nurtured, not just by beauty, but by fear. By fear, he meant a whole host of confrontations not only with terror, but also conflict and problems and hostilities. I think that kids' characters are molded through being able to operate on their own, to make mistakes, and even to

confront danger. This is enormously important. And the ideal that, somehow, it would be good to protect children, flies in the face of what we know about child development.

I also think this open model certainly holds true for the development of sexuality, or the ways in which children explore and develop their own eroticism amongst themselves. Right now, sexual development is policed more and more heavily. Arguably, kids growing up inside this scheme are going to be more and more disabled in their ability to be tender and in their ability to enjoy that part of their lives. I do not think there is any doubt of that. Luckily, maybe one might say, kids probably still play doctor.

Anyhow, I imagine that that is one of the social realities; and it is a part of the anxieties, I suppose that has fueled all of the hype to protect the *child* from the very beginning, at least, is the real scare started in the daycare centers. These incidents became a way of beating up on working mothers adding to their nightmares and piling on the guilt. Not only were they working and abandoning their children, but they were abandoning them to daycare demons. And interestingly, the first wave of arrests made was very often of women, because daycare centers really did not have too many male employees. That was one reason that the daycare hysteria could not last too long. The idea of women as the principle demons, the principle pedophiles, just was not going to wash very well, so it moved on. But I think the whole child-abuse hysteria still comes down, particularly, against women.

dC: Why do you think that women are in a different position than men, in terms of how they are cast in the Gothic narrative of the pedophile?

JK: I really do not know how different they are, because you do, now and then, read books which are written about male molestation: boys abused by women. *They* say this is the great silent secret, women molesters. I doubt it very much. You read some spectacular things about women teachers—but, to me, they still seem to be sort of fill-ups to extend the base story, which tends to be about white male predators.

I'm not sure that I have a very interesting response to that question. I think it is just the way in which aggression is coded as male. These nightmare figures are not usually seen as women, although they are seen as cowardly, predatory, sneaky, and so forth, categories that are



often ascribed to women. Nonetheless, these figures are still viewed as deficient males because they are aggressive and going after sex with kids. Such a perspective understands women as less suited for that role. Also, I suppose one could say, if you cast women too heavily in that role, you are disrupting what contemporary American culture wants to protect: the drive of women from the workplace back into the home to re-institute a patriarchal culture. If you make women into the aggressors, you lose part of the building block of that unit. There is an interesting way, too, in which this drama re-inscribes heterosexuality. The most hated group in the country is probably The North American Man-Boy Love Association—but most of the pedophilia dramas in real life are heterosexual.

### My Gothic Monsters and Myself

dC: Touching upon your notion of "sick minds," can we discuss the use of voice in *Erotic Innocence* and your decision to use the monolithic "we"?

JK: As you can imagine, the decision to use a "we" as a way of talking about cultural phenomena was worked out over a very long period of time. I gave it a lot of thought, the obvious alternative being "I". The difficulty with the first-person singular was that personalizing it seemed too limiting—and I am perfectly willing to say that I am not immune to the attractions of these kids on television shows and movies. I did not think that the subject-oriented position was useful. I thought that offering it as a "we" would speak of a kind of cultural geography: in this time and place, these narratives seem to be a main-line charge in our culture. If I am wrong, or if people are exempt from this, then fine. If people even discuss the point, then the book has done some good—I hope.

If the "we" is not, in fact, a generalized "we," if it is not a description of a strong cultural energy, then the reactions to the book, presumably, will disavow the book on those grounds. But the "we" is also, of course, a little bit provocative—"C'mon, you feel this too, don't you? Admit it." That voice is very bad rhetorically, in a sense, but I thought also that the other choices were even less satisfying. What we are doing to children is absurd. In hand-wringing about it, we might also mull over how awful it is that we are doing this to kids to satisfy our own pleasures in telling these stories. One thing which partly motivated my choice of "we" is that when you admit that you eroticize

children you are not admitting all that much. All that you are saying is that you are a part of the culture. Okay, so let's start there. "We" can start there.

dC: Do you think that the cathartic intention of the book has broadened the appeal of your message, precisely because you position yourself as reader and consumer of the Gothic narrative, as opposed to positioning yourself outside of the critique you wage?

JK: Well, I hope so. Many very good books have taken a position on a particular culture as if the person writing is somehow not a part of that culture. I do not write on Los Angeles, but have some graduate students who do. Everybody hates Los Angeles and says pretty much the same thing. It is kind of interesting. Most of the authors who do this talk as if they were making a fresh observation. It's as if, whatever LA is, they aren't part of it—even if they were from New York, a place about which similar things are said. This tendency to adopt a kind of aloof, judgmental analytical pose or position—that is one I certainly did not want to follow.

dC: Can you talk about the methodology that you utilized in your research for *Erotic Innocence* and how you selected the archives that you analyzed?

JK: Let me sidestep that for a minute, because I had written a much more conventional book earlier. In *Child Loving*, which is about Victorian culture, I tried to consult more traditional materials—nineteenth century books on child-rearing, medical manuals, legislative materials, literature, and the like—to see what I could do about understanding the way child formation was being argued out and the kinds of stories that were getting told. What interest has it served, in the twentieth century, to reduce the Victorian babble to a kind of monolith?

I was interested, for instance, in the pervasive twentieth century notion that the Victorians took delight in condemning masturbation, and then produced all of these manuals on how it would induce a plethora of horrible ends. I asked, why would we suppose that they were idiots, or why would we want to suppose that they were obsessed with this topic? Most medical manuscripts did not mention it, even childhood manuals did not mention it. How do we account for this silence? Is it prudery or is it indifference? And there are a number of people in the Victorian period who said there was way too much talk about



this, and others who recommended masturbation as preferable to consulting prostitutes, and so forth—there was a wide range of attitudes. What are the purposes of reducing that to a single voice? What does such an odd conclusion say about our way of doing history, and constructing our own selves on the basis of how we write that history? I wanted to make these questions part of my inquiry.

The last chapter of *Child Loving*, which was very long, attracted almost all the attention devoted to the book. It dealt with a broader range of media, some comic strips and a few things about contemporary culture. Since everybody came down on that, I decided the best thing to do was to try to write on contemporary culture insofar as it impacted me. To pay less attention to official kinds of sources, which would, in this case be, medical, legal, and legislative materials, looking instead to the ways in which these stories seem to be generated in newspaper articles, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, talk shows, the discourses of my relatives, movies... I was trying to access a range of materials, but not a conventional scholarly archive. I assumed, partly, that most of us had some awareness of those official things. I also assumed, say in the case of medical opinion, that it was likely that official discourse was partly out of step with the everyday experiences of people like social workers; such individuals know that they would much rather be out there helping mothers who are trying to deal with poverty, and helping kids who are being emotionally abused. But I did not try to include those kinds of sources, because I was trying to get to a different narrative; not in a condescending way—I was just trying to look at different things.

**dC:** Have you facilitated a redirection of the public gaze, *vis-à-vis* contemporary constructions of the category 'child'?

**JK:** Well, I do not know that I accomplished anything. I think that people who are thinking along these lines, have, perhaps, found it useful to have somebody else talking along these lines. And in some cases, people have found some ways to broaden the discourse by connecting with each other at conferences and via email. There have also been several wonderful, sophisticated studies that do not depend upon mine at all, but have made a kind of connection to my efforts. That is heartening and more people are working in this area. I do not take any credit for such studies, of course, or for influencing other people. It is just part of the network of voices which are trying to cover this phenomenon with the best weapons we have, which troubles a lot of people. The response to the book [*Erotic Innocence*] has been very

generous, particularly among people who have been deeply engaged in worrying over issues of the family, of power, of instruction, of patriarchal authority, and of discourses of protection.



## Notes

1. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 on 20 November 1989. It entered into force on 02 September 1990, in accordance with article 49. Full text of this document is available: <<http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.html>>.
2. The full title of this legislation is The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. TANF programs are designed on a state-by-state basis. For a description of state and tribal plans and welfare reform initiatives, refer to the following site: <<http://www.welfareinfo.org/tanf.html>>.
3. The Robin Hood Hills murders refers to the satanic panic episode that occurred in West Memphis, Arkansas in May of 1993, after three boys were found murdered. The blame for the murders was quickly attached to three older boys who were identified as Satanists. Each of the three was found guilty and all are still in jail today.

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