

BOOK REVIEWS

MINOR CONCERNS

Harmful to Minors: the Perils of Protecting Children from Sex. By Judith Levine. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. 299pp. \$25.95 pb.

All concepts of the age at which young people are ready for sex are inextricably rooted in particular societies. In the European middle ages, the Church set the minimum age for marriage at 12 for females and 14 for males. In the seventeenth century, Samuel Pepys thought nothing of having intercourse with his 14-year-old wife, Elizabeth. Current ages of consent vary across Europe. Recent excavations near Pompeii have found remains of a woman no older than eighteen, who had given birth four times. What was and is acceptable in one society will lead to a prison sentence and a sex offenders register in another.

It's worth noting that in modern debates, the biological readiness of the body for sex doesn't usually enter the reckoning; it's a supposed psychological readiness that must be at issue. Else there could be no question of saying that sex with a 14 year old is wrong.

Worth considering also is what the existence of such different rules implies. Do we want to say that Samuel Pepys was

somehow *really* a child abuser, or alternatively that young people are less mature at fourteen now than they were 350 years ago? Or do we want to say that previous ages fundamentally misunderstood their own psychologies?

In practice, of course, such conclusions are usually avoided, because debates about such issues rarely possess either logic or a historical awareness, and because acknowledging such things would mean abandoning the notion that there is somehow a right answer to what an age of consent should be. Those who make the most noise in political debates are not often inclined to espouse uncertainty.

Judith Levine's book, *Harmful to Minors*, finds its context firmly in contemporary US society, where, she argues convincingly, issues about the sexuality of young people can hardly be debated sensibly at all because of what she calls 'the sexual politics of fear'. She convincingly debunks many current orthodoxies and offers a sane view with which to replace them. It is a book that is much needed.

Her basic view is that the belief has grown up that the sexuality of young people must be suppressed and denied, because not merely sex itself, but also exposure to sexual material and ideas and even basic knowledge of sex matters, is harmful for the young.

She starts by looking at the idea that young people's minds can be harmed by exposure to material with sexual content. It underlies much of censorship law and its absurdities: how a film can be all right for 13-year-olds, but not for 12-year-olds, another may be suitable for people under 17 if they have an adult with them, but not otherwise.

Turning to the issues of child abduction and murder, she argues that society has constructed a putative category of people called paedophiles, at once sick, predatory, violent, possessed of incredible powers of cunning, well-organized, conspirators, and masters at evading detection. Not a few people have become angry that Levine should have the temerity to ask what the facts are – she has been subject to death threats for writing this book. She points out how rare abduction is, and that the majority of 'abductions' turn out to be cases of children running away from their parents. And she questions the very concept of the 'paedophile', quoting the evidence of John Money at John Hopkins University that the majority of reported acts of abuse are committed by men who are in relationships – with adults.

Likewise, she calls in question the received wisdom about child pornography on the Internet. She reports how the FBI actually took over the running of a Web site in order to entice individuals. Of the 100 arrested, not one had ever harmed a child. Having viewed some relevant images, she says they were 'no racier than a Bahamas tourism commercial'. Of Internet chat rooms, supposedly places where paedophiles groom unwitting victims, she shows it is rare that meetings of any sort ever follow, and exceptional for these to involve pre-adolescents.

Of the increasing number of, ever-stricter, laws that claim to protect children, she remarks that the climate of discussion is such that it is virtually impossible to argue against them, or to discuss rationally whether they actually do anything to achieve their avowed aim of protecting children.

In places her discussion left me feeling uneasy. While she is right to highlight the moral panic that is driving these debates, she doesn't always do justice to the risks that there really are. Yes, very few children are abducted, but some indeed are. Yes, much supposed child pornography is nothing of the sort, but some is vile. By overstating her argument, she may alienate some of her potential audience.

In the following chapter, Levine deals with the (specifically American) world of therapy for alleged molesters who are themselves under 16. She points out the enormous *volte face* that has occurred: a relatively few years ago, parents were being reassured that it was perfectly fine if children touched each other or masturbated, but now are warned about 'danger zones' of the body, which are taboo. In 2001, one 8 year old had a charge of 'sexual harassment' entered in her school record; her crime was sending a note to a classmate asking if he wanted to be her boyfriend.

After accusation, therapy may follow. One programme for teenage 'offenders' involved 24-hour surveillance, a requirement to report explicit, detailed accounts of all sexual thoughts and of every time they masturbated, submission to random drug tests, and denial of all contact with anyone of 'victim age'. Another compelled inmates of a prison to simulate anal rape while the therapist shouted obscenities at them. One needn't agree with

everything Levine says to concur that there is much wrong when such things happen – and that the abuse is being done to, not by, the ‘offender’. *Pace* Levine, one needs to hold on to the fact that a few teenagers do commit sexual crimes but laws already existed to deal with them. As the Bulger case illustrated in this country, if anything the existing law was already too draconian.

Chapter 4 is a discussion of statutory rape and the age of consent. Levine points out that statutory rape is not about sex the victim says she did not want; it is about sex she does want, but ‘which adults believe she only thought she wanted because she wasn’t old enough to know she did want it’.

In Chapter 5, she looks at the issue of sex education and the move in the US towards abstinence being held up as the only appropriate sexual choice for teenagers. She is excellent, both here and in the following chapter on abortion, in her description of how the political running is being made by the religious right wing; one group sent 30,000 missives to Congress accusing advocates of sex education of supporting paedophilia and baby killing, and threatening such advocates with the eternal lake of fire. The agenda arises from seeing sex as dangerous, and bad, with only (Christian) marriage being a suitable setting for intercourse. She counterpoints this discussion with the remark of a ninth grader that her idea of sex was, ‘It’s like, the boy puts it in you and moves around for about three minutes.’ Asked how it felt, she just shrugged her shoulders. What chance has she of a fulfilling life if that’s her idea of sex?

To extrapolate from Levine’s discussion, if one were to adopt the world view of the Christian right wing then young

people would marry as sexually ignorant virgins and then somehow have wonderful, fulfilling lives together. Nowadays, most marriages take place when people are in their mid- to late twenties; that means they would have been sexual beings for at least 10 years, and during the years when sexual desire and ability is at its height they would have been totally abstinent; instead, they would have been filled with warnings that sex is dangerous and that their own feelings about sex have been completely untrustworthy. Suddenly, marriage is to make them ready for intimacy. Sure, that’s really going to happen. Any sane approach will start by acknowledging that from puberty, young people are sexual beings whether anyone likes it or not, that sexual beings have sexual desires, and that sexual desires seek expression. Denying any possibility of that expression, rather than shaping it meaningfully, is an excellent way of harming people. There were reasons why the 1970s happened.

In the final third of the book, she turns to advocating a positive approach towards young people’s sexuality. She argues for helping young people to enjoy their bodies, to approach sex in a positive way, and so to esteem themselves that they can make valid and informed choices about the desires they certainly feel. Her suggestions are careful, considered and valuable, and ought to be widely read, though one doubts that the people who most need to read them ever will.

While occasionally Levine overstates her case, this book is both a timely and a sane contribution to a debate that needs to happen, but at the moment hardly does. It is to be thoroughly commended.

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