

Foreword

by Paul Valent

Sexual abuse of children is arguably the most mentally cruel trauma, rivalled perhaps only by traumas inflicted on child survivors of the Holocaust. The most cruel traumas are the last to be recognised. Survivors of child sexual abuse and child survivors of the Holocaust were recognised only in the 1980s.

Having been myself a child survivor of the Holocaust who treated a large number of survivors of child sexual abuse, I wrote a paper comparing the two groups.

I found that though sexually abused children were not starved or socially persecuted, nevertheless many of their sufferings overlapped with, and some even exceeded, the sufferings of Holocaust child survivors.

This was because for the sexually abused group the 'Nazis' of their lives were their very families, or others who pervaded their lives.

Still, clinical recognition of the enormity (and prevalence) of child sexual abuse is but the first step. The next step is legal societal recognition, and dealing with perpetrators. This step is intensely resisted through denial, blaming the victims, and vigorous institutional obfuscation, as we saw for instance in the case of institutional abuse of children by the Catholic Church. Beyond recognition and acknowledgement that abuse happened, lies the deep ocean of untold suffering.

This is where Neil Atkinson's book is literally a revelation. It is unique for a number of reasons.

First, the stories are told by survivors themselves in their own words.

Second, survivors come from every social spectrum: different genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, religions, cultures and social classes. They confirm that child sexual abuse is ubiquitous, silently infecting all societies.

Third, the same can be said of perpetrators: the book covers males and females, parents, teachers, Scout masters, peers, and internet predators.

But for me, the most valuable part of the book is the personal stories. For example, Nihal tells the story of his own abuse from beginning to end. He hides nothing of the rawness nor the soul-twisting precedents and consequences of his abuse. The others in the book follow his example and do likewise.

Each story is told from the mind and the heart of the survivor, but, in addition, with the maturity of an insightful storyteller.

The Judas Moment is when your childhood is betrayed, the moment it no longer belongs to you, the moment childhood is irrevocably violated, the moment the sanctity and wonder of childhood is plundered, robbed by an evil memory.

They stole our bodies that day and also stole our happiness and childhood as we knew it.

The writers describe how the abused child is, and partly remains, stunned, wordless. Verbal capacity is swamped by the enormity of the experience. The child has no vocabulary for the event, nor for its moral dimensions. The child has only the perpetrator – the one who has groomed the child to be its only trusted love object – as a guide. To not feel abandoned by the only hope of love, the child accepts shame and guilt, injustice and silence.

In addition, nobody outside wants to know. A doctor called the signs of blood haemorrhoids. A psychiatrist declared: even if true,

it can't have long-term effects. Oh, and homosexuals can't be raped. And you must be paying off a karmic debt. 'Shame and fear sealed my lips.'

And so the consequences continue unabated. 'No child has the words. This emotional carnage seeps out eventually into your physical self ...' or into self-harm behaviour. Both are medicalised and turned against the sufferers. So there is a cascade of traumas.

A great strength of this book is that it is not written in order to demand recognition and pity from the readers; rather, the writers gift their pains and memories with a sense of generosity to the readers. The survivors write of their experiences with the intent to inform and help readers to recognise their own abuse, and to encourage them to seek help and redress.

They write with the wisdom they have gained over the years. Sometimes they are even poetic:.

Hopelessness and despair slithered uninvited into the room,
trailing insomnia and depression behind them like a skulking coward.

Lastly, this book is useful for healers and therapists of child sex abuse in particular, but also for healers of other traumatised people. That is because all traumatised victims overlap in their wordless suffering, and are also often spurned and not understood by those around them.

– *Paul Valent, psychotherapist and traumatologist, is a child survivor of the Holocaust. His extensive writings can be accessed at*

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Introduction

I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

– Elie Wiesel (1928-2016), American writer, professor, political activist, Nobel laureate, Holocaust survivor

Survivors of evil *did* speak. They did tell others what they knew. The passage of time has for too long silenced child sexual abuse survivors. Shame stilled their voices until 2014, when the guardian angel of abused children, former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, established the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The Royal Commission heard from 1200 witnesses over 400 days of public hearings. They found that ‘the innocence and future of thousands of children, over generations, had been wrested from them by sexual predators at the very institutions where they should have been safe. This child sexual abuse was a national disgrace, and the nature of that abuse “so heinous it was difficult to comprehend”.’¹

Sexual abuse happened in every place where adults came into contact with children – schools, orphanages, surf clubs, Scout groups, churches and synagogues. More than 250 survivors told Commissioners in private sessions that they had been sexually

1 Miki Perkins, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 Oct 2018: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/apology-leaves-abuse-survivors-somewhere-between-cynical-and-glad-20181018-p50ahm.html>

abused in contemporary settings (post-1990), two-thirds with foster or kinship carers, along with about 8000 other child sexual abuse survivors.¹

‘The Royal Commission warned against assuming that child sexual abuse was a historical artefact or the product of a “few bad apples”. In fact, it was endemic.’²

Prime Minister Morrison, a devoted Christian, said in his apology on behalf of the nation:

I am angry too at the calculating destruction of lives and the abuse of trust, including those who have abused the shield of faith and religion to hide their crimes, a shield that is supposed to protect the innocent, not the guilty [...] We can never promise a world where there are no abusers but we can promise a country where we commit to hear and believe our children.³

There were many organisations shamed by child abuse guilt, but none so much as the Catholic Church. The Commission served, though, to prove that clergy sexual abuse wasn’t an unfortunate lapse on the periphery, as the Catholic leadership has always argued, and it wasn’t just an individual moral failure to be resolved by prayer and repentance. It was a systemic way of life for many priests, and – increasingly, we are learning – a life they led with the connivance and enabling of leadership.

Many thousands of children suffered repeated and severe sexual abuse in Australia’s religious institutions, particularly those of the Catholic Church. The Royal Commission ... heard cases of abuse across 964 Catholic institutions such as churches, religious schools and children’s homes. Abuse included such behaviours as fondling, masturbation and, in

1 Miki Perkins, *The Age*, 21 October 2018: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/apology-leaves-abuse-survivors-somewhere-between-cynical-and-glad-20181018-p50ahm.html>

2 *ibid.*

3 National Apology Address: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-apology-address>

over half of the cases, rape. This was usually accompanied by other forms of abuse, including physical punishments, humiliation and chronic neglect.¹

Despite this, the Church's most intemperate supporters brushed the Royal Commission aside as scapegoating. One truculent columnist fulminated he didn't give 'a flying puck', as tier after tier of the Victorian police and legal system accused certain in the Church's leadership of gross irresponsibility and ethical neglect to act and protect innocent children from known child abusers within the Church.

As far as their supporters were concerned, the ugliest evil wasn't 'abused minors' but the smeared reputations and perceived legal injustice.

Child abuse exists beyond what was uncovered by the Commission. While the Commission served as a powerful platform from which many significant changes became law in regard to mandatory reporting, redress and other factors, two significant widely reported cases glaringly exposed how little is known about the ongoing struggle abuse survivors face.

We have a criminal justice process. That process rightly respects the unimaginable courage that a survivor of child sexual abuse must summon to participate in the process and the enormous personal cost of doing so, both to the survivor and to his or her family. These are magnified exponentially when the perpetrator is a high-profile person.²

The tragic spillover in the case of a High Court's judgement to overrule a conviction is the real risk that some victims of sexual abuse in other cases will be scared into thinking the powerful always win, and no one will believe them. When they think of speaking out against a relative or trusted figure who betrayed them, they will see

1 Child abuse in the Catholic Church of Australia: <https://home.crin.org/issues/sexual-violence/australia-case-study-clergy-abuse>

2 John Ellis, *SMH*, February 28, 2019: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/history-will-judge-george-pell-the-cardinal-who-sought-to-crush-me-20190227-p510ma.html>

the failure of this case and assume that it is not worth the trouble. It would be an additional tragedy beyond the consequence of abuse itself if this High Court judgement provoked that response.

The former choir boy at the centre of that case stated courageously, ‘This case does not define me.’¹ It’s a rallying call to other child abuse survivors to believe in justice and not to quit.

If all this wasn’t repellent enough to survivors, families and supporters, before you could say cobweb, we saw another example of those who believed the ‘good name’ and reputation of a psychological organisation is more important than the lives of child abuse survivors.

A peak psychologist’s [sic] body, once led by paedophile Bob Montgomery, came under fire for noting the ‘impact’ of criminal prosecution on him and urging he seek support from long term friends in its ranks. Montgomery pleaded guilty to abusing 12-year-old boys while he was a scout-master in Sydney in the 1960s. It was reported that a psychologist in Western Australia said the organisation’s response made her feel ‘ill for several hours’.²

“I cried with frustration for all the child sexual abuse victims and the struggles they face with institutions supporting child sex offenders,” she said.

The psychologist held that the organisation’s response ‘highlighted “the impact on his mental health and that of his family – yet no mention about the mental health of Montgomery’s victims for which he plead[ed] guilty to, nor for mental health of other victims”’.³

The organisation’s members vented their shock and dismay, prompting the president of the organisation the following day to email members around the country to ‘clarify’ their position on child abuse.

1 BBC News: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-52209943>

2 Josh Roberston and Heidi Davoren, ABC News, Wed 10 June 2020: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-10/australian-psychological-society-bob-montgomery-child-sex-abuse/12334420>

3 *ibid.*

A senior psychologist said:

Alarmingly, members objected that even in her second statement, she [the president] still did not address the mental health impact of Montgomery's victims, but just in general about all victims [...] It seems in these statements the victims of Montgomery have been ignored, and just lumped into general victims of sexual abuse – whereas Montgomery was specifically mentioned and considered in relation to the impact on his mental health, it seems above the interests of his victims,' it was reported.¹

For child abuse survivors the attitude of the psychologists' body, whose mandate is therapy, care and mental health of clients (including child abuse survivors) was execrable in excusing, even supporting, Montgomery in a similar manner to the unprincipled and morally barren apologists for the Church.

Perhaps this is because, after the Royal Commission's findings and High Court findings, child abuse survivors virtually 'disappeared'. They became faceless victims, too easily dismissed, raped ghosts of yesterday, abused minors, now adults who had a dreadful experience 'back then' but all that was a long time ago.

Child abuse, grooming and online child porn seems to be constantly in the media, but we know so little about victims' lives and stories. When it's reported, victims are almost a side issue, given insufficient coverage by the media – coverage that centres on a few high-profile cases and convenient monsters. There's no conversation about what it means to be a child and raped, about professional structures that continually failed victims and families, like teachers, doctors, even the police, and the fiasco of systems that are still denying just compensation to victims, as well as the ongoing struggle for survivors dealing with their traumas.

This is why survivors of evil must find their voice, tell their stories so that victims do not become just a footnote of history and less important than whitewashing the child abuse filth and muck off reputations, personal or organisational.

¹ *ibid.*

Minors who are now adult survivors care. Their families, supporters and therapists care. The brave, tireless and dedicated police care. The loved ones who remember the lost souls to suicide care. All the victims who cry as they describe trying to stop lurching from one mental health crisis to the next care. The ones who can't hold down jobs, the many who frequently struggle to get out of bed, crash through divorce and pinball off relations care.

I believe you will care too.

It is almost unfathomable for those who don't know of it, what sexual molestation does to a person. There is, in a sense, a double violation. First the inhuman defilement of body and dignity. Then the abuse of mind, the injury to identity, self-esteem, self-worth.

Then there's shame.

Shame can make the abused a prisoner, sentenced to life without parole in solitary confinement with only guilt as company. I feel for those whose shame made them blame themselves that the abuse happened, who think they were somehow guilty and it was their 'fault'.

The voice of the child is only as loud as the adult listening it allows it to be. A fractured child becomes a broken adult.

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This book contains a selection of emotional stories from survivors and the partner of a survivor. Each story except one is a first-hand personal account in the contributor's own words. Each offers a unique perspective on surviving abuse, and the toll it takes on their lives. Some stories expand on how culture, welfare, police or medical authorities failed them, how support and protection, when it was needed the most, was lacking.

But it is also about inspiring stories that cross cultures and genders of abused children, now adults, who refused to be cowed and who triumphed over evil.

How did this book come about?

I knew a survivor who knew a survivor, who believed. An

Indigenous woman who read my story and who knew a survivor ... they wanted to speak out, to find their voice, to tell their story where others can't or were too afraid or ashamed.

I wish I could include all the stories, but sadly am unable. For this my deepest apology. Each story is deemed to be true because of my belief in personal survivor stories. It is not my place to question, but to believe, embrace and to love.

Personal accounts are very candid and can be distressing. But diluting the narrative to make reading more palatable diminishes the meaning of the sharing. And more than that, if graphic details ignite society's righteous anger, it means predators, in all stations in life, have no place to hide: not the abuser sweeping supermarkets, the father of two kids, the 21-year-old who lives at home, the grandpa or corporate molester CEO watching 'webcam child sex tourism' on their laptop.

Child abuse is increasing at an alarming rate around the world, especially online. Victorian police sources suggest more than 7.4 million files containing child abuse images and videos were connected to Victorian-based users alone in May 2020. And that's likely to be a gross underestimate.

There is no stereotype of the offender anymore. This evil includes the unholy alliance of those enemies in our midst, enemies of innocence, with defenders of reputations considered more important than the damaged lives of victims.

But I write with fear, dear reader. We all do. There is the stomach-churning fear that people just like you won't understand, or worse, not care. Coupled with that, the very real dread the exposure of truths will not set myself or other survivors free, but condemn us to child abuse stigma: being rejected, shunned or blamed. Then there's the fear of being branded a liar, when victims give reasons why they delayed or didn't report crimes.

The stark reality of child abuse is that these are atrocious crimes – large in their scale, destructive in their intent and appalling in their consequences – and they are increasing everywhere. The more we

Along Came a Spider

know, the better prepared we are to recognise, stop them and save the lives of innocents.

This book is not the final word. This book invites other victims to come forward, to trust that you will be believed, you will be loved, you will be heard, and you will be supported. You will no longer remember alone. Survivor stories speak for those who have no voices.

To the reader, thank you so very much for caring.