

Book reviews

James R. Kincaid, *Child-loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992, 413 pp.

This book tries to unravel a paradox. We want our children to be innocent, compliant, affectionate. And yet these are the very qualities likely to appeal to a paedophile. We know we can resist and we label as perverts those who cannot. Could it, therefore, be that we make our children vulnerable to legitimate the elaborate machinery of protection we have constructed around them? We know, of course, that however sophisticated this is it will fail and that children will fall through the net, many to their deaths. We also know that vox populi will bay for the blood of the professionals allegedly at fault when a tragedy occurs. Is Kincaid therefore right to suggest that there is something wrong with the way we 'love' children?

His book uses recent histories of childhood and of the human body, as well as fiction, advice manuals, medical textbooks, pornography and public school memoirs (the latter two not always readily distinguishable) to hypothesise that the evolution of the child as an object of professional attention and aesthetic interest is part of what Foucault has called 'the history of sexuality'. The argument of the book, says Kincaid, is 'that what we think of as "the child" has been assembled in reference to desire, built up in erotic manufactories, and that we have been labouring ever since, for at least two centuries, both to deny that horrible product and to maintain it'. But Kincaid's thesis is far from identical with Foucault's. For Kincaid denies that the functioning of these 'erotic manufactories' can be explained in terms of the machinery of power which underlies modern society. He believes and argues that those who have been offering the explanation are themselves part of the network of power. Indeed, that they, rather than the paedophiles, are the problem – or, at least, part of it. And, since the explainers are part of a culture and a society, ultimately it is we who constitute the problem. To support this Kincaid offers us interpretations of a number of Victorian and modern classics of childhood. These are 'readings' with the avowed object of showing 'what we do'.

This is intriguing and the book is often spell-binding. We are offered interpretations of *Wuthering Heights*, of *Great Expectations*, of Lewis Carroll, of James Barrie which turn upside-down conventional readings. There is no harm in being startled in this way: the problematising of the understanding of childhood. It is surely right that we should question why we demonise as perverts those who, by definition, 'love' children whilst being quite content to use the 'cuteness' of children, often their near sexuality, on television game shows and to sell products through the advertising medium. It may be that the two phenomena are more closely related than we would like to think, that, indeed, our 'innocent' portrayals of childhood help to construct a sexuality which paedophiles then exploit. But it is surely wrong to co-opt all adults into a type of conspiracy. Kincaid rejects gender distinctions, but is this fair either to Victorian society or our own? Can one, as Kincaid would like to do, sever the link between paedophilia and a male-dominated society? It is notable that, Emily Brontë apart, all

the literature he deconstructs is written by male authors. Child pornography is predominantly, if not exclusively, a product of the male mind. And it was men surely who carried out the majority of the ritual beatings which have helped to create and sustain *le vice anglais*. Kincaid is too ready to dismiss the wealth of feminist scholarship which offers social and cultural analysis of sexual abuse of children. To see it, as he seems to do, as little different from the official version of the truth is wide of the mark.

This is a book which made me think and will stimulate all with an interest in childhood. But in the end it fails to convince. It removes conventional blinkers only to put on new ones. His 'we' needs further deconstruction and the role of men, of masculinity, of patriarchy needs exploration and explication.

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Le prix d'un enfant. Quatre ans dans l'enfer de la prostitution enfantine à Bangkok ("The price of a child. Four years in Bangkok's prostitution hell"), Marie-France Botte and Jean-Paul Mari, Collection «Vécu», Robert Laffont, Paris, 1993, 254 pp.

Like many young Europeans, Marie-France Botte, a Belgian nurse, has undertaken many missions for different humanitarian organisations in all the continents. In the mid-1980s, she was assigned to Thailand by Terre des Hommes to work in Cambodian refugee camps. She quickly found out that organised networks systematically abducted children: boys were generally sent to work in factories and girls to occupy the brothels in Bangkok. Marie-France Botte discovered that trafficking in children had existed for a long time but had never been denounced for fear of reprisals. She then decided to take matters in hand and proceed to action. In cooperation with the Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights (CPCR) in Bangkok, she attempted to raise awareness and mobilise funds to implement a programme aimed to fight the traffic and sexual exploitation of children in Thailand. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other potential European donors were initially impressed by the idea but were unable to provide the necessary funds: they pretended that it was outside their mandate or that their funds were needed for emergency situations. Later on, the François-Xavier Bagnoud Foundation, *Médecins sans Frontières* Belgium and the European Community showed interest in the project and decided to support it.

For four years, Marie-France Botte experienced the "hell" of child prostitution in Bangkok trying to dismantle the organised mafia circles in spite of the intimidations and reprisals. Together with CPCR, she succeeded nevertheless to save the lives of more than one thousand children and to provide medical care for the large number of them that were affected by sexually transmitted diseases, particularly the HIV virus.

On the grounds of this unique experience, Marie-France Botte wrote this book. "Not only to describe in detail what I have been through all those years (. . .) No, I did not ask for this new journey in hell (. . .) I wrote this book because I could not efface from my memory the looks of Lao, Sonta and Patchara, three children who died of AIDS (. . .) Not to mention these little girls, not to say anything would be like