

“Pedophilia Chic” Reconsidered

The taboo against sex with children continues to erode.

BY MARY EBERSTADT

U ntil very, very recently, public questioning of the social prohibition against pedophilia—to say nothing of positive celebration of child molestation—was practically non-existent in American life.

The reasons why are not opaque. To most people, the very word “pedophilia” summons forth a preternatural degree of horror and revulsion; and the criminal law that reflects those reactions has consistently treated the sexual molestation of minors as a serious and eminently punishable offense. So it is small wonder that, historically speaking, the taboo against using legal minors for sex was no more publicly controversial in the United States than the prohibitions against, say, cannibalism or bestiality. Those few partisans of the idea who did sometimes sally forth customarily found themselves regarded as the lowest of the social low, even by the criminal class.

This social consensus against the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, however—unlike those against, say, animal sex or incest—is apparently eroding, and this regardless of the fact that the vast majority of citizens do overwhelmingly abominate the thing. For elsewhere in the public square, the defense of adult-child sex—more accurately, man-boy sex—is now out in the open. Moreover, it is on parade in a number of places—therapeutic, literary, and academic circles; mainstream publishing houses and journals and magazines and bookstores—where the mere appearance of such ideas would until recently have been not only unthinkable, but in many cases, subject to prosecution.

Dramatic though this turnaround may be, it did not happen overnight. Four years ago in these pages, in an essay called “Pedophilia Chic,” I described in some detail a

number of then-recent public challenges to this particular taboo, all of them apparently isolated from one another.¹ Plainly, as the record even then showed, a surprising number of voices were willing to rise up on behalf of what advocates refer to as “man-boy love,” or what most people call sexual abuse.

Yet while the examples themselves were easy enough to document, their larger meaning seemed far from clear. Why, in a post-Cold War world bursting with real political controversies, were some people intent on insisting that the time had come to rethink an issue that most people already vehemently, passionately, agreed about? And why was the taboo against pedophilia under particular pressure in the mid-1990s, of all times—an interval when, readers will recall, public attention to the sexual abuse of *girl* children had simultaneously reached an all-time high? Perhaps, or so it seemed reasonable to speculate, all that really lay behind these efforts was just that familiar postmodern idol, shock value. Perhaps this “pedophilia chic,” I guessed then, was simply “the last gasp of a nihilism that has exhausted itself by chasing down every other avenue of liberation, only to find one last roadblock still manned by the bourgeoisie.”

¹These included, among other events and soundings, a much-publicized Calvin Klein ad campaign that paid homage to the conventions of child pornography; the publication by a reputable publisher, Prometheus Books, of a book advocating “intergenerational intimacy,” i.e. pedophilia; a still-notorious piece in the May 8, 1995, *New Republic* praising NAMBLA, the North American Man-Boy Love Association, for its “bravery” and suggesting that we lower the age of consent for boys; a sympathetic profile in *Vanity Fair* of a convicted child pornography trafficker; a sympathetic profile of a pedophile in a celebrated book by author Edmund White; and a review of the writings of several prominent gay authors, all published and acclaimed in mainstream circles, whose books featured sex scenes between men and underage boys. Literary critic Bruce Bawer was a minority voice objecting to the latter trend. See “Pedophilia Chic,” *THE WEEKLY STANDARD*, June 17, 1996.

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Four-plus years and many other challenges to the same taboo later, it is clear that this hypothesis got something wrong. For one thing, no sustained public challenges have arisen over other primal taboos. Even more telling, if nihilism and nihilism alone were the explanation for public attempts to legitimize sex with *boy* children, then we would expect the appearance of related attempts to legitimize sex with *girl* children; and these we manifestly do not see.² Nobody, but nobody, has been allowed to make the case for girl pedophilia with the backing of any reputable institution. Publishing houses are not putting out acclaimed anthologies and works of fiction that include excerpts of men having sex with young girls. Psychologists and psychiatrists are not competing with each other to publish studies demonstrating that the sexual abuse of girls is inconsequential; or, indeed, that it ought not even be defined as "abuse."

Two examples from the last few weeks will suffice to show the double standard here. In the November 12 *New York Times Book Review*, a writer found it unremarkable to observe of his subject, biographer Gavin Lambert, that when "Lambert was a schoolboy of 11, a teacher initiated him [into homosexuality], and he 'felt no shame or fear, only gratitude.'" It is unimaginable that *New York Times* editors would allow a reviewer to describe an 11-year-old girl being sexually "initiated" by *any* adult (in that case, "initiation" would be called "sexual abuse"). Similarly, in mid-December the *New York Times Magazine* delivered a cover piece about gay teenagers in cyberspace which was so blasé about the older men who seek out boys in chat rooms that it dismissed those potential predators as mere "oldies." Again, one can only imagine the public outcry had the same magazine published a story taking the same so-what approach to online solicitation, off-line trysts, and pornography "sharing" between anonymous men and underage *girls*.

No: As was true four years ago, contemporary efforts to rationalize, legitimize, and justify pedophilia are about boys. Forget about abstractions like nihilism; what the record shows is something more prosaic. The reason why the public is being urged to reconsider boy pedophilia is that this "question," settled though it may be in the opinions and laws of the rest of the country, is demonstrably not yet settled within certain parts of the gay rights movement. The more that movement has entered the mainstream, the more this "question" has bubbled forth from

²The antinomian and arguably malignant exercise of Nabokov's *Lolita*, written 45 years ago, has not only not been surpassed, but remains so controversial today that the latest Hollywood version of the story was not even released in movie theaters in the United States.

that previously distant realm into the public square. It should go without saying, though under the circumstances it cannot, that many, many leaders and members of that movement draw a firm line at consenting adults, want no part of any such "debate," and are in fact disgusted and appalled by it. Then there are other opinions.

I

Let us begin with one recent public challenge to the taboo against pedophilia that did garner the public attention it deserved, albeit belatedly, and which demonstrates both the boy-specific character of today's revisionism and the gulf between popular and other views of the subject. This was the episode that began with the publication in July 1998 of an essay in the American Psychological Association's (APA) prestigious *Psychological Bulletin* called "A Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples" and co-authored by Bruce Rind (Temple University), Robert Bauserman (University of Michigan), and Philip Tromovitch (University of Pennsylvania).

The density of its professional jargon and 30-plus pages aside, the argument of "Meta-Analytic" was straightforward enough: that the common belief that "child sexual abuse causes intense harm, regardless of gender" was not supported by the studies the authors cited; that, to the contrary, "negative effects [of child sexual abuse] were neither pervasive nor typically intense, and that men reacted much less negatively than women." The article also criticized the "indiscriminate use of this term [child sexual abuse] and related terms such as *victim* and *perpetrator*," suggesting instead that the child's feelings about sex acts with adults should be taken into account, and that "a willing encounter with positive reactions would be labeled simply *adult-child sex*."

What was equally radical about "Meta-Analytic," though less discussed at the time, was its specific comparison of pedophilia to "behaviors such as masturbation, homosexuality, fellatio, cunnilingus, and sexual promiscuity." All such, the authors noted, "were codified as pathological in the first edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (1952) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*"; and all are so codified no more. What this analogy tacitly suggested, of course, was the assurance that pedophilia, too, would someday take its place at the liberationist table. In the meantime, as the authors put it, "This history of conflating morality and law with science in the area of human sexuality by psychologists and others indicates a strong need for caution in scientific inquiries of sexual behaviors that remain taboo, with *child*

sexual abuse being a prime example [emphasis added].”

As MIT psychologist G.E. Zuriff observed later in an essay for the *Public Interest*, “It is not difficult to see how these ideas would antagonize not only Dr. Laura [Schlessinger] but the public at large.” For although the incendiary potential of asking people to give pedophilia a second look may or may not have been grasped by the APA authorities who accepted the article for publication, no such ambiguity marked the reaction of the lay public. Most people were made aware of “Meta-Analytic” in March 1999, when Schlessinger devoted the first of two radio talks to attacking the article, and their own livid view of the matter was made known in the course of a multi-dimensional public uproar that took months to die down. The denouement was a series of unusual events, including a public castigation of the American Psychological Association by majority whip Tom DeLay; a House vote to condemn the “Meta-Analytic” essay itself (355-0, with 13 abstentions); and a highly unusual public rejection by the APA of the piece’s conclusions, along with a promise to acquire an independent evaluation of the article.

In retrospect, there were two significant and little-noticed facts in all this. One was not so much the schism that this controversy revealed between elite-therapeutic and popular thinking about pedophilia, but rather that the schism itself had gone unnoticed for so long. For shocking though it may have been to the general public, “Meta-Analytic” was in fact only the latest in a very long series of professional attempts to revise therapeutic conceptions of boy pedophilia, attempts of which most lay readers remain quite ignorant.

Professionals in the field know better. Fifteen years ago, for example, in his careful research volume *Child Sexual Abuse*, noted authority David Finkelhor was already drawing attention to the “body of opinion and research [that] has emerged in recent years which is trying hard to vindicate homosexual pedophilia.” To read Finkelhor’s sources on the subject—or, for that matter, to read the notes in the heavily sourced “Meta-Analytic” itself—is to see exactly what he means. In their call to redefine “abuse” as “contact,” for example, Rind, Bauserman, and Tromovitch were merely resurrecting research and conceptual work stretching back over two decades; similarly, their distinctions between boys’ and girls’ supposed experiences of abuse have a pedigree that begins with Kinsey and branches out dramatically in professional publications of the last 25 years. The authors of “Meta-Analytic” may have made their points boldly enough to get noticed; but that is the only academic novelty to which they could truly lay claim. The real news about the normalization of pedophilia displayed in “Meta-Analytic” was that *nothing about it was conceptually new*.

The second peculiarity of the outrage over “Meta-Analytic,” which also went unnoticed at the time, was that it was not, in fact, universally shared. The notorious North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), predictably enough, cheered the study as “good news.” Less explicable was the reaction within the gay press, which not only failed to distance its movement from the study, but went on to excoriate the APA’s critics (particularly Laura Schlessinger). This was the same approach taken, independently, by at least two mainstream—and relatively conservative—gay journalists.

Writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, prominent author and activist Andrew Sullivan complained about the “sour reception” that had greeted the study. After all, he wrote, Rind et al. had found that “lasting psychological trauma among adult survivors of abuse, particularly for men, was much less than feared.” This, according to Sullivan, should be “a reason for relief.” Instead, and what he evidently found disagreeable, “outraged members of the religious right accused the APA of tolerating pedophilia” and “launched a crusade to punish the organization.” He concluded sarcastically: “That’ll teach them to look on the bright side.”

Another writer outraged over the outrage about “Meta-Analytic” was respected reporter and political analyst Jonathan Rauch. In his commentary on the controversy published in the *National Journal*, Rauch roundly defended the study. It was the critics of the “Meta-Analytic” piece, Rauch wrote, who were “turning out stomach-churning stuff.” The vote in Congress—as opposed, say, to what Rind et al. had written—was “faintly sinister.” Like the authors of the piece itself, Rauch advocated that, in the name of “science,” researchers should “abandon the current custom of referring to all adult sexual encounters with minors, regardless of the circumstances, as ‘child sexual abuse,’” because they could “perform finer-grained analyses if they used ‘abuse’ to denigrate injurious or unwilling encounters. Other encounters,” Rauch echoed, “could be called ‘adult-child sex’ or ‘adult-adolescent sex.’”

To his credit, Rauch did report that “in 1989, when he was 23 and just out of college, Bauserman [one of the Meta-Analytic authors] published a cross-cultural comparison of attitudes toward man-boy sexual relations in a Dutch journal called *Paidika*.” This journal, in Rauch’s description, “had taken pro-pedophilia stands”—something which he admitted “raises red flags.”

But at the same time Rauch, like Sullivan, avoided the real issue at hand—that “Meta-Analytic” quite obviously aimed at de-stigmatizing boy pedophilia itself. Even more startling, though, was his bland depiction of *Paidika*. This is not exactly a journal in which pro-pedophile ideas have somehow surfaced accidentally. It is a publication dedicat-

ed to the phenomenon of "boy-loving," the most prominent such "scholarly journal" in the world, whose longtime editor, the late Edward Brongersma, was a convicted pedophile as well as the author of a two-volume pedophile classic, *Loving Boys*. (To describe this as a journal which "had taken pro-pedophilia stands" is akin to describing THE WEEKLY STANDARD as a magazine where conservative arguments have reportedly appeared.) And, of course, the qualifier "23 and just out of college" served to soften Bauserman's earlier appearance in *Paidika*, suggesting it was an excess of youth.

Both Sullivan and Rauch are not only prominent gay journalists but also leading proponents of the worldview to which the gay rights movement owes much of its recent and stunning political success—the argument that, as Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* puts it, "homosexuals . . . have the equivalent emotional needs and temptations of heterosexuals." Both writers are also members of the Independent Gay Forum, an institution aimed at "forging a mainstream identity"; and both have frequently broken ranks with the leftists and radicals who dominate gay activism. That two such mainstream authors should mock the public outcry against that APA article illustrates something noteworthy: that in place of a social consensus against pedophilia per se, a separate option—call it anti-anti-pedophilia—appears to have taken root. According to that view, the problem is less sex with minors than the people who declare themselves against it—Dr. Laura fans, congressmen, dissident therapists, religious types, and anyone else who does not grasp the necessity of putting words like "child sexual abuse" in quotes.

II

In some of the clinical and therapeutic literature on pedophilia, it has become customary to distinguish between "ephebophilia," or sexual attraction to postpubescent children and teenagers, and "pedophilia" proper, meaning attraction to prepubescent children. Both forms are exhibited more than occasionally in another part of the written world, namely gay fiction. "Fiction" here emphatically does not mean pornography as such, but the kind of literature authored by self-consciously gay writers, pub-

lished by reputable houses, and reviewed respectfully in the mainstream press. Again, it must be emphasized that numerous gay authors of note do not positively portray sex between adults and minors, and ipso facto are not part of this discussion.

Plenty of authors do cross the line, though. "Gay fiction," Philip Guichard complained in an article for the *Village Voice* last summer, "is rich with idyllic accounts of 'intergenerational relationships,' as such affairs are respectfully called these days." Over four years ago, "Pedophilia Chic" quoted passages from the works of several acclaimed authors—including Edmund White, the late Paul Monette, and Larry Kramer—which frankly and often sympathetically portrayed men seeking and having sex with underage boys. Today there are many more such examples to be found in gay fiction, all verifiable by a trip to the local chain bookstore.

Last year, for example, St. Martin's Press published a novel called *The Coming Storm* by Paul Russell, a professor of English at Vassar and the author of three previously well-received works of fiction. The drama of this tale revolves around something that remains an imprisonable offense in almost every state—a sexual "affair" between a troubled 15-year-old boy (Noah) and his 25-year-old gay boarding school teacher (Tracy). (The age of 15, incidentally, is no definitive limit in Russell's narrative. In the course of the book, Tracy also fantasizes about 14-year-old boys.)

The Coming Storm became the object of effusive praise by award-winning reviewer Dennis Drabelle in the *Washington Post Book World* (August 15, 1999). *The Coming Storm*, Drabelle enthused, "takes off from a sensational subject—forbidden sexuality—to arrive at unexpected heights and subtleties." It "persuades the reader" that "the sexual relationship between Noah and Tracy is not only not harmful to either but a boon to the precocious junior partner, who becomes a better, more engaged student after the affair gets under way." What is "troublesome" about the book, according to Drabelle, is

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³In response, Drabelle wrote that he "supported the laws that protect children from the sexual advances of predatory adults," that nothing in his review "says or implies otherwise," and that the reader is "entitled to his opinion" about whether "any such affair would inexorably result in wreckage."

not that anyone is “corrupted” by what happens (“no one is”), but that “it is apt to be stereotyped, *not least by the legal system that makes it a crime* [emphasis added].”

This cheerleading for the sexual molestation of teenagers in the Sunday pages of one of the country’s major newspapers did not pass without comment. One reader berated Drabelle in the letters column for “strongly implying that child abuse, when it takes place between two males, should no longer be viewed by the public as either a social offense or a crime.”³ Yet as even a partial survey of related literature shows, what is truly anomalous about this case—of a mainstream reviewer in a mainstream family newspaper ratifying sex between grown men and boys—was that anyone bothered to be bothered about it at all. Other writers, including prominent writers among them, have gone further still, and with even less consequence.

Consider David Leavitt, one of the best known of contemporary gay authors, whose numerous novels and short stories, among them *The Lost Language of Cranes* and, most recently, *Martin Bauman; or, A Sure Thing*, are routinely reviewed in the better journals and magazines. In fact, it would be hard to think of a gay fiction writer more consistently represented in mainstream publishing.

For that reason, it is all the more surprising to read what this ostensibly mainstream author chose to write in his introduction to the equally mainstream *Penguin Book of International Gay Writing* (1995, edited by Mark Mitchell). There, in the course of describing what the anthology includes, Leavitt notes matter-of-factly that “Another ‘forbidden’ topic from which European writers seem less likely to shrink is the love of older men for young boys.” He then draws attention to one particular book excerpted in the volume, *When Jonathan Died*, by Tony Duvert. “The coolly assured narrative” of this work, Leavitt informs, “compels the reader to imagine the world from a perspective he might ordinarily condemn.” Duvert, writes Leavitt, “offers us a homosexual Lolita—one in which the child is seducer as much as seduced.”

The object of this praise by one of America’s leading gay novelists, appearing in one of publishing’s most prestigious book series, is the tale of a man and boy who are living together in Italy. The scene selected is sexually graphic. And the age of this child, whom Leavitt considers “seducer

as much as seduced”? He is—page 427 in the hard cover edition—“hardly seven.”

Another seemingly representative collection of gay literature, this one on the shelf at Barnes & Noble and also apparently selling without comment, is *The Gay Canon: Great Books Every Gay Man Should Read*, an Anchor Book published by Doubleday in 1998. Its editor/author, Robert Drake, is a novelist and editor of other anthologies who has won the Lambda Literary Award. Like the Penguin anthology edited by Leavitt, Drake’s book too strives for canonical status, aspiring to offer a roadmap to the most important texts of gay history.

As it turns out, several of the texts that editor Drake thought worth including feature scenes of man-boy sex—again, what most of the rest of the public calls abuse or molestation. One work is something called *The Carnivorous Lamb* by Agustin Gomez-Arcos, described as a book about an incestuous relationship between a boy and his older brother (to Drake, “the best, most complex yet satisfying novel of filial love ever written”). Another text, this one by writer Matthew Stadler—described as the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship for his first novel—is called *The Dissolution of Nicholas Dee*. This book, says editor Drake, “is an operatic adventure into the realms of love, personality, ambition and art . . . a pure joy to read.” Its protagonist is “a pedophile’s dream:

the mind of a man in the body of a boy.” Drake also excerpts and discusses William S. Burroughs’s nightmarish *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead*, the pederastic violence of which defies description. Yet this work, according to Drake, “tears straight to the heart of one of the greatest sources, community-wide, of 1990s gay angst: What to do with men who love boys?”⁴

Still another example of how standards are being lowered by a major publisher and respected writer—this one from academia and available at Borders—is *A History of*

⁴Drake’s own answer: “Even as the homo culture of this *fin de siècle* seeks to puritanically clamp down on boy-love advocates, it ridicules itself with a fixation on lithe, boyish sexuality and smooth-chested youthful attractiveness—and the perpetration of same as the physical and erotic ideal apparent in clubs, online profiles, porn films and mainstream advertisements. It is nothing more than blatant hypocrisy.”

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Gay Literature: The Male Tradition, published in 1998 by Yale University Press. This book, "the first full-scale account of gay male literature, across cultures, languages and from ancient times to the present," is authored by Gregory Woods, described on the jacket as "the foremost gay poet working in Britain today." It includes a longish chapter on "Boys and Boyhood" which is a seemingly definitive account of pro-pedophile literary works, ranging over texts from the platonic *Death in Venice* to the noir likes of the aforementioned Tony Duvert. Nothing is questioned, much less condemned, in the course of Woods's account of these works. The only moral ambiguity that occurs to him concerns not the boy but the *man* in the equation. Woods concludes: "By playing [i.e., having sex] with boys, the man remains boyish. Whether you regard this as a way of retreating from life or, on the contrary, as a way of engaging with it at its most honest and least corrupted level, depends on which writer you consult at any given time [emphasis added]."

III

As for the related matter of gay non-fiction, here too, judging by the public domain, the subject of boy pedophilia has a manifest niche.

One book only recently available in the "gay studies" section of a Borders in downtown D.C., for example, is a peculiar classic of a sort entitled *Male Inter-Generational Intimacy: Historical, Socio-Psychological, and Legal Perspectives*, edited by the aforementioned pedophile icon Edward Brongersma and two colleagues. This book, according to one of its jacket endorsements, "shed[s] critical light on the broad spectrum of man-boy love and its place in ancient and contemporary societies." In other words, it is a series of briefs using scientific polemics in an effort to rationalize the sexual molestation of boy children. The article abstracts speak for themselves. ("Pedophilia is always considered by mainstream society as one form of sexual abuse of children. However, analysis of the personal accounts provided by pedophiles suggests that these experiences could be understood differently." "The incidence of violence is very low in pedophile contacts with boys. The influence can be strong in lasting relationships; it can either be wholesome or unwholesome." And so on.)

Of course, this opus that "gay studies" bookshelves now reserve space for did not spring from nowhere. The book itself grew out of two issues of the *American Journal of Homosexuality* (Vol. 20, Nos. 1/2, 1990) dedicated to the pondering of "male inter-generational love." Here again, an ostensibly mainstream gay vehicle was put to the service of advocating pedophilia. In fact, the case of the *Journal of Homosexuality* is particularly interesting as a case study of how a pernicious idea can spread. The editor of this rep-

utable gay journal, John P. DeCecco, is a psychologist at San Francisco State University. DeCecco is favorably quoted in the introduction to *Male Inter-Generational Intimacy* for having praised the "enormously nurturant relationship" that can result from pedophile-boy contact. DeCecco is also on the editorial board of *Paidika*.

As one would expect, such cross-pollination in gay fiction and criticism is verifiable many times over via the inhuman efficiencies of cyber-correlation. It was not immediately obvious, for example—in fact, it came as a surprise—that typing "Paidika" into an ordinary search engine would turn up a reference to Gay Men's Press best-sellers; but it did not take long to see why. For one of the books on the Gay Men's Press bestseller list turns out to be *Dares to Speak: History and Contemporary Perspectives on Boy-Love*, edited by Joseph Geraci—all of whose chapters but one appeared originally in *Paidika* itself. Another book on the same bestseller list is *Some Boys*, described as a "memoir of a lover of boys" that "evokes the author's young friends across four decades and as many continents." Another on the same list is *For a Lost Soldier* by Rudi van Dantzig, advertised as involving sex between an 11-year-old boy and a Canadian soldier in Holland in 1944. There are more.

Surfing also makes plain that the better-known gay organizations, all of whom stand dead set against any conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia, are nonetheless sending mixed messages about what is and is not off-limits for the underage. Most of them, for instance, now have "youth sections" on their websites for and about legal minors. The justification for this heightened attention to the young is to ameliorate the angst of gay teenagers. At the risk of stating the obvious, though, it is hard to see how this purpose is served by encouraging boys to act and think sexually at ever younger ages, which is an all but unavoidable side effect of the type of "outreach" these sites engage in.

Consider, for example, the website of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), one of the more respected gay rights organizations in the country. It is just a click of the mouse from PFLAG's "useful links" to a site where one can read the "coming-out" stories of children aged 10, 11, and 12. Similarly, the "youth" section of GLAAD's publication list (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) simply assumes that minors are sexually autonomous—and active. One piece ("Landmark Survey Shows Gay Youth Coming Out Earlier than Ever") notes approvingly that most children now "realize" their orientation at age 12. Another piece, "Lesbian and Gay Youth Find Safe Place in Cyberspace," counsels: "Don't believe much of the hype about how cyberspace is populated with pedophiles." These citations are taken from just

the first two pages of GLAAD's 15-page list of publications for and about "gay youth."

At OutProud—another site recommended and linked by leading gay organizations—visitors are routed to a comic strip called "Queer Boys." It features two boys who are said to be 16 and look younger. They set off for Manhattan ("Let's run away to New York, where it's safe to be Queer!!" "Kewl!"), where they triumph over evildoers (i.e., parents and reparative therapists) and find happiness at last thanks to the *habitués* of a bar in the West Village. ("A gay rock club! That's so cool! Damn! I wish we were old enough to get in!!" says one of the boys. "Damn those politicians! Damn them all to hell!!" replies the other.)

For a final example of how pedophilia is being defined down, consider *XY* magazine—which would doubtless have run afoul of the obscenity laws until very recently. Started just four years ago, *XY* is now, according to its founder and publisher Peter Ian Cummings, the "third largest gay magazine in the U.S., selling over 60,000 copies per year and hav[ing] more than 200,000 readers." (These numbers are unaudited, but would put *XY* on a par with the *Advocate* in circulation, though lower than *Out* magazine's 120,000.) Cummings also reports that "you can find *XY* on sale in Borders, Tower Records, Virgin Megastores, B. Dalton, Barnes & Noble, Waldenbooks, and many others."

What gives *XY* its unprecedented niche is that here, for the first time, is a mass-market magazine "officially targeted toward 12-29 year old young gay men," every issue of which, as one admiring journalist puts it, "features scantily clad young men in several photo spreads and on the cover." Then there is the non-photo content. The first issue was stamped "Underage." Another issue included a sympathetic pro-and-con interview with a prominent member of NAMBLA. An article in another issue was titled "F—the Age of Consent." There is also a smattering of self-help that can only make minors easier to find—for example, advice about what kids should do if their parents install a filtering system that prevents them from reaching gay cyberspace (answer: get around it).

In sum, if one had taken on the challenge of *designing* a magazine for pedophiles, it would probably look a lot like *XY*, which is why its market niche and evident reader support invite reflection. So too, for obvious reasons, does the public (gay) reaction to all this. On the one hand, *Out* magazine referred to *XY*'s debut as a "dubious achievement" and suggested that it was equivalent to child pornography. Similarly, Philip Guichard complained in his *Village Voice* piece (headlined "I Hate Older Men"):

⁵According to the publisher, Virgin records, Tower Records, and Smith Kline Beecham have been among *XY*'s few paid advertisers.

"Mainstream gay culture dresses up its kiddie porn in a pretense of serving teens. As nice as it is to believe that magazines like *XY* and *Joey* [a recent competitor] are actually consumed by gay teens, it's obvious to me that the shirtless kids in provocative poses who fill their glossy pages are there for older men." What's more, *XY*'s publisher has complained of "pedophobia" on the part of his gay critics; and most advertisers, by Cummings's account, including those popular with the male gay market (Calvin Klein, Abercrombie & Fitch, the Gap), have demurred from buying space in its pages. Apparently, the fear of supporting child sex, or the fear of appearing to do so—or both—remain potent corporate motivators.⁵

At the same time, however, to judge by the endorsements on *XY*'s website, numerous other observers have weighed in favorably. The *San Francisco Examiner* says that of all magazines, *XY* is "the one most on the cutting edge of change." The *Ft. Lauderdale Express Gay News* calls it "the most courageous magazine in America." The general-interest entertainment guide *Time Out New York* observes that "*XY* has boldly established itself as a unique publication that tackles sex, romance, and other issues facing gay teens and men." But perhaps the most accurate indication of *XY*'s community standing comes from the business publication *Advertising Age*, which noted: "*XY* is playing a significant role in mainstream online media. . . . The magazine's site can be accessed directly via America Online, and the magazine is also providing content to the 'youth channel' on PlanetOut.com." This success is a sign of the times. Some of the largest and most respected gay organizations in the country now list *XY*, of all things, as a "resource" for gay youth—this, alongside a burgeoning number of websites also aimed at minors and replete with personal ads, chat rooms, "pen pals," and other forms of anonymous contact rife with the potential for subterfuge.

IV

It is tempting to throw up one's hands on reading a litany like this one, and to blame it all on our anything-goes postmodern life. But this is determinism masquerading as pessimism, and a determinism that does not fit the facts. Today's pressures to normalize pedophilia are not the result of some omnipotent and unstoppable taboo-devouring social and moral juggernaut; they are occurring one bookstore, one magazine, one publisher and advertiser, one author and editor and consumer at a time. Case by case, given a more enlightened public, it is not hard to imagine these decisions—like the one that led to Penguin's putting its imprimatur on a pedophilic sex scene, or like the misguided efforts by some gay organiza-

tions to refer teens to unsavory and perhaps even unsafe websites—being made otherwise. Such a turnaround is particularly imaginable in the case of chain bookstore merchandisers, who routinely place pro-pedophile works on the gay-interest shelves—a phenomenon that thoughtful movement activists must find outrageous.

It would help immensely if those members of the gay rights movement who have not realized what is being committed in their name—along with those who do realize what is going on, and who deplore it—join forces against this trend. Here too, one can imagine progress being made; decent people, by definition, tend ultimately to do what decency requires. When “Pedophilia Chic” appeared four years ago, for example, a poignant response soon came from Paul W. Simmons, the political director of the Log Cabin Republicans in Houston. He feared that the piece would leave readers with the “erroneous impression that the gay male community endorses sexual exploitation of adolescent males.” The letter continued: “Unfortunately, the homosexual community’s political leadership, which is dominated by radical leftists, has failed to denounce loudly the North American Man-Boy Love Association and other nefarious groups. But on this issue, as with many others, the leadership is removed from the constituency it purports to serve. For a sizable majority of gay men, sexual relations with children are viewed as morally appalling, and the adult practitioners of it are seen as pathological deviants.”

These are words with which any reasonable person will agree. They also raise the question of why—particularly in light of the astonishing political and social victories of the last several years—leaders of that movement have not been more scrupulous about some of its ranks.

In an interesting pro-movement 1996 book, *Perfect Enemies: The Religious Right, the Gay Movement, and the Politics of the 1990s*, authors John Gallagher and Christopher Bull propose an answer of sorts to this question. Most national gay groups, they note, opted for respectability as the movement grew, particularly by passing resolutions denouncing NAMBLA and all it stood for. At the same time, according to the authors, pedophilia advocates did enjoy lingering protection among parts of the movement because “many thoughtful activists who opposed NAMBLA’s goals could not escape the suspicion that to

denounce the organization would be to mimic society’s condemnation of their own sexual orientation.”

Whatever its origins, the reluctance by some activists to draw such lines means this: Today, instead of standing foursquare with the rest of the public against this evil, the gay rights movement appears divided. A few proclaim boys to be sexual fair game. Influential others disavow pedophilia per se, but tolerate its advocacy on grounds of political solidarity with persecuted groups. Still others, in the relatively new development noted earlier, appear to have opted for a kind of anti-anti-pedophilia, according to which the “real” problems for the movement are somehow Dr. Laura and the religious right, rather than the facts to which such critics draw attention: e.g., that efforts are being made to destigmatize the sexual exploitation of

boy children; or that positive portrayals of “inter-generational sex,” which are extremely rare in the rest of the culture, are not rare in gay literature and journalism. And, once again obviously, there are the many, many other people—representative of that “sizable majority” of which the Log Cabin Republican wrote—who must be as distressed by such advocacy as he is, but appear undecided what to do about it.

Today’s gay rights advocates preside over what is probably the single most successful domestic political movement of the post-Cold War era. The sine qua non of its dramatic advance has been the tolerance of the civic majority, for whom the movement’s most stirring appeals—to equity and fair

treatment and “a place at the table,” as Bruce Bawer put it—have turned out to resonate more deeply than even most activists could have imagined. This is not to say that public unanimity reigns here, any more than it does over the agendas of other special interest groups. Reasonable people, both inside and outside of the gay rights movement, disagree in good faith on profound points—from the interpretation of Judeo-Christian teachings, to the implications of civil unions, to the appropriate public health measures in the wake of AIDS, to the judicial propriety of hate-crime laws.

But it is not and will not be the case that this same tolerance can be parlayed into support for predators. About pedophilia there remains one and only one proposition that commands public assent. It is this: *If the sexual abuse of minors isn’t wrong, then nothing is.* ♦

There are grounds for optimism: decent people, by definition, tend ultimately to do what decency requires.