

MAY book supplement

At last a book for men sexually abused as children

Victims No Longer is an outstanding guide to recovery

Victims No Longer: Men Recovering from Incest and Other Sexual Child Abuse

Mike Lew
Nevraumont Press, New York, 1988
\$19.95 cloth, 393pp.

Reviewed by Simson L. Garfinkel

When I was eight or nine years old, I was sexually abused by my cousin. I did my best to forget the experience. For many years, I succeeded.

I never wondered why it was so important, and yet so difficult, for me to be close to other people — I assumed that relationships were that way for everybody. When I broke up with the person I had been seeing my second year in college, I didn't wonder why I became suicidal — I just knew that I was. And I never wondered why men, especially naked men, scared me — they just did.

Then, during my final year in college, the memories of those afternoons with my cousin came back to haunt me. In graduate school, I sought out a therapist to help me with my problems. The most important thing I learned in those early weeks of therapy was that the problems I was having were common to incest survivors. Knowing that many before me with similar problems had been "cured" gave me the strength to carry on.

In time, I came to a point where I wanted to read about other men's experiences with childhood sexual abuse — and their recoveries. When I asked my therapist for a book, she drew a blank: there were no books written about male survivors of incest.

Instead, my therapist recommended *I Never Told Anyone* — a collection of 33 first-hand accounts by women about their childhood sexual abuse. Between the readings, the therapy and a lot of crying and thinking, I embarked on the road towards recovery.

Now, Mike Lew, a psychotherapist in Brookline, Mass., has attempted to fill the gap I experienced. He has written *Victims No Longer*, a book for recovering male incest survivors that includes an account of his experiences in helping victims to recover from their trauma.

Victims No Longer is an important book, in part by virtue of the fact that it is the only book about male incest survivors. Men who were sexually victimized as children will find *Victims* more helpful than the literature that has been written for women, because men's experiences as sexual victims are in many respects different from those of women.

As Lew points out in his opening chapters, there are many, many burdens that our society places on men which result in particular difficulties for male incest survivors. Men are supposed to be strong, they are supposed to hide their emotions, they are always supposed to enjoy sex — especially with older women. While male incest survivors owe an enormous debt to the women's movement, we need our own literature detailing how to recover from sexual abuse.

But while Lew's book is the first offering in this literature and helpful in many ways, I cannot recommend it to a male survivor as the first book about incest that he read. *Victims* does not stand on its own. It begins by immediately diving into a narrative about abuse and the social context in which it takes place, describing what it means to be a man in our society and what the immediate effects of abuse are on a man. Thus the reader — who is taken to be a recovering survivor — isn't given any real chance to feel.

For me, the healing power of *I Never Told Anyone* was that the incidents of sexual abuse seemed so ordinary, so somehow familiar, that it was safe to empathize with the writer and through that empathy begin to feel one's own hurt. Indeed, in many ways, the strength of any book about sexual abuse — especially incest — lies in its personal accounts and/or in stories taken from the author's clinical experience. The most important thing to tell a survivor is that his or her experience is one that, unfortunately, has been shared by millions of other people, and that the survivor was not at fault.

My principal problem with *Victims* is that it has too few personal stories: it has precisely nine statements, many of which do not actually describe the incest that the person suffered. Instead, they speak of other kinds of abuse, the anger associated with incest, or the recovery process. Of the few accounts that do describe the abuse, most are what I would call "extreme" cases.

In *Victims* we find Philip, a 44-year-old survivor who grew up in a completely dysfunctional family, and who was severely abused and nearly killed by his father. There is Ivan, whose mother cut him with a kitchen knife, then left him to bleed to death. Lew says repeatedly in his narrative that one or a few incidents can be as damaging as an ongoing experience — indeed, he would probably take offense at me calling these two cases more "extreme" than other cases of incest — but he never has a survivor who just experienced one or a few incidents tell his story.

In addition to the personal stories, *Victims No Longer* offers 16 "focus" sections. These are among the most valuable portions of the book, examining specific issues from "if the abuser is a woman" to "what if I enjoyed it?" This part of *Victims* speaks to the survivor on the precise subjects he seeks to explore.

Surrounding the statements and the focus sections are 27 chapters of narrative. Some of these sections are simply outstanding, such as a chapter describing the purpose of counseling and how to go about finding a counselor. Equally good are the chapters on recovery, on survivors' sexual feelings, how to confront one's abuser (and whether or

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Mike Lew

The subject is recovery for male incest survivors

Author Mike Lew talks to GCN about the effects of homophobia and male socialization, about dealing with shame, intimacy, fear, grief, and trust

By Pam Mitchell

The first words I ever saw printed about gay male incest survivors were in an interview I myself conducted for GCN in the beginning of 1985. At the time, Jim Ferreira, one of the gay men I interviewed, was in the process of organizing a self-help group for male survivors, to my knowledge the first of its kind in the Boston area. Since then the number of men identifying themselves as survivors of incest and other childhood sexual abuse has increased dramatically, and the resources available have multiplied accordingly. But unlike women survivors, whose movement has been well-documented in both feminist and mainstream publications, our male counterparts haven't gotten much press. From the beginning, most communication on the subject has travelled word-of-mouth through gay men's networks, feminist networks, counseling and mental health networks. And within these networks, it's been a general rule that if someone asks a question about resources for men with incest histories, the answer will be "Call Mike Lew."

When I ran into Mike Lew at the '88 Gay and Lesbian Health Conference, he had just committed some of that much-heralded knowledge to print. The final draft of *Victims No Longer* was on its way to the publisher, and he was like a proud father, exhausted, elated, and a bit punchy. Not only did I share Mike's glee that a book about recovery for male survivors would soon be sitting in the bookstores, but I felt particularly heartened that, as luck would have it, the first book on the subject had been written by one of ours — an ardent foe of sexism and homophobia. Mike told me he was planning a promotional tour (during which his words actually made it over the national wire services, breaking yet another print barrier), but promised that on his return he would come down to GCN so we could do the interview which follows.

GCN: How did you come to write this book?

Mike Lew: When I first went into private practice years ago, I led workshops for people recovering from physical violence. More and more men who had been raped were being referred to me by DA's offices and Victim Witness assistance programs and rape crisis centers; at the same time, I was beginning to realize that many of my clients, both male and female, were dealing with incest and other sexual abuse issues. I plugged into the network of women therapists in the Greater Boston area — Judith Herman and Janet Yassen and many others — doing excellent work with women survivors; but when I set out to find a group for my male clients, there was nothing — nothing in Boston, nothing in eastern New England as far as I could find. In true male fashion, I

started complaining about this lack of services. The women therapists listened patiently and let me complain until finally the light dawned and I started the first groups for male survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Immediately I found myself being cast as an expert in the field. I knew I needed more information, but the little literature that existed was, with few exceptions, terrible. So I depended primarily upon the women's literature, which is excellent, and did a whole lot of listening to my clients; in the process I became a *de facto* expert. When people started saying, "You've got to write a book," I insisted, "I'm not a writer, I'm a therapist." But I knew I couldn't be a therapist to all the people who were hungry for information, so I decided to share what I had learned.

Why has there been such a dearth of information about child sexual abuse in general, and particularly about abuse of boys?

A lot of us have not wanted to look at the reality of sexual abuse of children. We believe in parental rights, in the privacy and sanctity of the family, despite the fact that non-interference can mean the sacrifice of one or more children to an abusive family pattern.

And it's a difficult topic, particularly for people who have a history of abuse in their own childhoods and have either blocked it or are afraid to look at it. As a society we've been in deep denial, mental health professionals included. People are beginning to realize that Freud believed his patients when he first encountered reports of incest, and only got scared off and came up with his Oedipal fantasies when the numbers were so staggering.

In addition to rampant fear of the topic in general among mental health professionals, there are other reasons for their particular silence around male sexual abuse. The field of child abuse recovery and the mental health field as a whole are quite homophobic. Abuse of male children by men (and perhaps to a lesser extent, of female children by women) gets confused with homosexuality. The same person who would not think of labelling the abuse of a young girl by a man a "heterosexual relationship" doesn't think twice about addressing a man abusing a young boy as "homosexual" abuse. That only makes sense if you're thinking of this as sexual activity, or sexual orientation. Whether we're talking about a man abusing a boy, a man abusing a girl, a woman abusing a boy or girl, we're not talking about sexuality, but about child abuse that takes a sexual form. As a survivor says in the book, "If you hit someone over the head with a

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from a book. I'm telling you: wait. Of course, you could starve by then. □

Victims no longer

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not such confrontation is a desirable thing), and what it means to forgive the abuse. In general, all of the chapters on the recovery process are very strong.

Unfortunately, these important chapters are relegated to the second half of the book, which nearly stands on its own through references to the same issues that are raised in the first part.

I was saddened that the introduction to *Victims* was written by Ellen Bass, who co-edited *I Never Told Anyone* and is a co-author with Laura Davis of the more recently published *Courage to Heal*. Although I am indebted to Bass for her work in the field of abuse, I would have felt more comfortable having the introduction written by a man, or at least by a woman who had written about the problems faced by male survivors.

Imagine me, a man who had only read about the effects of childhood sexual abuse on women, reading through Bass' introduction to find that the only survivor quoted is a woman! As a survivor, this introduction told me that the book was not written for me or people with my problems. Lew spends a great many pages telling the reader exactly the reverse. It seems silly to sabotage the effort in the first few pages.

But despite its shortcomings, *Victims* is an important work. And many of its problems could be solved if it were merely reorganized and condensed. (It could also benefit from an index.) A book that is nearly 400 pages long is a formidable volume to hand to a person who is in the middle of the recovery process. When I was in therapy, I wanted something quick to read. *Victims* does contain an invaluable resource guide for male survivors as well as a guide for friends of survivors.

Let us hope that the next book about men's experiences with incest is written by survivors themselves. *Victims No Longer* would make an excellent accompaniment to such a volume. □

Mindfulness

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accept the values and judgments of the heterosexual context in which we are raised. We are mindless, inventive, and our mindlessness dooms us.

The act of coming out, however, is an action of mindfulness. We are able to accept new information, challenge stereotypes and paradigms, outgrow long-held ideas. We're able to think for ourselves, define our lives and our values, and — despite its hackneyed tone — be all that we can be. By extending Langer's analysis, we might find some clues as to why so many gay men are involved in the arts and other creative areas. The ability to burst apart categories, look at things from new perspectives, and defy traditional

feminists have long asserted that the rights to choose abortion, the right to work outside the home, the right to choose to love women were not solely matters of civil liberties, but would ultimately have a liberating impact on our culture.

The implications of this book in the era of AIDS are most profound and it is in her discussion of how our mindsets determine our health (and even our lifespans!) that Langer is most radical in her thinking. An amazing experiment, in which a group of old men were taken on a retreat and told to be who they were 20 years ago in an environment that was constructed to be 1959, showed that various physiological changes that we accept as part of aging appear to be at least in part caused by the way we think aging will affect us. Langer's proof that the power of the mind to impact health leads to one's imagining the affect that the concept "AIDS is a fatal disease" has had on people with AIDS — did they die of the disease or the mindset? Is the disease part of the mindset?

These are not new concepts, yet people who have found it easy to dismiss Louise Hay and other holistic AIDS spokespersons will have a difficult time rejecting this Harvard professor's data. The heroism of AIDS activists — resisting doctor-centered treatment, challenging the FDA and NIH, scrutinizing scientific explanations regarding HIV — is seen, after reading Langer's book, as simply an assertion of mindfulness. Being in-the-day, alive and aware — all characteristics encouraged in people with AIDS — necessitates the relinquishing of old mindsets and the development of acute mindfulness.

Days after completing reading this book, I came to believe that, in fact, the 20 year history of the gay and lesbian liberation movement has been a history of developing mindfulness in this broad and diverse population. Even our tidy slogans — "Question Authority," "A Woman Without a Man is Like a Fish Without a Bicycle," "Gay is Beautiful," — could serve as chapter headings in this book that is essentially about how being alert, asserting one's unique perspective, and challenging the status quo can make us more alive. At its most basic, *Mindfulness* is a powerful manifesto urging the empowerment of all people. □

Red

Continued from back page

door before he could answer, I got off the bus to go home.

A few minutes later, I was in the door. My roommate moaned, "It's hot" and then she said, "Great pants, like the color." "Yeah, thanks" I mumbled, and then I started to cry. What she doesn't realize is that for a fat woman to wear red pants is an act of revolution. □



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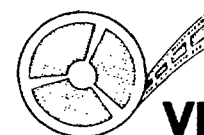
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