

books

The Nature of the Pedophile

Portland author asks some profound, disturbing and important questions about the effects of sexual abuse

by Glenn Scofield Williams

Naked in the Rain disturbed the hell out of me. And I certainly recommend it. But probably not for the reasons you think.

I'm not recommending the book because the writing style is extraordinary. The writing is not bad, but it does have a lot of reported scenes (this happened, then this happened, etc.). And sometimes very important moments in the characters' lives can transpire at lightning speed, feeling underwritten and lacking the significance required for such moments. On top of it all, this is only the first in a two-part installment; the action ends abruptly (though satisfyingly enough) after a major turning point.

Nor am I recommending the book on the basis of realistic believability. The majority of the novel takes place at a wealthy, high-class house of prostitution, the likes of which probably does not exist (let alone the network of such houses that the story suggests). And there are times when the 11-year-old protagonist thinks some extraordinarily mature thoughts and seems to be a natural savant at anything he sets his hand to (from classical piano to dick).

However, I am certainly recommending this book. Why? Eowyn Wood's *Naked in the Rain* (Crooked Hills Publishing, 2007; \$13.95 soft-cover) asks some profound, disturbing and important questions. Questions that our nation, as a whole, tends to ignore, often to the detriment of adults and children who become throwaways or worse. And it asks those questions in an extremely innocent and thereby insightful manner—questions that seep through the lines on the page without any didacticism or pat answers.

The novel tells the story of Brian, who meets 14-year-old "tough guy" River in a juvie recovery center after a recently foiled suicide attempt. The boys rapidly discover a tight bond through similarly bad family experiences and eventually devise a plan to run away together to Los Angeles. Arriving in the city, broke and homeless, they wind up in the hands of Grant, the wealthy owner of a pedophilic house of prostitution that caters to moneyed clients. The two boys learn about their sexuality (through Grant) and, in the process, discover a deep love relationship between each other.

I told you it was disturbing. And to make it even more complex, the novel is full of sex scenes written in a quite erotic fashion and, at other times, with frightening violence. Some are pedophile scenes, some depict sex between boys, and there are even scenes of heterosexual pedophilia.

"The scenes needed to be there," the author says. "I don't think any of the scenes are gratuitous. It's all from Brian's point of view, and it's erotic for him. And this becomes so important in his life, and so basic to his personality, that I thought it was important to show some of it."

Wood is a Portland writer who moved here from Southern California a decade ago. She identifies as bisexual—"probably had something to do with why I felt the need to write a story about it, the bisexual nature of it"—and works as an administrator for an AIDS service organization.

The book addresses some fundamental tenets of sexuality, morality and legality. In no way does the book endorse or condone pedophilia. But it does ask important questions about the nature of the pedophile, about the causes of that specific kind of abuse and about the humanity of both victim and perpetrator.

"The book is really about the effects of sexual abuse," Wood says. "I would not say Grant is a good guy. Compared to some in the book, he's the good guy, but compared to a normal adult, he's a bad guy. Good and bad is a gray area."

Our society looks at the repugnant practice of pedophilia and labels the people who practice it "monsters" and "inhuman." But pedophiles are, in fact, human beings, as are their victims. If we are to save both and stop the violence done to children, we must face it head-on and recognize the need to salvage whatever humanity remains. What do we do with these lost souls? Is there a chance that they can be brought back into "normal" human society? This book asks these questions through the story of an 11-year-old struggling with his own identity and place in the world.

"Maybe another point of the book," Wood says, "is probably no one is 100 percent evil."

Grant and some of Brian's adult johns seem in the book to genuinely have feelings for the boy



Bisexual author Eowyn Wood moved to Portland from Southern California a decade ago.

they are harming (which is a realistic, if extremely tragic, part of pedophilia). "I think it's a form of love Grant feels," Wood says hesitantly. "Grant feels Brian is special. He feels a connection with him. It's not a healthy relationship, obviously. The situation with Grant is still abusive, even though there's no physical harm. It's still not a healthy relationship with Grant. It would be bad enough if it was just the two of them, but the fact that Grant coerces him into prostitution is very bad. So even when it's physically pleasant [to Brian], it's still twisting Brian into something else."

And the sex is, in fact, erotic and pleasant to the boy—an important, if dangerous, point. Psychologists and sociologists vouch for the fact that violent and destructive sexual acts can be, in ways, pleasurable to the victim. Does the pleasure of the body make the crime any less criminal? No. But we must recognize that victims of abuse often feel that they are going crazy because the body responds with its own endorphin will, even as it experiences a harmful act. The book illustrates this truth unflinchingly.

"It's left open for the reader to make their own judgments. Initially, it's Brian's point of view, and he doesn't see any problem with it. But by the end, he starts to see it differently, realizing that even when it's pleasant physically, it's damaging in other ways. The older person has so much power in the relationship," she adds. "At the same time, pedophiles are people, too. I hate to say it that way, but it's true."

The book is also a love story between two boys.

And even here, Wood treads dangerous territory. How are we as readers to respond to erotic stories about children making love? Can children really be in a love relationship, or are they too young to understand what that means? Who's to decide?

"Well," Woods says, "I've had people say similar things...they're all into the story, and then suddenly they were kind of oddly thrilled. And then I had someone say that the story made him feel dirty. Not necessarily good or bad, but it shows that the story's effective."

The story raises serious questions about the responsibilities of witnesses. There are plenty of characters not directly involved in the pedophilia or the prostitution who see what's happening and do nothing, and there are many different reasons for this inaction. There are questions about parenting and the responsibilities of parents to keep children healthy and on track. There are questions about the culture of money and the misery that wealth can buy.

This book rattled me, and I hope you give it the chance to rattle you, too. "I do hope, in some respects," Woods says, "that it helps open some minds. If nothing else, I'm forcing people to relate to an underage gay prostitute, and how many people relate to that? Maybe they'll find that love between two [boys is] not so bad." 10

EOWYN WOOD reads 7:30 p.m. June 21 at St. Johns Booksellers, 8622 N. Lombard St.



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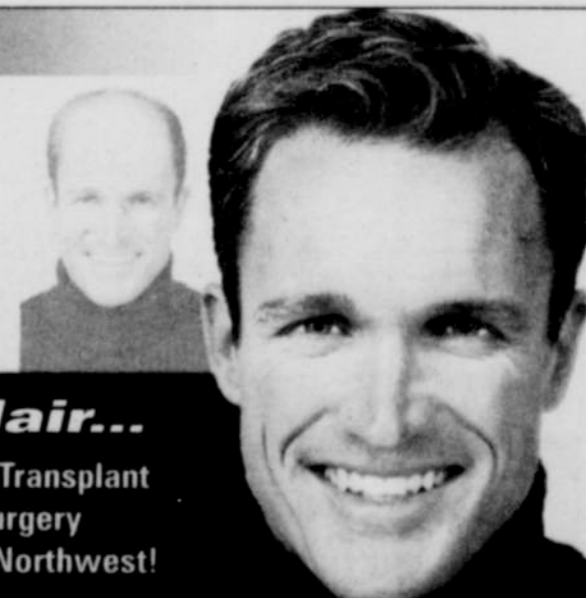
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