

Can Paedophilia Stage a Comeback?

In MercatorNet last week [Carolyn Moynihan predicted](#) that paedophilia would make a comeback as a legitimate form of sexual expression, provided that it was loving and consensual. It was, she argued, a natural consequence of the ideology of the Sexual Revolution and that even if it is reviled as the worst of crimes at the moment, its day will come.

... the idea that sexual relationships between men and boys – or women and girls – should be legitimate is far from dead. Perhaps it is just waiting for us all to get over our problem with paedophilia, which could easily happen.

Right on cue appears a controversial play by a Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist asking for sympathy for paedophiles.

Downstate is the creation of Chicago-based playwright Bruce Norris. After a season in Chicago at the taboo-smashing Steppenwolf Theatre, it has opened in London.

The publicity for [Downstate](#) warns that it is confronting, with graphic descriptions of child abuse, rape, self-harm and drug use. But its most challenging aspect is that it tries to change the way we think about paedophiles.

They're not monsters, [Norris says](#). They are people who have made a mistake.

Many among us would prefer that paedophiles be killed. That would be the simple answer—to say these people are sick. They're monsters. Let's get rid of them. But we can't do that. So what if we said instead, these people are human beings, and they're living in a bad situation of their own making. Now what do we do?

The four paedophiles in *Downstate* live in a shabby group house, wear ankle bracelets and have to be wary of vigilantes. The central figure, an elderly former piano teacher who molested two of his students, became a paraplegic in jail after he was kicked by another inmate. They're a pathetic lot.

Norris's call for forgiveness is provocative but it reminds us that redemption is always possible and warns that a thirst for justice can too easily become a passion for retribution.

... even positive social movements like #MeToo run the risk of tipping over into vengeance as those of us on the left attempt to purge ourselves of any stain of ideological impurity. And I fear that what gets left out of the current national conversation is any mention of... forgiveness. We'd prefer to luxuriate in our righteous hatred for each other right now, in a way that feels cruel and grotesque and tribal.

Compassion, understanding, la di da ... So far, so good. But in an interview [with the London media](#) Norris also explains that he wanted to "disrupt consensus" about what is seen today as sexually appropriate. In a hundred years, it might seem "somewhat barbaric":

"The idea that these sort of legal and sexual situations were being treated as black and white makes me really uncomfortable because that is a form of consensus that I think is not nuanced enough to address what actually goes on in those situations."

"There but for the grace of God go I" is one thing. Questioning whether paedophilic relationships are wrong is an altogether different matter. If the only proper place for sexual activity is within marriage, the worst place ever must be the exploitation of children's innocence for the gratification of adults.

At this moment in history paedophilia is regarded as the gold standard for depravity, but we must not forget that this was not always the case – and not so long ago. Sophisticated academic and artistic justifications are seldom distant. In the late 1950s Vladimir Nabakov's novel about a middle-aged professor's obsession with a 12-year-old, *Lolita*, was a best-seller in the United States.

Here is some of the praise lavished on it: “both ravishing and shocking” ([The Atlantic](#)); “still the most thrilling ride in the amusement park” ([The New Republic](#)); a work of “towering genius” ([Slate](#)). Mind you, these accolades were written *last year*, in 2018, on the 50th anniversary of its publication in the US. A 2012 list of “[The Greatest Books of All Time, as Voted by 125 Famous Authors](#)” ranked *Lolita* as the greatest novel of the 20th Century. Sure, the literati are saying, paedophilia is wrong, but can it *really* be that wrong?

Our culture may have got a lot of things wrong about sex, but it got one thing right: paedophilia was a terrible crime in 1955; it is now; and it will be in a hundred years. But unless we accept that sex is something sacred and meant for marriage and not a recreational activity, paedophilia has a good chance of becoming acceptable again.

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