

Michael Jackson's Dangerous Liaisons

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This is an unusual book, especially for review in an academic journal. Its subject is pop icon Michael Jackson, one of the most famous, talented, and financially successful entertainers of all time—and also one of the strangest. Specifically, the book focuses on Jackson's interest in children, and whether that interest was sexual in nature. The author, Tom O'Carroll (under the pseudonym "Carl Toms"), is himself an unapologetic pedophile, and his pedophilia has influenced both his insight into Jackson and his aspirations for the book. Thus, there are at least two reasons why a sex researcher might approach the book skeptically. First, its topic might seem more appropriate for a lurid tabloid than for a book of more than 600 pages with detailed references, including academic journals. Second, O'Carroll's pedophilia raises the question of whether his opinions reflect insight or self-serving pedophilic bias. To those with this initial appraisal, I advise: set aside your skepticism and you may be rewarded.

Was Jackson a Pedophile?

O'Carroll argues persuasively that Michael Jackson was almost certainly pedophilic. Specifically, Jackson appears to have been most attracted to pubescent boys—boys on the verge of puberty. (The precise term for this sexual orientation is *homosexual hebephilia*, although pedophilia is the more common if slightly inaccurate term, and the one I use herein for the sake of convention.) Jackson denied sexual interest in boys and more famously denied engaging in sexual activity with them despite specific accusations that he had done so. Obviously, Jackson had

a considerable stake in people believing that his interest in children was innocent. What's the evidence he was lying?

The most persuasive evidence for Jackson's pedophilia—O'Carroll would not put it "evidence against Jackson"—is the 1993 accusation concerning Jordie Chandler. (Details of the accusation are available not only in *Dangerous Liaisons*, but also in leaked legal documents and a book written by Jordie's uncle, among other sources.) Jackson befriended 13-year-old Jordie and his family during 1992 and the two became inseparable. Jordie's biological mother and father were separated and Jackson especially ingratiated himself with the mother. Soon after Jordie's father, Evan Chandler, met Michael, Evan became both resentful and suspicious of the relationship between Jordie and Michael. He was resentful because Jordie had little interest in anyone other than Michael and suspicious because Jordie and Michael often slept in the same bed and were obviously smitten. Thwarted by his ex-wife in his attempt to end the relationship, Evan's resentment and concern festered until he eventually pressured a confession from Jordie, who admitted that he and Jackson had engaged in kissing, masturbation, and oral sex. Jackson had been the (nonviolent) sexual aggressor, countering Jordie's initial protests with tears of rejection followed by reassurance that there was nothing wrong with their behavior. Following these revelations, Jordie's family united in legal action against Jackson. Jordie's cooperation was reluctant.

Facing criminal charges, Jackson settled a civil suit with the family for at least \$21 million. Due to Jordie's refusal to cooperate with a criminal investigation, the criminal charges were dropped. Jackson's defenders have insisted that the settlement was extorted by the Chandler's false accusations, but this seems unlikely. Even someone as rich as Jackson would not merely give away \$21 million, and the guilty-looking settlement probably cost him much more than that in earnings potential. A desperate attempt by fixer Anthony Pellicano to make Evan Chandler sound like an extortionist was unconvincing. "No one who has

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read the entire transcript... would conclude from it that Evan's motive was extortion" (p. 282). There is no good reason to doubt the Chandler's story, despite unsupported rumors that Jordie recently claimed he lied about the sexual contact.

O'Carroll comes to a somewhat different conclusion about the accusations behind Jackson's 2005 criminal trial. That trial concerned a complaint by Gavin Arvizo, who was also 13 when the alleged sexual contact between Jackson and Arvizo occurred. In this case, Jackson was tried and acquitted. Arvizo's mother had severe credibility problems, having induced her children to lie for monetary gain prior to the Jackson allegations. O'Carroll is uncertain whether Jackson and Arvizo were sexually intimate, but believes acquittal was the correct decision because of reasonable doubt.

These two major accusations are not the only relevant evidence regarding Jackson's sexuality. There were rumors about other boys, such as Jason Francia (rumored to have won a \$2 million settlement) and Brett Barnes (who denied sex with Jackson). There was his admitted fondness for sleeping in the same bed as children, more specifically boys. There was the lack of any apparent sexual interest in attractive women who were interested in him. An especially poignant story concerns Brooke Shields, who asked to accompany Jackson to the 1984 Grammy awards. Jackson reluctantly agreed, but also brought 12-year-old Emmanuel Lewis, to Shields' great embarrassment. O'Carroll searches without success for any evidence that Jackson was attracted to women or to adult men. Even his marriage to Lisa Marie Presley lacked evidence of mutual passion. Presley pursued Jackson, who benefited from the appearance of an apparently normal relationship. Furious that Jackson planned to go on vacation with boys, she divorced him.

None of these stories are new and most of them have been disputed by Jackson's family, handlers, and fans. O'Carroll's contribution is sifting through the massive available information with a reasonable and skeptical eye. That is no simple task, due to the sheer volume of material and to the need to separate information from misinformation. On the one hand, it is important to understand that an active Jackson publicity machine worked nonstop to project a sexually normal image to ensure commercial success. On the other hand, someone as rich, quirky, and ruthless in his professional life as Jackson was bound to be subject to false accusations now and then. O'Carroll examines the most important accusations sensibly and fairly, coming to different conclusions in different cases. One gets the impression that many of Jackson's crushes did not result in overtly sexual relationships. But I believe no reasonable person could come away from the book with severe doubts about Jackson's pedophilia.

Pedophilic Concerns

Although O'Carroll shares the public's intense fascination with Jackson, he does not merely view Jackson as a member of a

singular category, oddball superstar. He illuminates Jackson as a pedophile and he also uses Jackson's life to examine certain beliefs about pedophilia.

The most controversial issue O'Carroll takes on is the issue of harm. He discusses Sandfort's (1987) study of a small convenience sample of boys involved in pedophilic relationships. Sandfort interviewed the boys privately (that is, without the presence of their pedophile lovers) and found that they viewed their experiences positively. O'Carroll laments that no one has followed the boys into adulthood to determine how they felt about the relationships then and whether they retrospectively felt harmed by them.

O'Carroll also discusses what he considers to be an overwhelming societal bias against even considering a lack of harm from pedophilic relationships. Indeed, the best scientific evidence suggests that the most typical experiences considered childhood sexual abuse may not be as harmful as most people think. Specifically, sexual activity that children engage in voluntarily (albeit illegally) with adults is nearly uncorrelated with undesirable outcomes, and it remains unclear whether the small association is causal (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998, 2000). Of course, if sexual abuse is accompanied by force, threats, kidnapping or torture, the harmfulness vastly increases. Those offenses are harmful in a nonsexual context as well.

Common reactions to pedophiles do not reflect these data. O'Carroll argues that even in the most innocuous cases—when a child is not plausibly coerced and enjoys the relationship—societal outrage triggers the power of the State to coerce children to cooperate in the criminal pursuit of pedophiles. O'Carroll believes the possibility of harmless, even beneficial, sexual relationships between adults and children are an empirical issue, and that the rage of those who claim otherwise reflects an emotional response, not a scientifically supportable response. He also argues that opposition to child–adult sexual relationships can be so hysterical that these reactions themselves are harmful, especially to children. The recovered memories movement of the 1990s showed the power of iatrogenic harm linked to false beliefs about harmful events. (In this case, the false belief was that the sexual abuse ever occurred.) It is plausible that teaching children to believe they have been harmed by even mild sexual contact with adults harms children more than the contact itself. More research needs to be done in this area.

Were Jackson's relationships with boys harmful? They do not appear to have been coercive in a physical sense, although Jackson was manipulative (e.g., crying after rejection). He also apparently led Jordie Chandler to believe that Jordie could get into legal trouble if they were found out. O'Carroll thinks that it is telling that, in most cases, the boys remained friendly with Jackson long after they were spending much time together. O'Carroll does not seem to believe that Jackson's sexual attention was notably harmful to any child; however, he is critical of Jackson for his treatment of some parents. Jackson could be cruel in encouraging his boy friends to ignore other important people in their lives and

to focus their love and attention on him. As a parent, I can imagine how hurtful and enraging this would be.

The child most clearly harmed by his relationship with Michael Jackson was Jordie Chandler, who believed, at various times, that he had betrayed his best friend, lost his best friend, and been betrayed by his best friend. After the settlement, Jordie became estranged from his mother and had an acrimonious relationship with his father until the latter committed suicide in 2009. But O'Carroll assigns most of the blame to Evan and society, who he argues collaborated to make a complicated, forbidden situation much worse than it would have been—worse for both Jackson and Jordie. Evan, a dentist, extracted Jordie's confession during a painful dental procedure and then compelled him to cooperate in the case against Jackson, despite Jordie's heartbreak. O'Carroll plausibly argues that this represented child abuse. Jordie Chandler remains a haunting and haunted figure who has not spoken publicly about the events or their aftermath.

Pedophiles in general, and Jackson in particular, have been accused of exploiting children in their preferred age ranges and then abandoning them when they get too old to be attractive. In general, Jackson does not appear to have abandoned his boy friends in this way, although one observer noted that he seemed to have "boys of the year." He remained good friends with many of the boys he appeared romantically obsessed with, even after they grew up. (Chandler is the major exception, but that was not Jackson's choice.) O'Carroll suggests that this is the natural course in pedophilic relationships, at least with boys. This is because most of the boys will become heterosexual men and their heterosexual interests will rapidly replace any romantic or sexual interest in the pedophile.

O'Carroll believes that at times Jackson flaunted his pedophilia because, as one of the most famous, beloved, and wealthiest men in the world, he could. O'Carroll is disappointed that Jackson passed up the opportunity publicly to defend his pedophilia, choosing instead to deny it. However, had Jackson done the former, it is difficult to imagine any end other than the rapid deterioration of his legacy. Jackson was not as thoughtful or articulate as O'Carroll, whose mission is as quixotic as they come.

Should We Publish Books Promoting Pedophilia? Should We Read Them?

In November 2010, a controversy erupted concerning an electronic book, *The Pedophile's Guide to Love of Pleasure*, self-published by Philip R. Greaves II and sold on Amazon.com. After a threatened boycott by people outraged that Amazon would carry such a book, Amazon pulled it. Greaves was charged by the state of Florida with distributing obscene materials. Subsequently, Amazon dropped several other books that appeared to promote pedophilia, including O'Carroll's earlier book, *Pedophilia: The Radical Case*.

As a private company, Amazon has the right to decide which books to sell. Amazon will obviously be influenced by customers' reactions and will try to avoid the prospect of a boycott. My view is that we should do what we reasonably can to encourage Amazon to carry controversial books, even books whose content we find repugnant, as long as no clear-cut direct harm is likely to come from them.

I have not read Greaves' book, but I have browsed the earlier O'Carroll book that Amazon no longer carries. It is unabashedly pro-pedophilic, arguing that children can be trusted and should be allowed to choose to have sex with adults. O'Carroll does not, however, advise people to break laws or tell them how to do so. He argues that people should work to change relevant laws. As I have noted, O'Carroll also takes a pro-pedophilic stance in *Dangerous Liaisons*.

The idea that pedophilic relationships can be harmless or even beneficial to children is disturbing to many people, including me. It is difficult for me to imagine a future heterosexual boy enjoying a sexual relationship with a man, and it is easy for me to imagine a man using a child sexually for his own pleasure at the expense of a child's welfare.

The lack of scientific evidence supporting my largely visceral reactions against pedophilic relationships has been one of the most surprising discoveries of my hopefully ongoing scientific education. Persuasive evidence for the harmfulness of pedophilic relationships does not yet exist, perhaps because research on childhood sexual abuse has not been sufficiently high quality to establish harm. This partly reflects the impossibility of controlled experiments in this domain, but I suspect it also reflects the certainty of researchers that adult-child sexual contact is harmful and the understandable inhibition against considering the alternative.

O'Carroll argues against my intuitions, and he argues well. He argues that pedophilic relationships have not been clearly established as harmful because they are not. I do not *feel* convinced by his argument, but I do not believe that I have a better argument than he does. Existing scientific data simply are not definitive and those which exist do not convict the pedophile.

Conclusion

This book is fascinating, challenging, and discomfiting. Anyone wanting to understand Michael Jackson will need to read it. This is not to say that the book provides a complete account of Michael Jackson. If one wants to read about Jackson the performer, search elsewhere. Nor does the book shed much light on Jackson's other eccentricities, such as his plastic surgeries, his affected speech, or his menagerie. But it certainly illuminates the most controversial aspect of Jackson's life, one that was surely important to Jackson.

No doubt many of Jackson's fans will reject the book's arguments out of hand, with the justification that O'Carroll is a pedophile and should not be trusted. Their primary motivation, of

course, is to maintain the illusion that Jackson's love of boys was sexually innocent. They cannot, or at least will not, reconcile their admiration for Jackson with his pedophilia. O'Carroll does not experience any cognitive dissonance reconciling these things. To him, Jackson was both a wonderful performer and a pedophile—a flawed human being to be sure, but no monster.

Dangerous Liaisons is also worth reading for the challenges it raises regarding pedophilic relationships and their consequences. I suspect O'Carroll believes that this is a suitable tribute to Michael Jackson's unfinished life.

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