

The other side of disgust

by L. Brent Bozell

Daniel Bergner isn't the devil's advocate, but he is a pervert's apologist. This author and contributor to the New York Times Magazine has a new book titled "The Other Side of Desire," which argues it is unfair to judge bizarre, harmful and disgusting sexual attractions as bizarre, harmful and disgusting.

Bergner's book focuses on four real-life fetishists: a husband with a secret foot fetish, a man with an attraction to amputees, a vicious female sadist and a man who longs for sex with his 12-year-old stepdaughter. Book reviews and interviews suggest he hasn't written a book to judge the fetishists, but rather to judge the society that would rush to condemn their drives and behaviors.

Bergner tries to define deviancy down by quoting one of his experts, a New York psychiatrist who quips, "perversion can be defined as the sex that you like and I don't."

Unsurprisingly, Bergner has the support of many book critics. Media outlets enjoyed promoting the book by picking out and running with the most salacious tidbits. The book contains several subplots beneath its four primary characters. A Bergner interview with Salon.com began by introducing readers to one of the minor characters in the book, a Wall Street retiree wearing a red latex bodysuit and a black hood who is strapped to a table while electric shocks are surged into his genitals.

Faced with this indelible picture of sickness, Bergner instead provides the man strapped to the table with an opportunity for self-defense. "Is this a weird way to deal with life?" this freak asks. Then the man continues: "Consider the man who bought Mark McGwire's seventieth home-run ball for three million dollars. Who's weirder?"

The most objectionable of Bergner's four primary perverted subjects (and the only one who seems to disgust him in the least) is "Roy," the man attracted to his young stepdaughter. In real life, he succeeded in seducing the child, which consequently destroyed his marriage. Condemnable? Of course not. Bergner told Salon that Roy's perverse pull toward pre-teens "falls in this blurry area on the continuum" and "the psychological boundaries are a lot less clear than we'd like to think ... We all want there to be a clear line, and there just isn't."

Luckily for society and for young girls, there is a clear legal line, a black and white definition of right and wrong. It's called statutory rape.

It's natural that a New York Times contributor would draw praise in the New York Times Book Review, but the reviewer, National Public Radio commentator Lori Gottlieb, went beyond the call of duty in her Feb. 8

piece. She aggressively touted Bergner's literary and journalistic gifts, then took up the banner of his libertine crusade to blur all lines between the decent and the repulsive.

Under a disturbing photograph of a man in a black leather mask, the Times review came headlined with euphemistic phrases, about "a love life less ordinary" and "eccentric sexual yearnings." Gottlieb professed amazement at the book: "I'm no longer sure where normal ends and abnormal begins."

Gottlieb joined Bergner in making excuses for Roy, the child abuser, by passing along the words of Roy's employer: "Everybody has these thoughts. The only thing that separates him from you and me is we didn't act on them."

Pause that, and rewind. "Everybody" has thoughts of seducing a 12-year-old stepdaughter? "That's ridiculous," you (and just about anyone) say. But "just about anyone" doesn't include the New York Times book reviewer, who labored to defend that ridiculous statement. Researchers agree, Gottlieb insisted, since tests on Roy's attraction to different age groups showed only a slightly greater attraction to adolescent girls than to adult women. "This shouldn't surprise anyone familiar with those ubiquitous billboards featuring half-naked teenagers selling adult underwear. But how many middle-aged men, especially those with daughters, would admit to this attraction in public?"

It doesn't occur to Gottlieb that she is tarring society with a really fat brush. Not "everyone" is guilty of hypocrisy, or lusting after children in their care. Most everyone would condemn both the man plotting to seduce adolescents and the sleazy advertisers who sell underwear with teenage models, or models attempting to look like teenagers.

What these people call "moral ambiguity" leads inexorably to moral paralysis. Its champions in our popular culture aren't trying to redefine the boundaries as much as destroy them. They may look like playful pundits who just want to talk graphically about sex for fun and profit. But they're constructing a funhouse with mirrors so distorted that the people inside will be lost without any guideposts for an escape.

The commercial possibilities for Bergner's exploitation of perversion may be never-ending. Gottlieb concluded: "On one level, this book has all the elements of a top-rated HBO series — provocatively graphic sex, humorous dialogue and moral ambiguity."

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