

SILENT TREATMENT

The troubling response to a memoir of incest

By *Amia Srinivasan*

Discussed in this essay:

The Incest Diary, by Anonymous. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 144 pages. \$18.

The *Incest Diary* is not an abuse memoir, though it is an account, a true one, of sexual abuse. Its anonymous author was first raped by her father when she was three years old; they last had sex (“consensual” sex, for what it’s worth, though one thing the book shows is just how little that sometimes is) when she was twenty-one. During that final encounter, at her childhood beach house, after gin and tonics on the porch, she “had an orgasm bigger than any single one I had in my subsequent twelve-year marriage.” Abuse memoirs usually begin with childish innocence, descend into a dark adult world of sexuality and violence, and end with some small, scrabbling hope, a puncture of light. *The Incest Diary* begins and ends in darkness. There is for its author no self that preexists the abuse, no self to be recovered or redeemed. She comes into existence as an object of her father’s lust and sadism. She is, she tells us more than once, his “creation”; she was “born for him.” (Her father’s diary entry from two days after her birth ends, “Some day this kid’s gonna fuck.”) There is no redemption, only the cycling of desire and loathing, a sickening repetition that plays out across generations—her father, we learn, was abused by his grandfather in turn—and within a single life. Near the end of the book, we are given a description of Carl, the author’s current partner. He is charming and soft-spoken, wears threadbare cardigans, reads Kleist aloud to her on the porch, and has a cock “just like my father’s.”

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He gets off on physically threatening her, and the more she fears him, the more aroused and in love she feels. He ties her up and puts her in the closet, just as her father did, and then lets her out and violently face-fucks her. “We are most who we are in bed,” Carl explains.

On the whole, reviewers have not known what to make of *The Incest Diary*. Mistaking it for an abuse memoir (*Newsweek* called it a “highly marketable addition to the lucrative business of healing-and-recovery memoirs”), they have said that it raises a perennial question of the genre: namely, whether it might titillate perverts—or worse, us. In the *Telegraph*, Allison Pearson wrote that “the reader who would like it best” is a pedophile. David Aaronovitch, in the *Times* of London, said he could not bring himself to read the book while sitting in front of a man and his young daughter on the train, “not wanting those thoughts and images in my head.”

There has also been much fretting over the book’s graphic language. In the *New York Times*, Dwight Garner claims that it uses “porn lingo of recent vintage,” most of which, he said, “cannot remotely be quoted in a family publication.” (He then goes on to quote these lines, which precede the description of the last time the author has sex with her father: “My body was pure sex. My father had made himself a sexual object for me, too. I objectified him as I objectified myself for him.” Admittedly these are not the most explicit lines in the book—there is plenty of “cock” and “pussy”—but is this really “porn lingo”?) Most of all, reviewers have

wrung their hands over the author’s admission that she sometimes enjoyed being raped by her father; that she craved and, despite herself, continues to crave sex with him; that, as a small child, she sometimes “seduced” him. Might this not vindicate the old pedo chestnut that the kids like it?

It is hard to recognize *The Incest Diary* in these reviews. It is a controlled, exquisitely written book, it disturbs and disgusts, but it also mesmerizes and, at certain moments, charms in its quiet brutality. This is how the author describes her youthful efforts to rouse her mother from her denial about the abuse going on in the family:

I show her pictures of the slain beauties at La Specola, the natural history museum in Florence. The eighteenth-century figures of pretty murdered women with their innards exposed—intestines and livers and stomachs, hearts, kidneys spilling out of their perfectly made, peeled-open, and glowing wax skin. Their faces are peaceful; they wear pearls; they lie on beds of lace.

The Incest Diary is itself like a book of pictures, 144 pages of small, crushing vignettes, organized not chronologically but according to a logic of association and disassociation. Tastes and smells and sounds, acutely remembered—the “sweet and slime” of strawberry jam on her father’s penis “mixing with the sweet and slime of the man”; the “smoky canvas” of the mattress on which she is raped; the rustle of clothes falling to the floor; the comforting perfume of her mother’s Nivea bottle, which she carried around while sucking her thumb—are what remain from the author’s childhood flights from her besieged body. When she thinks of the day her father raped her in the bathtub, leaving her in a pool of her own blood, she “can only see it either from above, watching the two of us, or from my father’s perspective.” Of another rape, she says she “went up into the sky. Up, up, all the way up, and I looked down and saw a little girl and her father.” The girl, she says, was “maybe eight or nine.”

When the sculptor Richard Serra was a boy, the author tells us,

he was standing on the shore and he watched an old ship get launched into the sea. This gargantuan thing was set into the water, where it made the water move like mad, but the water held it. He says he thinks that all of his work might be about that day—about the transfer of mass and heavy things buoyed up.

Maybe all of the things I do are about my father raping me before I knew how to read or write.

It is a platitude that everything a survivor of childhood abuse goes on to do is in some way or another about that abuse. But the author's point here isn't about childhood abuse as such but about the kind of abuse that comes so early as to precede the child's ability to express it, to others or to herself—when the only telling to be done is in the form of pictures, not words. This is a book not simply about childhood rape but about the way in which the rape itself sets the parameters for how it will be described: in sensory fragments, almost totally devoid of affect, cool little abstractions of trauma. The author remembers being called into her teacher's office in the eighth grade to discuss her daily journal; the teacher wants to know why she never writes about herself, only about the weather and the Gulf War. The answer, surely, is that words risk betraying as much as they convey. When the author remembers her father asking her, in a baby voice, whether she wanted to fuck, her "palms sweat." "Yes," she would respond, in her child's voice, "let's fuck."

It is when the author occasionally breaks from cool abstraction into something more engaged and affective that the book is at its most disturbing:

Today I read in a book about torture that the more a captive is raped, the more likely she is to experience pleasure. Pleasure as a means of survival. The more she is raped. The more pleasure. Does this mean I have felt the most pleasure in the world? My body is pure rapture. Writing this arouses me. I think about my father and I get wet. . . . My father is my sex-

ual pleasure. I'm tied up and he's hand-feeding me his semen. Hand-feeding me what he just jacked off into his palm. This great pleasure of ours is bursting in light. I feel God in my heart getting bigger. I'm swallowing his sperm while I'm bound to the chair, and I have rays of light shooting out of my head and face.

As much as *The Incest Diary* is a book about pain, it is undeniably also a book about pleasure. The author lusted and lusts still after her father. She is furious when she comes to realize that he also has sex with her mother. When she is eight years old and they move to a new house, she assumes that she will share the master bedroom with him. After her parents divorce two years later, she begins leading her father into his room for sex. Even once the abuse is over, she cannot have an orgasm without seeing her father's face, "as if my ultimate erotic experience is being raped by the man who created me." A few times a year, she has a dream in which it is just her and her father, alone in the world, fucking "all we want." "My father is my secret," she writes. "But the secret under the secret is that sometimes I liked it. Sometimes I wanted it, and sometimes I seduced him and made him fuck me."

Lolita is a book that appears to be about seduction but is really about rape. *The Incest Diary* presents itself as the inverse, a book apparently about rape but really about seduction. But this conceit betrays the further truth—call it the secret under the secret—that sometimes rape and seduction, coercion and desire, are not opposed at all. This is why the question of whether or not a child "wants it" is irrelevant to the morality of pedophilia (something both pedophiles and many reviewers of *The Incest Diary* overlook): not because children don't want it—or do want it—but because "wanting it" is itself something so easily formed by adult violence. And not just the declaration of the wanting—what is a child's "let's fuck" but a simulacrum of consent?—but the wanting itself. When a victim of sexual

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abuse says she wanted it, she is telling us about the sort of person the abuse required her to be. The author says that it is only “as if” her sexual obsession is being raped by the man who created her. Here she is hanging back, knowingly, from the bleaker truth: It is not merely “as if” she is sexually obsessed with the man who gave her half her genetic material, fed and clothed her, made her into a thing that would desire him forever. She is sexually obsessed with him. How, indeed, could it be otherwise? Describing her father letting her out of the closet in which he had locked her, she asks, “How could I not love the man who set me free?”

If we needed it—not that we should—there is ample evidence in *The Incest Diary* that wanting it or not is beside the point. The rape makes the author into a fearful, self-loathing, violent child. She refuses to stick out her tongue in case people can tell she has licked a penis; when she spreads her legs in ballet class, she worries that someone will discover she has been penetrated. (These worries take a childish form, but they turn out to be prescient. Carl, who “smelled her need for violence,” is only one in a catalogue of men all too attuned to her secret: there is the piano teacher who sticks his tongue down her throat; the friend’s father who offers her, when she is sixteen, a luxury car if he can fist-fuck her; the married businessman who, when she is on a fellowship in Chile after high school, makes her his lover; the museum donor who rapes her during a summer internship; the man in the bar who picks her up by saying she looks like a girl who has been molested by her father.) She simulates the rape of her Barbie dolls with her brother’s dinosaurs and cuts off their hair and beheads them. She washes her hands so much that she gets sores. She sits on a radiator until she can smell her flesh burning and has to be rushed to the emergency room. In grocery stores, she asks adults to take her home with them. She draws pictures of girls being impaled by skyscrapers. She wets the

bed. She has nightmares in which she sees, up in the trees, her “long-haired scalp hanging from a blossoming tree branch.”

Where was the mother? The short answer is that she was both there and not there, aware of what was going on—competing with her daughter for her husband’s affections, calling her a bitch and a whore, wishing her dead—and also seemingly unaware, lost in her own narcissistic fog of unhappiness and steeplechasing. (This is a family of cultural, if not always financial, privilege: the horses; the art books; the private education paid for by grandparents in London; the college visits to Princeton, Bryn Mawr, and Wellesley; the cousin at Harvard; the author’s adolescent ambition—by now realized, one imagines—to write stories for *The New Yorker*.) When the mother sees the blood on her prepubescent daughter’s unicorn-patterned sheets, she says nothing. Much later, when the author comes home from college, she lies in bed for days weeping and finally reminds her mother of the years of rape, the blood on the sheets. Her mother touches her arm but says nothing.

There are other moments of maternal failure, committed by other women, just as the original paternal abuse is repeated by other men. In high school, the author reveals the rape to her grandmother, her mother’s mother, who responds by asking if she would like a tuna sandwich. A family friend—“beautiful, strong, and brave,” the sort of woman the author wants to be when she grows up, that we all want to be—puts her hand over the author’s mouth and tells her to forget about it and move on, as she herself had done. In an important sense, these are the most awful moments of the book, less grotesque and harrowing than the rape scenes but somehow more despairing. “More than everything my father did to me,” the author writes of her mother, “it hurts me that she denies it.”

That the author experiences her mother’s failure to protect her as the ultimate betrayal is unsurpris-

ing. Many, I suspect, would agree. We, of course, want to know how a father could do such things to his daughter. But this sort of question is often posed as one of psychology, a question of perversion and malignancy, whereas a mother's failure is almost always treated as a question of morality. Our inclination to think this way suggests that for all its supposed unnaturalness, we are capable of finding something natural in a father's sexual desire for his daughter, something explicable if not forgivable. The author cites Lévi-Strauss's observation that the key difference between animals and humans is the incest prohibition. ("What does this make me?" she asks.) The notion of an incest taboo presupposes the naturalness of the incest drive; we have no similar need to impose a taboo against maternal cruelty, for this is seen as the aberration, not the rule. Freudians, meanwhile, tell us that while boys want to kill their fathers and sleep with their mothers, girls naturally compete with their mothers to seduce their fathers. But one wonders, reading *The Incest Diary*, whether this, too, isn't a myth that serves the interests of those men whose sexuality cannot be divorced from the desire for dominance and violation. Could it not be that rather than daughters wanting to seduce their fathers, it is fathers who seek to seduce their daughters—who try to make them into precisely the sort of girls and then the sort of women who can never truly escape their fathers?

Of all the opprobrium heaped on this book by reviewers, the most galling is the accusation that it is a false account. The author tells us in a note at the start that she has "changed many specifics" in order to preserve her anonymity but that she has "not altered the essentials." Perhaps even the "essentials," whatever those are, are not all true, either by literary design or by the accidents of memory. That is an academic point: the same could be said of all memoir and autobiography. But *The Incest Diary* has come in for uncommonly skeptical attention. Some reviewers have said that

it is just too extreme to be true. In his review, David Aaronovitch, drawing on advice from a "very well-respected psychotherapist" friend to whom he described the book, wrote that the "account of the father's pointless violence sounds more like psychosis than reality." Sure—the reasoning seems to be—a father might rape his daughter, but would he really do it until she bleeds? Or perhaps he would make her bleed, but would he really take a knife and cut her vagina? Perhaps he would cut her, but would he really do it while she was tied to a chair?

But why couldn't it be that her father did not merely "fondle" her, did not merely "molest" her, but raped her, again and again, tied her up, cut her up, in the reassuring knowledge that, if anything, the worse it got the less likely it was that anyone would believe it? Knowing that he was giving her a secret too big, too outlandish, to tell? Aaronovitch, again on the expert advice of his friend, asks whether a man would really engage in such "risky" behavior, as if men do not take risks, especially sexual ones, all the time, particularly with those over whom they exercise power. As if getting caught were the rule rather than the exception. As if there is something so special about a child's body that it cannot be violated in the ways that many women's bodies routinely are.

There has lately been a cultural turn toward believing, as a matter of decent politics, the purported victims of rape and sexual abuse. *The Incest Diary* shows us, horrifyingly, why that matters. A year after their final sexual encounter, the author at last confronts her father. He protests that she seduced him as a little girl, that she was "such a smart, precocious child, so curious about everything," that it was she who wanted him to touch her. The next day, he tells her that if she persists in her allegations of rape—the word "allegations" reveals the legal advice sought and followed—he will disown her. Her grandfather tries to have her committed. Her aunt calls to say that she is taking

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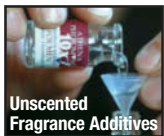
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the father's side. Her younger brother drops out of college and has a mental breakdown, for which the author feels responsible. Worried that he will kill himself, she assures him that the incest in fact never happened; they haven't spoken of it since. She does not hear from her father until many months later, when she gets a card with an image of a baby rabbit in a field of wildflowers. Inside, he has written, "Get well soon."

One might have imagined that any reader of this account wouldn't want to risk becoming yet another unhearing hearer. And the risk would seem all the more unnecessary since the account is anonymous. What is so striking about the skepticism expressed by many readers of *The Incest Diary* is that believing it does not risk defaming a potentially innocent man or "ruining" any lives—none of the standard tropes used to silence women or exonerate men could even in principle apply. This suggests that there is something else at work in the disinclination to believe the author of *The Incest Diary*, and perhaps in the disinclination to believe at large: not an instinct to protect some particular man but an instinct to protect all men, or to protect ourselves from what we suspect men, as a class, might be.

It is hard to assess *The Incest Diary* as a literary object. For all its elegance, its moments of chilly beauty, the book never allows one to fully divorce it, as a piece of writing, from its devastating occasion—

much less to entertain the thought that the abuse might be somehow redeemed through its writing. It is far easier to say, or should be, that the book is a significant feminist text. It shows many things that women have found so hard to tell, and men so hard to hear: how sexual pleasure can be irrelevant to the moral meaning of sex; why saying that rape is really about power rather than about sex is to fail to understand that sex, under patriarchy, is usually about power; how men at their worst are judged less harshly than women at theirs; that some of the most basic facts of many women's lives are, in the minds of many men, unthinkable except as fabrication and fantasy.

Near the end of the book, the author repeats her earlier question: "How could I not love the man who set me free?" This time the man is not her father but her lover, Carl, who enjoys reenacting the scenes of her childhood rape. The question, posed again, is now darker and more knowing. It is a warning to us not to think that the author's relationship with Carl—in which, it might be hoped at least, she owns her sexual trauma—represents a liberation any different from the kind offered by her father, who frees her from the closet in which he himself locked her. Carl is the price the author pays for sexual pleasure and love. It is an accommodation that admits no blame or judgment. But it is an accommodation that has little to do with freedom, then or now. ■

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