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Book Review: Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders by Anna Salter

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Book Review: Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders by
Anna Salter

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Book Review

Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders, by Anna Salter. New York: Basic Books, 2003. 272 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper).

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Anna Salter has set a difficult goal by asserting in her introduction, "But if I do my job right, reading this book will make it harder for sex offenders to get access to you or your children" (p. 4). The task of translating often difficult and disturbing research on sex offenders for parents to better protect their children is challenging. Salter should be commended for undertaking this challenge.

Salter's premise is to show that sexual predators are masters of deception by taking specific steps to gain the trust of others. This includes a subterfuge of the family by presenting themselves as a trustworthy person and offering to take on caregiving responsibilities such as baby-sitting, mentoring, or teaching activities. This is critical, because many people do not think of a sexual offender as being someone already a part of their lives and as someone they know and trust; most view a sex offender as a stranger lurking in the bushes.

The deception and grooming process that many offenders use is well illustrated by Salter's qualitative interviews with convicted sex offenders. This method is both a strength and a weakness of the book. Weaving these interviews throughout the book, Salter makes the often-surreal thoughts and behaviors of child sexual molestation an upsetting reality. However, she is portraying only a portion of all sex offenders—only those convicted and serving time. Not all sex offenders serve time. For example, based on a meta-analysis on the prosecution of child sexual abuse, researchers calculated that out of 100 cases referred for prosecution, 26 would result in incarceration (Cross, Walsh, Simone, & Jones, 2003).

The initial chapters of Salter's book describe the overall problem of sexual abuse in a conversational style and summarize the deceptive techniques that offenders use. Salter's emphasis is that "private behavior cannot be predicted from public behavior" (p. 23). Characteristics of acquaintance sex offenders, such as seducing victims with kindness and tricking victims by creating a special relationship with them, are described well. Salter instructs readers to be suspicious of adult males with limited adult relationships who want to spend significant time with children of particular ages. She describes the deception and double lives

of a YMCA director, a musician, and several religious leaders, yet she does not mention family members who have molested.

A distinction between intrafamilial and extrafamilial child sexual abuse would have been useful. Child sexual abuse offenders are often intrafamilial; a recent report found that 68% of sexual abuse perpetrators were parents, relatives, legal guardians, or unmarried partners of a parent (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2003). This is particularly important given that different types of sex offenders tend to have different types of victims. Intrafamilial offenders tend to have female victims, whereas extrafamilial offenders tend to have multiple male victims, many between the ages of 10 and 16 (Lanning, 2001). Similarly, another study found boys more likely to be sexually abused by strangers (40%) as compared to girls (21%), and girls were more likely to be sexually abused by family members (29%) as compared to boys (11%) (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). Thus, it is important to recognize intrafamilial offenders when describing sex offenders. This book would have been strengthened by adding chapters devoted to understanding and protecting children from intrafamilial offenders.

A significant proportion of the chapter on child molesters is spent debunking or arguing against particular studies. By focusing on a few studies rather than trends in the field, Salter overlooks the significant strides that have been made in understanding child molesters. Although it is useful to critique other people's research, I was left wondering how this contributes to parents' protection of their children.

The chapters that follow address the difficult topics of rapists, sadists, and psychopaths. Even if one is familiar with this research, these chapters take some time to get through. The material is upsetting. A strength is Salter's ability to concisely organize classification types such as opportunistic, compulsive, distorted thinking, and fantasy rapists. The sections briefly describe general characteristics of each type of rapist and provide quotes from offenders thereby providing a snapshot of these offenders. In contrast, the chapter on psychopaths seems tangential to the goal of this book. Although it is interesting to read about "the old problem" of psychopathology dating back to the age of Athens and Alcibiades and Socrates, I found this section long and not well linked to the book's purpose. Similarly, the next chapter describing how sex offenders continue their manipulative ways by deceiving prison employees is informative yet not completely linked to the book's goal.

Salter then shifts gears to describe how *our* perceptions and illusions often give sex offenders opportunity. The author describes how difficult it is to accurately detect deception. The discussion of Paul Ekman's research on facial expressions and emotions is fascinating. Information on how our illusions increase our susceptibility to the illusion of control,

our bias toward positive memories, and the impact of trauma is included. Although all interesting topics, the reader—at least this reader—needed a roadmap to connect the topics specifically to helping parents protect their children from sex offenders.

The next chapter on detecting deception continues to describe how we need to monitor our positive illusions toward other people as well as how difficult it is to detect liars. This chapter is innovative in that Salter draws from the gambling literature to illustrate how effective people are at deception. The author spends a significant proportion of the chapter describing Paul Ekman's research on the four channels of communication (facial expressions, body language, voice characteristics, and words). Aspects of each mode of communication are described as well as which mode is most revealing of deception. This section is interesting, but I felt that the parent is left with the impossible task of trying to detect who is a sexual offender. Salter does note that these are small things and not easy to see, and "thus, although I report information on detecting deception, I do so with strong reservations about its effectiveness in protecting our children" (p. 222).

The concluding chapter on deflecting sex offenders begins with a comparison. Because doctors cannot tell who has AIDS and who does not, AIDS has changed how doctors interact with patients by taking additional precautions, such as wearing gloves. Likewise, Salter asserts that we do not know who may be a sex offender, and therefore, we must put on the necessary "gloves" to take precautions. The author suggests that one way to do this is for parents not to drop off their children at any extracurricular activities. This is a bit of a slippery slope; it is great to advocate that parents be actively involved in their child's life, but this sets the stage for a paranoid if-then thinking game that potentially could make parents feel guilty if they do not make the "right" choice. Salter, however, is illustrating a valid point that offenders seek out vulnerable children, and when a child lacks a positive relationship with a parent, it makes a child more vulnerable.

This book contributes to our understanding of convicted sex offenders and illustrates how we should be suspicious of certain types of behaviors. By focusing primarily on pedophiles and describing sadists and psychopaths rather than the full spectrum of sex offenders such as intrafamilial offenders, Salter somewhat sensationalizes our perception of sexual offenders. It would have been useful, for example, to include Lanning's (2001) typology continuum of sexual offenders, which outlines characteristics of situational to preferential child molesters. There are many types of sexual offenders, and we still know very little about the range of offenders, especially given that much of the research is on convicted sex offenders who may represent the most egregious offenders or those who are simply not "successful" criminals. Salter's writing

style is easy to read and effortlessly draws the reader into the minds of some offenders. Although this book would not be the only book I would recommend to a parent interested in better protecting their child from sex offenders, it would be among the books I would recommend.

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