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Remedying Hermeneutic Injustice One Poem at a Time: A Review of The Little Orange Book: Learning about Abuse from the Voice of the Child

Alec J. Grant PhD

Independent Scholar, alecgrant32@yahoo.co.uk

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Abstract

This remarkable book tackles child sexual abuse and exploitation, arguing that blame and accountability belong to its perpetrators. It draws on thematic content analysis and autoethnographic principles and is methodologically novel in utilising the poetry of the first author, written in childhood, as primary data. An important international educational and practical resource, it should be on the shelves of university libraries, informing courses in social work, criminology, health and qualitative inquiry. It is also a much needed knowledge resource for abuse survivors and their advocates, remedying what the moral philosopher Miranda Fricker calls “hermeneutic injustice”: abused people lacking the knowledge and vocabulary to adequately make sense of their experiences.

Keywords

Child Sexual Abuse, Autoethnography, Hermeneutic Injustice

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Remedying Hermeneutic Injustice One Poem at a Time: A Review of *The Little Orange Book: Learning about Abuse from the Voice of a Child*

Alec J. Grant
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This remarkable book tackles child sexual abuse and exploitation, arguing that blame and accountability belong to its perpetrators. It draws on thematic content analysis and autoethnographic principles and is methodologically novel in utilising the poetry of the first author, written in childhood, as primary data. An important international educational and practical resource, it should be on the shelves of university libraries, informing courses in social work, criminology, health and qualitative inquiry. It is also a much needed knowledge resource for abuse survivors and their advocates, remedying what the moral philosopher Miranda Fricker calls “hermeneutic injustice”: abused people lacking the knowledge and vocabulary to adequately make sense of their experiences. Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse, Autoethnography, Hermeneutic Injustice

It is a pleasure and privilege for me to review this remarkable book. A courageous and compassionate myth-busting text, it carries substantial epistemic weight and authority, and is a timely antidote to longstanding and widespread public and professional ignorance of a heinous social problem. The primary aims of its authors are to show how our contemporary life enables child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSA/E), and to place responsibility, blame and accountability squarely on its perpetrators. In so doing, Eaton and Patterson-Young challenge the idea that CSA/E is confined to a monster minority, requiring one-size-fits-all, decontextualized and often victim-blaming solutions.

Each chapter is carefully and thoroughly subjected to a central concept and content analysis based upon their qualitative analysis of poems written by the first author when she had been subjected to sexual violence between the ages of 11 and 17. Through its pages, the authors succeed in building a case for a “trauma-informed, child-centred, anti-victim blaming, strengths-based approach to listening to, learning from, and working with children who have experienced abuse” (p. xiii). They draw rigorously on research and scholarship to explore the psychosocial and cultural significance of the first author’s lived-experiences as a young girl coping as best as she can through years of sexual abuse and family and societal neglect, and then managing to reflexively and masterfully rise above this in late adolescence and adulthood in the interests of social justice. Educational and other social institutions are taken to task for failing to identify abused children through, for example, not noticing the survival function of children’s “positive” coping mechanisms, such as working hard at school. Such constant invisibility of the abused child is testimony to the myopia of society, parents, teachers, counsellors and other institutional figures, in failing and not wanting to see the blindingly obvious.

As a reader with a professional and personal stakeholder interest in the area, the book worked well for me emotionally, and I experienced a kaleidoscope of feelings during a very gripping two-day read. At a methodological level, I engaged with it as a seasoned qualitative researcher, teacher, and writer, with interests and affiliations in autoethnography, narrative voice and the relationship between writer intent and reader response. Despite employing the

conventional method of qualitative thematic content analysis, the book is clearly an autoethnographic success. It's also methodologically novel in utilising the poetry of the first author, written in childhood through adolescence, as primary data around which the book is constructed. Although initially a little disappointing for me, I came to sympathise with the authors' decision to write the book in the 3rd person voice (which is fully discussed in their final, reflection chapter). This was clearly a difficult choice for them to make, and the need for the necessary distance afforded by 3rd person—for the first author especially—is convincingly argued. Moreover, I know that looking through older eyes at material written in young life is often like looking at something someone else might have written. This confers the advantage of using the 3rd person voice to speak to *every child*.

I believe this text will prove to be an important international educational and practical resource for parents, older children, professionals and academics. I would love to see it on the shelves of university libraries, informing courses in social work, criminology, health and qualitative inquiry. I'm also confident that it will be used as a much needed knowledge resource, especially for people—and their advocates—who've lived through abuse and currently lack this. This will go a long way to remedying what the moral philosopher Miranda Fricker calls "hermeneutic injustice": the state of disadvantaged, abused and oppressed people lacking the knowledge and vocabulary to adequately make sense of their experiences.

Reference

Eaton, J., & Paterson-Young, C. (2018). *The little orange book: Learning about abuse from the voice of the child*. Staffordshire, UK: VictimFocus. Available from <https://www.victimfocus.org.uk/the-little-orange-book1>

Author Note

Alec Grant, PhD is an independent international scholar who has written and taught extensively, in the disciplines of qualitative inquiry and autoethnography, critical mental health and philosophy. He is a social justice activist in the demedicalization of mental health, and activist ally in child sexual abuse and exploitation. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: alecgrant32@yahoo.co.uk.

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