



The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children--and Its Aftermath

Susan A. Clancy

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Few would argue that the experience of sexual abuse is deeply traumatic for a child. But in this explosive new book, psychologist Susan Clancy reports on years of research and contends that it is not the abuse itself that causes trauma—but rather the narrative that is later imposed on the abuse experience. Clancy demonstrates that the most common feeling victims report is not fear or panic, but *confusion*. Because children don't understand sexual encounters in the same ways that adults do, they normally accommodate their perpetrators—something they feel intensely ashamed about as adults. The professional assumptions about the nature of childhood trauma can harm victims by reinforcing these feelings. Survivors are thus victimized not only by their abusers but also by the industry dedicated to helping them. Path-breaking and controversial, *The Trauma Myth* empowers survivors to tell their own stories, and radically reshapes our understanding of abuse and its aftermath.

The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children--and Its Aftermath Details

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From Reader Review The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children--and Its Aftermath for online ebook

Carrie Poppy says

In many ways, I wanted to give this book five stars, but there are some issues that needed addressing that fell by the wayside, so I am ditching one star. I should say that, throughout this review, I will refer to the abuser as he/him, and the victim as she/her, but obviously abuser and particularly victim can be any gender, though the vast majority of sex abusers are men. Now, then, the book.

First, the good:

Clancy clearly and compellingly makes the case that child sexual abuse (hereafter, CSA), while an absolutely unacceptable crime that often permanently harms victims, doesn't happen the way we think it happens. From her research (mostly interviewing adult victims of CSA), she concludes that the vast majority of young-child victims initially don't find the abuse frightening or upsetting. Instead, she finds, most child victims find the encounter strange and confusing, and ultimately forgettable (the exception is when the abuse is physically painful, but this turns out to be relatively rare). Then, later, as the child rounds the corner of puberty, they start to awaken to sexuality, learn about their own sex drive and sex organs, and have an "ah ha" moment where they realize, now years later, that they were being used for an adult's sexual gratification as a young child. While they thought they were having a platonic encounter, the other person was doing something much different; they've been tragically manipulated. This realization becomes INCREDIBLY traumatic as the victim must now reframe all her memories to account for this horrendous discovery.

To make matters worse, the attacker is almost always someone the child knows, and he is often still in her life, perhaps an uncle or teacher or minister who is beloved by the parents and extended family. Not only is the child (now adolescent) suddenly the survivor of sex abuse, but she now feels she can't trust her own brain to spot an abuser. Clancy finds that victims of this type of abuse (in which they weren't initially disturbed, but later are) may actually suffer WORSE than those victims who endure terrifying and/or physically painful attacks that they resisted at the time. Though violent attacks obviously have horrific and perhaps permanent effects (including potential PTSD), the victim can at least trust her own brain to spot abuse and abuser; after all, she did so when she was a child. By contrast, the victim of long-game manipulation, grooming, and fondling may have initially responded with confusion or even pleasure (many victims report this), so she must deal with intense shame, guilt, and regret for "not having stopped" what a child of three or four or five can't be expected to understand, much less stop.

This all rang true to me from the first page. While I haven't survived CSA, I have friends who have, and who have shared their experiences with me. This exactly mirrors what I usually hear: that the touching was not painful, that the victim didn't physically (or verbally) resist, because she didn't understand what was going on, or because she "liked" the feelings, though she didn't identify them as sexual at the time. I recently read "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" for the first time, and Maya Angelou recounts her own CSA, including a penetrative rape at the age of eight. She fearlessly shares what others carry in secret for entire lives: that at first, when her mother's boyfriend was fondling her, she liked it, and thought it was a form of platonic intimacy. Only later, when her abuser threatened to hurt her brother if she "told," did she realize that the behavior must have been "bad." The horrifying situation escalated to the point where Maya was violently raped, at which point she was able to unequivocally identify the abuse as abuse (despite her very young age), and report it.

Because this mirrored what I have learned about CSA from first-person accounts, the first couple of chapters were a bit repetitive for me. I felt she spent a bit too much time trying to convince me that CSA delivers its trauma years after the original crime is committed. I expected to come here and find many reviews calling out the repetition. But instead, I find reviews filled with shock and horror at Clancy's findings that kids typically don't resist the initial abuse; some people clearly still didn't buy that premise, whether because they didn't find it compelling, or didn't want to. Clancy, then, was right to spend so much time on it.

The much bigger issue is what isn't in the book. As I read, I kept thinking, "Oh man, pedophiles will use this to say that if we just decriminalized CSA, it would cease to be traumatic for survivors." The thinking would go like this: "These kids don't experience anything worse than confusion during these sexual encounters, so long as intimidation and physical pain aren't involved. They only come to identify it as 'bad' once they are older because they live in a society where we demonize kids experiencing natural sexual urges. If we simply stop doing this, then as the child grows up, she won't suddenly reframe her healthy childhood sexual experiences as abuse." I could feel this interpretation hanging over every line in this book, and I kept waiting for Clancy to address and eviscerate it. Given the incredibly sensitive subject matter and its high stakes, Clancy and her editor would have done well to foresee this interpretation, and nip it in the bud. But the book never does. It's a shame, because a single paragraph could have cut off this line of inquiry. Perhaps even a line saying something like, "These survivors began to reframe -- with horror -- their experiences, not simply because they learned about sex abuse, but because they learned about SEX. Simply realizing that they have budding sexual urges, and having an innate concept of consent, they are horrified to realize that an adult who was supposed to protect them, instead fooled them into being an object of sexual gratification. Even before they know about abuse, they know something terribly unjust has been done to them." I am assuming that this is the conclusion Clancy came to, since she vehemently states again and again that CSA is an unforgivable crime that should be thoroughly prevented and punished. But she simply never puts this fine a point on it, and this missing piece of the puzzle turned out to be pretty critical: you can find a mostly-positive review of the book on NAMBLA's pro-pedophile website.

There are also some issues with language that might partly be due to me reading this 2011 book with 2018 eyes. For example, she speaks of children "consenting" to fondling because they didn't fight it. Of course, now we know that children can't "consent" because they don't have enough information to do so. A better term might be, "didn't fight it," which most children don't. Of course, the point here is not that the child *should* have fought it. The point is that the adult abuser is wholly responsible; he is taking advantage of a trusting child, while he has way more information than his victim does. The power imbalance makes it impossible for the child to meaningfully consent (hence our age of consent laws). But, again, this missing attention to language subtleties was unfortunate. There are other similar language issues that came up, but I tried my best not to be too distracted by them. Regardless, while this handful of ill-chosen terms muddied the water, the book taken as a whole is completely clear on child sexual abuse: it is inexcusably bad, and the child is never at fault. Yes, even if they "liked" it at the time. Yes, even if they told their abuser they wanted it. Children don't always understand the ramifications of their fleeting curiosities and desires, and a responsible and loving adult steers them away from those things which will harm them, now or years later.

Back to the good: Clancy is a memory researcher (her other book, "Abducted," is a fascinating look at how people come to believe they were abducted by aliens, and even build false memories around that narrative). I am fascinated by the faultiness of human memory, and especially by false memories and "repressed memories." Believers in "repressed memory" say that a traumatic event can cause the victim to dissociate to the point that her brain refuses to build and keep a memory of the incident, to protect her from future harm -- the harm of living with a horrifying past. The memory, then, is buried deep within the subconscious, and either never released, or released suddenly and unexpectedly. Or, in the truly far-out cases, recovered with the aid of the much-discredited "recovered memory therapy." This therapy has been shown to be merely an

invitation for morbid daydreaming, causing patients to conjure up imagined scenarios of terrible events (not just sex abuse, but Satanic abuse, or alien abductions, and more). Despite having read multiple books and articles on the subject, I had never quite gotten one thing clear: Clancy and her fellows (such as Elizabeth Loftus) have repeatedly said that trauma doesn't make our brain hide memories; to the contrary, it **SOLIDIFIES** memories. The abject fear we experience during a robbery, or a rape, or a natural disaster, has the effect of "slowing time down," allowing our brains to react faster than they normally would, but also allowing us to build incredibly detailed memories. Counter to repressed memory theory, traumatic events are **less** likely to be forgotten, not more. Yet, I also heard these experts say that abuse is sometimes forgotten and then remembered. This sounded like a contradiction, but I could sense that I was missing something. Clancy cleared up that "something" for me. Abuse, she explains, is often forgotten, but that is **because** it may not have been traumatic initially. Once we understand that most CSA victims were confused, but not afraid or in pain, during the initial acts, we can see why the whole thing was "forgettable" to them... until they arrived at their pre-teen years, recalled the events, and realized that a precious thing -- their first sexual encounter -- had been stolen from them by someone who knew exactly what they were doing. The memory had been forgotten because it was forgettable. Now, imbued with tragic meaning, it will never be forgotten again.

The last couple of chapters of Clancy's book might be the most important. She explores the reactions to her findings, and how well-meaning defenders of children, and feminists, and other scholars, attacked her, insisting that she must be a pedophile, or a pedophile-defender, if she would release her data. (By the way, it is literally impossible to come to this conclusion if you read the book.) I reckon these people saw the same gap I did, and ran to the unfair conclusion that Clancy left that part out not because of oversight, but because of malice. I think this is deeply unfair. Yet, this attitude is still alive. Check out the comments on videos of Clancy interviews and behold the people calling her a pedophile, despite that very interview featuring her repeatedly calling CSA an inexcusable crime. Witness, even, those trying to write her off by calling her a kook: "She even believes in alien abductions!" Nope. She doesn't. These people haven't read a word this woman's written.

One thing that is very clear is that Clancy is writing this book in order to protect victims. The trauma that they endure (and it is trauma in the vernacular sense, though her clinical definition of this word can become a bit of a distraction), can be life-long, even if it is delayed. It may blunt their abilities to form connections, have healthy sexual relationships and, as mentioned above, trust their own brains. It was this particular element that struck close to home for me. For 3.5 years, I had a boyfriend who was carrying on multiple relationships at once. I thought I was his one-and-only, but I was more like his one-in-ten. I didn't find out until much later, and had to reframe all of my memories. The hardest part to deal with, and to explain to others, was the way in which the realization made me not trust my own brain. I wanted any explanation of what had happened, any red flag I might have missed, so that I could protect myself in the future. Friends found this perplexing, but supported me as I dug through old letters and emails and photos. Likewise (but worse), I imagine that these CSA victims must paw through their old memories for most of their lives, looking for a red flag, however faint, that they can point to: "Ah ha! There it is. Next time, I will know."

As Clancy's book ends, she makes a heartfelt plea: that we listen to the data because the victims need us to. By building a narrative that CSA is always painful and frightening, we drive **MOST** victims into silence. They look back on their former selves, and see a confused child who didn't fight back as their beloved uncle touched them in a way they didn't understand. They think, "How come I didn't fight back, or scream, or even know it was abuse? Other kids do!" So they live in secrecy, in silence. And yet they are the majority. Of course, this all comes from a society that **wants** to protect children from abuse. We imagine that if we give people the idea that kids aren't horrified **every time** they are exposed to sex too early, that abusers will find an excuse to abuse at every turn. And this is a fair concern, especially given the aforementioned NAMBLA

review. But this concern is so pronounced, that we aren't listening to victims. A truly tragic picture, in which victims are thrown under the bus in order to protect... them.

It's worth noting that while this book focuses on CSA with delayed trauma (because this type is the most common), it does not disregard the existence of sex abuse which is horrifying and traumatic in the moment. Children are violently raped, children are made to be terrified, or to freeze up to the point that they *cannot* fight back. These things happen, and can never be dismissed simply because they are the minority. Clancy's objective is not to judge which kind of abuse is worst, but to broaden our understanding of what abuse can look like, and make room for the majority of CSA victims to look back on their abuse not as a shameful reflection on them, but as a tragically common experience for which they hold absolutely no culpability.

This book is important, even with its flaws. I hope a future edition will clear up the relatively easily addressed issues, because there is so much important information here. But until then, anyone who cares about CSA should read this book. I imagine it will be tremendously comforting to victims who imagined they were alone. You aren't alone, even if you didn't resist the manipulation of a conniving adult. You couldn't have. You were a child.

Cait Ní Cheallaigh says

I can see why many mental health experts would take exception to Clancy's narrow definition of "trauma," but nonetheless, this is a must-read for any human who breathes. If you're a victim of sexual abuse you may find comfort, but if you're not, you need to read this book even more. So many times I've heard, "Well, if it was so bad, why didn't you tell anybody," or, "Why did you wait this long," or, "If you're not traumatized, then I guess it wasn't so bad." This is still the prevailing attitude today, and it is more or less why, despite all advancements in reporting, like USA Swimming's "Safe Sport" initiative, little is really going to change for victims; the onus is still on children to even understand that they're being abused. Well, that doesn't work, because most times, they don't know they're being abused. It's not because there's something wrong with them, it's not because nobody explained to them right and wrong. It's because they're children and they're being lied to and manipulated by an adult they've come to trust, like an uncle or a coach. It can take years or decades before they come to terms that they'd been had, in very damaging, abusive ways. Adults sit by and let this happen, meanwhile, when they're the ones with the power to make it stop. Do yourself and everyone around you a favor and read this.

Kate says

A complete review can be found at:

<http://open.salon.com/blog/sparking/2...>

Overall, I found this to be a book about a psychological researcher's point of view who wasn't armed with the right questions or understanding of trauma from the onset due to her lack of field work. She confuses the adjective "traumatic" with the medical definition of "trauma" and all of its lingering physiological and psychological effects from the event itself.

She makes assumptions based on a control group which is relaying their incidents, many of which are not

seen as violent, often felt good physically at the time, and did not feel in physical danger as they new their perpetrators, for the first time. Additionally, they are doing so without any benefit of therapy or processing of the event. That is a biased control group.

What Clancy does unveil is an epidemic in our country of sexual abuse and many people who still do not understand they have been abused. While I don't agree with her conclusions, I think the overall study does have a benefit. She points fingers at the medical establishment while I think further education on the nature of trauma is what is actually necessary.

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Sarah says

I really enjoyed the authors unique perspective on childhood sexual abuse. Her commitment comes from really listening to survivors and adds an interesting layer to a complex issue without ever becoming cheesy or exploitative. As someone whose former partner has experienced childhood sexual abuse, I found her insights to be right on for what my ex experienced. In discussing the book with my ex, she confirmed that many of Clancy's findings and interpretations matched her own thoughts and feelings about her abuse. Clancy never claims to speak for all victims but it is clear that she has tapped a framework that makes sense to many.

Rachael says

I debated on what rating to give this book, and finally decided to skip that part. The Trauma Myth was certainly a thought-provoking book, but a "like-don't like" scale doesn't capture my feelings. I'm somewhere in a triangle of befuddled, intrigued, and disturbed.

I walked into this ready to be convinced. I have a lot of respect for Susan Clancy, who has a knack for successfully tackling career-killing issues such as alien abduction and child sexual abuse. Both of these topics arose from investigations about memory--recovered, false, trauma memories, etc.

In her first book, *Abducted*, she explored why and how people come to believe they were abducted by aliens. In that book as in *The Trauma Myth*, Clancy portrays herself as greeting counterintuitive data with annoyance and skepticism, followed by a reframing of her assumptions, and ending with a deeper understanding of the problem and a new framework in which to understand it.

Clancy's alien abduction framework was convincing and well-reasoned, and I expected the same in *The Trauma Myth*. I wasn't entirely disappointed, but I was also left feeling profoundly uncomfortable and unsettled. Part of that is the nature of the topic, but a lot of it was her approach.

Her main goal is to turn sexual abuse research and understanding on its head. It seems that she has made little progress amongst researchers, so she released a popular book to make her case. Her point is NOT that sexual abuse is in any way acceptable or that it does not have devastating effects on its victims. She argues that 1) sexual abuse is often not traumatizing when it happens, because it is perpetrated by trusted individuals at a developmental stage when children cannot appreciate the betrayal and violation; 2) as individuals get older, they come to realize they were violated and feelings of guilt and betrayal begin to form; 3) the belief that sexual abuse is traumatic when it happens leads the majority of sexual abuse victims to believe that their lack of resistance & understanding was abnormal and, thus, they are partially or totally to blame for the abuse.

There is no doubt in my mind that Susan Clancy has profound respect and compassion for victims of sexual abuse, and she believes the view she presents will do more to help victims than the current trauma model will. However, she makes semantic choices--which were likely conscious, carefully reasoned choices--that come perilously close to blaming victims, regardless of her arguments to the contrary.

She argues repeatedly that children are unlikely to resist sexual abuse, particularly when it involves genital touching and not painful penetration. Even when children have some vague recognition that what's happening is wrong or are confused, they may also appreciate the attention from the trusted adult, and they may feel physical pleasure. Further, these reactions are perfectly normal, and adult survivors should be made aware that there is nothing wrong or aberrant in the way they responded.

I'm with her on this, but it's her language in making these arguments that is questionable. She uses words like "complicit" and "consent," making the argument that although legally there is no consent, "most people do not live in a courtroom." Language is extremely important, and there are other ways to convey the same exact information without using an inflammatory word like "complicit".

The title of the book itself is exceptionally inflammatory, a choice that was, I imagine, completely conscious.

Most people reading the title would assume that she is arguing that sexual abuse is not harmful. Choosing such a title virtually ensures an uproar, leading to more press, and a higher readership. I choose to believe the goal of a higher readership is to increase the likelihood that her argument will gain traction and not for financial gain, but for every person who picks up the book and manages to read it all the way through (the most compelling, compassionate arguments are made in the second half), there will be perhaps hundreds who read the title and form their own opinions about the facts within the book. Authors cannot be held responsible for every ignorant person who misconstrues their argument without actually reading it. In this case, however, that outcome is predictable, inevitable, and perhaps even encouraged.

In short, it is a book whose arguments will stay with you and will continue to challenge you afterward.

Pamela says

This book was not worth reading and I do not recommend it. Her theory that there is an industry built around treating 'trauma' is quite a stretch. Not everyone who has experienced abuse or any other bad events has been traumatized but some have been. Those who exhibit the true signs of trauma do benefit from various forms of treatment.

Alex says

As a survivor of sexual abuse, this book really spoke to me. It helped explain a lot of the unresolved feelings that I have been dealing with for the past 25 years. The feelings of guilt, shame, confusion, anger, sadness all make more sense.

I encourage anyone who has been a victim of childhood sexual abuse to read this book. I hope that you find some comfort and understanding within the pages.

Emily says

This book was given a sensational title, and from my understanding, it caused a lot of controversy when it was first published. Reading it, there is no wonder why. The author, Susan A. Clancy, confronts all that society thinks is true about sexual abuse. There was plenty of times when I felt uneasy reading the book, because it -appears- that she is saying that sexual abuse is not traumatic. Rather, what she's really trying to say is that the trauma comes later when sexually abused children get older and realize what happened was wrong. Clancy interviewed hundreds of adults who'd been abused. Their experiences squared with mine and I found myself nodding along, despite my discomfort with the fact that notions cherished by society and myself were being demolished. Let me be clear: I don't believe I, nor Clancy, has the right to tell ANYONE who's been abused that they were not traumatized. These were the results of an investigation, and they just so happened to fit with what I experienced as true, which is that when abuse happens, it is mostly likely not traumatic --at the time-- it happens. Why? Because most abuse is not violent, the victim lets it happen, and they are usually abused not by STRANGERS but by someone they trust! This fits with the actual statistics. Using the trauma model, which was created for incidents that are violent and forceful and frightening, does not help abused children or adults abused as children. Instead, Clancy says, we should tell victims that it was not their fault that this happened to them, that they let it happen because they were too young to make a

judgement or give consent, and that the persons that abused them betrayed them, not the other way around. (Many victims blame themselves and they should not). That's the gist of the book. I recommend this book for both victims of sexual abuse and those who care for them-- family members and the professionals who work with victims.

Stephen says

This book is really fantastic. My one beef is that Clancy wants to ditch the trauma model completely. It seems the trauma model simply needs tweaking. Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Samu says

Not sure how I feel about this book. Maybe it's because it's ten years old already that most of this feels kind of like old news. I'm no expert on sexual abuse of children but even I knew the basics: the abuser is usually someone close to the child (a man), non threatening, often the child doesn't realize it is abuse until later because it is confusing and doesn't physically hurt, they are rewarded for being good etc. So, perhaps the point of the book is that we should stop talking about the physically traumatizing sexual abuse (abuse where physical violence occurred, the child was physically injured) and start talking about the more common form of abuse which is everything else. Sure. But isn't that what is being talked about mostly? Maybe it wasn't ten years ago?

Most of this book kinda feels like a play on words. The author doesn't think the word trauma describes the actual act of child abuse she studied but doesn't really disagree with the most basic things that are being told to children who were abused like it wasn't your fault and I'm sorry this happened to you. She talks a lot about the fact that sexual abuse of children is conceptualized through adult eyes and thus, does not meet the actual reality of what it feels like for the children that are being abused. She goes on to discuss consent and the fact that most children do not fight back and in fact 'allow' the abuse to occur -doing exactly the same thing she accuses adults of doing when discussing abuse with the abused kids: putting adult lenses on the whole thing. A child cannot consent due to their emotional and cognitive development and if we accept that as truth than how could a child possibly 'allow' the abuse? This is different from fighting back which children rarely do for many reasons (they didn't know they could, didn't know it was wrong, were taught to do as grownups tell them to do, wouldn't have had a chance anyway as the grownup was most likely physically bigger and stronger etc) but just as relevant a point. Even adults that are raped rarely fight back, for different reasons, but that doesn't mean they 'allowed' the rape to happen any more than the child who was abused did. The author does seem to agree children cannot consent but at the same time, says children comply and allow the abuse. Much of this book is like that: play on words and their meanings while saying the same thing others have been saying about abuse for years. So, I'm not really sure why this book was written and what the point is. Except of course that we should listen to the survivors of sexual abuse when trying to help them.

Judi sampson-young says

i have never read a book that made me so angry and crushed. Did the author really mention the book Lolita??? I'm not getting the no trauma thing! If something is happening to a child and they have no way to process it because there is no point of reference, that is trauma, that is why they have problems throughout

their lives. If you take away the molestation, you wouldn't have those problems. All of the participants in her study speak of knowing it was wrong, but didn't know why it was wrong; or that you just didn't disrespect an adult. To me this is trauma. From the time I was molested, my entire life turned upside down, and my form of abuse was not violent or coerced. By the time I was old enough to process what had happened to me, I had sooo much baggage of bewilderment, guilt (not only from the act itself, but the way I handled it). In the 40 years since "it" happened there has been only one time, in foster care, group homes, group therapy, or support groups, that I have ever encountered anyone who reacted to the abuse in the way that the author presents her case study subjects. This book was disappointing to me in that she speaks of the Harvard studies going on for 9 years and then doesn't present their stories, both before or after the abuse takes place, except for one or two lines, that SURPRISE, back up what she is trying to sell. It feels too edited.

Alida says

Do yourself a favor and read this book. Why? Because if you or anybody you know has been a victim of sexual abuse you/they need to read this book.

Janet says

This book has so much valuable data on the experience and after-math of child sexual abuse. That her conclusion is to say that most sexual abuse to children is not experienced as abuse, and to title the book "The Trauma Myth..." is an insult and injustice to sexual abuse victims. When I borrowed this book from the library (on the fateful day that a sex predator was accepted into the US Supreme Court), I believed that the author meant the meaning of 'myth' that incorporated the historical meaning. Myth originally meant truth, then it came to mean perhaps true, perhaps not, but the truth of it is lost in time. This meaning relates more accurately to children's reports of their sexual abuse experiences as children. When an adult tries to remember, some of the memory is very very clear, and some may be lost, or still cannot be expressed verbally in order to protect the small child in their psyche. It is impossible to have the acute level of after effects Clancy recorded, if there was not a problem at the time that the child was unable to put into words or actions at the time, and that is why we try our best to protect children from such abuse.

Almost 10 years later, it is not a surprise that the author has had much negative reaction to her call to drop the idea that child sexual abuse experiences are traumatic, because the more careful examination of her data, reveals that these children did experience their abuse as traumatic. It would be, for example, impossible to have such acute reactions later, if the experience was not traumatic on a level the child could not express at the time, and may still not allow her/himself to express as an adult. She only hints at such possibilities, and does not followup on them as relevant enough to show that child sexual abuse is traumatic at the time. It is my view that she is wrong about this.

Michelle Cahill says

Very thought provoking. A should-read for anyone in the field.
