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The 13th Boy: A Memoir of Education and Abuse

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A new book by the poet and dramatist Stephen Fife bears witness to the point that sexual abuse occupies a strange place in the American landscape. It has been released by Seattle-based publisher Cune Press. On the one hand, sexual abuse seems to be everywhere. We are told that as many as one out of every three girls and one out of every eight boys experience some form of sexual abuse while growing up. Daytime talk shows like Dr. Phil and network fare like Law and Order SVU and CSI are populated by people who all seem to have gone through abusive situations of some sort. And the specter of the online predator haunts the days and nights of most parents. Yet, when it comes down to examining this experience--understanding why children are susceptible to predators or what the fallout from such a violation can be--then a distinct queasiness seems to creep in, as if contemplating such a horrific act might be bad luck, as if (in some way) it might even invite this awfulness into their family's lives. Parents will monitor their children's internet and social media usage, they'll spy on their children (or hire someone else to do so), but when it comes down to getting some insight into what's going on in their child's mind, then they back away, afraid perhaps of what they will find.

This is where Stephen Fife's memoir *The 13th Boy*, just released by Seattle indie publisher Cune Press, comes in. Mr. Fife attended the prestigious Horace Mann School in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During his junior year, Mr. Fife was drawn into a mentoring relationship with his favorite English teacher, Robert J. Berman. Mr. Fife relates how Berman's offer to make Fife "a great writer" soon turned into something else on a class trip to Washington, DC. While he was alone in his hotel room, "Someone came up behind me and whirled me around. I had a very quick glimpse of Mr. Berman's face and his black-framed glasses as he tipped me slightly off-balance and thrust his tongue down my throat." While Fife initially rebuffed his teacher's advances, he is gradually worn down by Berman's continued manipulations until he agreed to come to his mentor's apartment. There the battle continued--not just for Fife's sexual submission but also (as Fife makes clear) for his identity. "How could Mr. Berman control my thoughts?" he wrote at age seventeen in one of his notebooks. "Isn't that the only way I have of retaining some semblance of sanity?"

Fife concludes his book with an essay titled *How to Protect Your Child*, in which he provides tips for anxious parents on how to recognize telltale signs of abuse in the behavior of children and teens. But actually his entire memoir is an object lesson on how abuse happens. As Fife relates, he came from a well-to-do household with socially-conscious parents and three younger brothers, forming what must have seemed like an ideal family picture. But an early experience of abuse at the hands of a housekeeper (about which he didn't tell his parents) had already sexualized Fife's behavior, something which baffled his parents and drove a wedge between them and their oldest son. It is into this breach that the predatory teacher stepped, offering himself as the new authority figure who would replace the parents in helping to determine Fife's destiny.

While *The 13th Boy* unfolds in a time long before the internet and social media, it contains lessons that are deeply resonant for today. In fact, the absence of digital role-playing--so familiar that we almost take it for granted--makes the psychological battle of wills even starker and more clear-cut. We can really see the wheels turning in Berman's diabolical scheme, and Fife achieves a shocking effect by keeping his storytelling simple and letting the reader get caught up in the flow of events. The fact that Fife is able to inject some humor into his account allows the reader to experience an unexpected level of comfort with these disturbing events, since we really feel that Fife has come to terms with his trauma and been able to move on with his life.

This makes *The 13th Boy* a singular book, since readers are given a sense of understanding rather than being asked for pity. In taking us inside the mind of his younger self, Fife doesn't dwell on his victimhood, so we don't either. In this way Fife provides the best lesson of all for parents, giving hope that even when the worst happens, there is still the chance for recovery, even triumph.

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