

Book title: Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls
Author: Melinda Tankard Reist (ed.)
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Reviewer: Lesley Hicks

Some of the issues confronted in this book jumped into sharp and controversial prominence in Australia in 2008 when the photographic artist Bill Henson held an exhibition in Sydney's Rosslyn Gallery featuring a number of photographs of a slender, naked, ethereal prepubescent girl. One chapter deals with the furore that resulted from the action of the police in confiscating some of the exhibits because of allegations that they represented child pornography. Some described this as a "moral panic" – an irrational and emotional over-reaction.

The charges were later dropped, but echoes of the controversy arose again in January 2010 when the NSW Attorney-General John Hatzistergos released the recommendations of a working party that artistic merit will no longer be a defence for the use of images of children deemed to be pornographic. Mr Hatzistergos said a final decision would not be made until the Government had received responses from victims' groups, the artistic community and the media. Meanwhile a *Herald* editorial said (12/1/10):

it would be worrying ... if the cravenly philistine attitude of so many politicians from the Prime Minister down ... encouraged more scapegoating of artists for the torrent of pornography on the internet and the increasingly routine sexual explicitness and violence of the entertainment directed at juveniles.

Whatever one's views on where the line falls between art and pornography, liberal defenders of Bill Henson's use of young girls as naked photographic models might describe the whole book *Getting Real* as reflecting "moral panic".

All the essays that form its chapters, by varied contributors, challenge and deplore "the pornification of girlhood" – the way our over-sexualised culture threatens young girls' right to their childhood, their innocence and their sexual integrity. The content and examples in some chapters, especially Reist's opening one, are very explicit, but in general the approach is not sensational but sociological and academic, with extensive, detailed references and footnotes.

Nevertheless the book inevitably contains much disturbing and even titillating material in describing the extent of the problem and the effects on the girls who are the willing or unwilling victims of those who prey on and exploit them. It's not light reading, but important for teachers, church and youth leaders, and concerned and thoughtful parents.

Though Melinda Tankard Reist herself is a practising Christian, other contributors are not – or certainly not necessarily – so the concerns reflected are general ones of care for children's welfare, rather than being based on a biblical view of the appropriate boundaries of sexual expression. Still, generally the idea that casual sex is okay (so long as there is consent and condoms) is rejected, especially in Clive Hamilton's chapter "Good is the New Bad – rethinking Sexual Freedom". He considers that adults as well as adolescents and men as well as women suffer as a result of the disappearance of former taboos.

Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University, argues that “where once teenage sexual activity was a sign of rebellion, now it is those who refrain who have become the dissenters” – the confident and courageous ones. (quoted p. 30). He refers to the feeling many young people have of regret and being sold short by casual sex, and writes, “Perhaps this is why many people are left with a vague feeling that that each time they have casual sex they give away a little of themselves, that something sacred is profaned and they are diminished as a result. Casual sex truly becomes meaningless sex.” (p. 89)

There are a host of other concerns. As suggested in the Herald editorial, compared to “the torrent of pornography on the internet”, perhaps artists sailing too close to the wind of child pornography pose a more minor threat. Our culture itself is toxic and permeates everything. For instance, mobile phone photography and internet networking enables teenage kids to send explicit images of themselves to each other; they can then run the risk of peers using the photos to practice blackmail. If a girl doesn’t fit the desired hot and sexy or “cool” image, she may become depressed or develop eating disorders.

At worst, actual sexual abuse can lead not only to depression, but to self-harm – when girls come to hate themselves so much that they cut or burn themselves or attempt – or achieve – suicide. In one chapter, ethicist Dr Emma Rush outlines dangers like these due to the premature sexualisation of girls and in another psychiatrist Dr Louise Newman writes of the mental health damage she encounters.

The role of commercial exploitation is considered – magazines aimed at girls, the impact of advertising and the increasing marketing of sexy teenage clothing and imagery to primary school girls. Another area is the early medicalisation of girls – the use of the pill, the abortifacient RU486, anti-depressants, and weight-loss and body-image obsessions leading to demands for medical intervention – even cosmetic plastic surgery.

What can be done about it all? Tankard Reists’s own research, speaking and writing is raising awareness, together with the others featured in the book. One woman’s activism features in the book’s final article – comedian Julie Gale refused to be silent and put humour and satire to work for the cause. She founded [Kids Free 2B Kids](#) and uses her profile, the media and the threat of adverse publicity to attack commercial sexploitation wherever she finds it. Even highly respected department stores have used sexy advertising to chase sales, using child models in suggestive poses. But at least they have proved responsive to complaints by people like Gale.

Church people need to be alert, informed and prayerful, not just deploring, tut-tutting and protecting (they hope) their own, but willing to speak out and take action. Julie Gale’s article ends with the quote “To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing” and her own comment, “As long as we stay silent, we are complicit in maintaining the status quo” (p. 190).

Lesley Hicks,

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