



Cruel Attachments: The Ritual Rehab of Child Molesters in Germany

By John Borneman

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There is no more seemingly incorrigible criminal type than the child sex offender. Said to suffer from a deeply rooted paraphilia, he is often considered as outside the moral limits of the human, profoundly resistant to change. Despite these assessments, in much of the West an increasing focus on rehabilitation through therapy provides hope that psychological transformation is possible. Examining the experiences of child sex offenders undergoing therapy in Germany—where such treatments are both a legal right and duty—John Borneman, in *Cruel Attachments*, offers a fine-grained account of rehabilitation for this reviled criminal type.

Carefully exploring different cases of the attempt to rehabilitate child sex offenders, Borneman details a secular ritual process aimed not only at preventing future acts of molestation but also at fundamentally transforming the offender, who is ultimately charged with creating an almost entirely new self. Acknowledging the powerful repulsion felt by a public that is often extremely skeptical about the success of rehabilitation, he challenges readers to confront the contemporary contexts and conundrums that lie at the heart of regulating intimacy between children and adults.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Cruel Attachments* is wholly absorbing, in the sense that it is un-put-down-able, but also in the sense that it provides numerous occasions for what can feel like utterly contaminating, destabilizing emotional identifications: with victims, family members, therapists, prison guards, the anthropologist himself—and, however unnervingly, also perpetrators. It is no small feat to bring readers inside the emotional worlds of all these players. To have done so, and with such subtlety and nuance, is remarkable and unprecedented.”

(Dagmar Herzog, Graduate Center, City University of New York)

“An unflinching and unsettling look at the limits of empathy, Borneman’s important ethnography carefully traces the complex pathways of desire, attachment, harm, violation, and care made visible in the context of rehabilitation.”

(C. Jason Throop, University of California, Los Angeles)

About the Author

John Borneman is professor of anthropology at Princeton University. He is the author of many books, most recently *Political Crime and the Memory of Loss* and *Syrian Episodes: Sons, Fathers, and an Anthropologist in Aleppo*.

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