

*Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* by James R. Kincaid. New York: Routledge, 1992. xi, 413 pp., 8 illus. ISBN 0-415-90595-8, \$35.00 (cloth).

James Kincaid's *Child-Loving* is not really a book about Victorian culture. It is a study of our own late twentieth-century eroticization of the child. He sees this phenomenon, alternately, in the proliferation of erotic child-images--from Calvin Klein's sultry prepubescents to the bare-bottomed Coppertone girl--and in the apparent fixation with the myth of the pedophile that precipitated the McMartin Pre-School trials and accounts for the missing children on milk cartons. A major thrust of his book is an unveiling of the contradictions and sometimes hypocrisy inherent in this behaviour. By his argument, the pedophilia we fear is really our own desire projected onto a convenient scapegoat. Even our apparent efforts to protect children poorly conceal a will to dominate and punish, erotic itself and potentially more damaging than the imagined damage of the pedophile. Looking squarely at our attitudes toward children and toward the adults perceived as acting out those attitudes, *Child-Loving* attempts the formidable task of deconstructing a taboo that has, almost without notice, become a central concern of our society.

Iconoclasm of this sort usually rears its head when the icon is ready to shatter. Kincaid is ahead of his age, genuinely daring and therefore never entirely comfortable with what he is doing. I sense, from time to time, an embarrassment in his prose and note little of the fun one associates with debunking. Of course Kincaid is not offering a defense of child-loving. Rather, he is concerned with opening up a subject that has been closed to disinterested discourse. Accordingly, he is willing to face the fact--or so he presents it--that (male) "victims" of pedophilia often treat it as a positive experience, their only compunctions a response to the social stigma attached to the activity, but he leaves it to his readers to draw the obvious conclusion. Even so, he knows that in taking up this project he is putting himself on the line, and for that reason he heightens the self-referentiality of his presentation to an at-times manic level. He comes at his subject from all angles, combining personal reflection, social and literary theory, and cultural history in a style that ranges from bewilderment to jeremiad. Lest we suspect his motives, Kincaid is all over the place, reminding us that he is fully human, incapable of reduction to whatever stereotype his readers may feel the urge to impose upon him. I admire this book, not just for its learning and high moral purpose, but also for the vulnerability of its writer.

Kincaid treats the Victorians as precursors of twentieth-century child-lovers. Like us, they inherited a sexualized image of the child--the image of purity and innocence that evolved in the closing years of the eighteenth century, made all the more desirable by its seeming freedom from desire. Kincaid makes no mention of Rene Girard, but his account of the erotic child parallels the theory of sexual desire set forth in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965). Paradoxically, the emptiness of the child suggests at once the need to be filled (by us) and a self-sufficiency that