

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Arnell Etherington

Boarding School Syndrome

The psychological trauma of the 'privileged' child

Joy Schaverien

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This book addresses the life-changing traumatic losses of the boarding school experiences for latency aged children and adolescents. *Boarding School Syndrome* analyses the trauma of the 'privileged' child who is sent to boarding school at a young age. Schaverien's hypothesis, honed from astute clinical observations, is that sending children away from home to boarding schools, whilst considered to be a privilege, can also be psychologically damaging. Though certainly not pathologizing all individuals that may have boarded, the author proposes that there are learned behaviours and emotional states that arise from the experiences of boarding. The author began to see that some chronic emotional issues - particularly around intimate relationships - in adult patients who are also ex-boarders showed similarity. The derived knowledge of a constellation of symptoms endemic to this picture, gathered over 20 years of

observation and analytical work, would be and can be helpful in identifying and treating the ex-boarder.

The book is well organized. Part 1 presents the history of boys and girls boarding.

In particular, Schaverien brings to the fore that much has been written on the social and historical impact of boarding schools in Britain, but very little on the psychological impact. The emphasis historically, on boys attending boarding schools and being educated in general, has left a gap in looking at girls' experiences of boarding. These are the twin paths in which this research-based, psychological analysis of the lasting impact of boarding has taken.

Part 2 tells the poignant story of one man's experience in boarding from six years of age through adolescence. These chapters explore common themes in the Boarding School Syndrome of arrival at the school, the terror of the dormitory, the abandonment, the 'adjustment', the murder of the soul, etc. that sets out the complex occurrences a young psyche must encounter. The case is illustrated with pictures made in the course of analysis. As an art therapist and extensive writer in that field, Schaverien offers the revealing imagery as a clear approach to expressing that, which previously had no other form of depiction. The pictures are powerful and given careful exploration.

In order to cope at a young age with the traumatic experiences such as extreme physical violence, abuse, captivity, deprivation of food and appropriate shelter - to name a few of the external realities faced - the psyche may divide itself in order to survive. The 'school self' and the 'home self' become two. The imagery made here as an adult, follows the unfolding of this psychological process as a young boy.

Schaverien suggests that these traumatic events may be further submerged by the ironic fact that going to boarding school can be a culturally accepted and expected experience and often trans-generational. Since it is a privilege to do so, therein may lie the amnesia of the dissociation of events that occurs. The broken attachments at

tender ages have been so painful to bear that they are beyond conscious recall. Children often do not talk to parents about their thoughts and feelings of boarding school, and parents do not talk to their children about their boarding school encounters. The paralyzing effects on the developing brain are explored in understanding the encapsulating of the self that can take place in a moment and last a lifetime. Schaverien suggests that most psychotherapists already know that boarding can be damaging but it is the *depth* of the trauma that may be overlooked. This case, so perceptively addressed by the analyst in words and art, sweeps one up into the pathos of the boarding school experience through the young boy's eyes.

Part 3 of the book, devotes itself to exploring the particular linked distressing events confronted in the Boarding School Syndrome. Using further case material, integrating girls' experiences, the author looks at the bereavement subsequent to broken attachments, the captive child held in abandonment, homesickness, as well as eating and sleeping problems. Hidden wounds such as these are often not uncovered until adulthood when an ex-boarder goes into psychotherapy because family life or intimate relationships become problematic.

Part 4 explores the developing body of the adolescent within the boarding school frame. Adolescence is complete with intimate body changes and strong emotions within either sex.

Set within the boarding school context these developmental steps can be deeply damaged in the young adult attempting to come forth. The adolescent returning to board is more set for this experience, the new boarder at this developmental age may be less prepared for the positioning of power, the loss of attachments, etc. that the boarding system presents. Hence, the armour of the developing masculine self, the hidden/repressed self of the girls, and sexual activity and abuse of the adolescent are explored in these last chapters.

The final chapter concludes with a summation of the Boarding School Syndrome. Schaverien suggests that these ordinary experiences be opened to further investigation, such as: homesickness reframed as bereavement and a true mourning process; captivity within the institutional life of rules, timetables and strict regime mean the child has little liberty and cannot leave without adult permission; homelessness provides the impetus for these children and adolescents to establish themselves in exile from home - thus the 'home self' and the 'school self' is further reinforced; the body is out of normal rhythms due to lack of appropriate physical contact from significant adults, eating is being prescribed, hunger and greed may then become a part of relating, sleeping can also be prescribed and interrupted; and finally their bed is no longer a safe place.

In summary, this volume is extremely well researched and written with great clarity in understanding and presenting complex psychological information. The chapters are augmented with excellent quotes from famous writers who were also boarders and this further illustrates how the Boarding School Syndrome is not uncommon. Pertinent research woven into the discussions informs clinical work with depression, anxiety, attachment disorders, trauma and recovery as a child or an adult that may be of further interest to the psychotherapist/analyst or art therapist.

Biography

Arnell Etherington Reader, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus at the Graduate Art Therapy Psychology Department, Notre Dame de Namur University in California lecturing for 25 years. She is an art psychotherapist and clinical psychologist. She continues teaching NDNU's International Art Therapy class in the UK, Art Therapy Ph.D. classes and other graduate classes at the California campus several times each year. Having moved to the UK six years ago, she now lectures at Art Therapy Northern Programme, has a small private practice in Wokingham, and offers the Living Art weeklong painting workshops.

