

BOOK REVIEWS

van Manen, M., & Levering, B. (1996). *Childhood's secrets: Intimacy, privacy and the self reconsidered*. New York: Teachers College Press. 195 pp. (Softcover).

Those already familiar with van Manen's work in phenomenological research should be impressed here by the lack of jargon which typically characterizes writing in this genre. This judicious avoidance by the co-authors was no doubt in order to appeal to the widest possible audience; I'm reminded of Madeleine Grumet's candid admission that the mere mention of phenomenology usually makes people wince!

Childhood's Secrets is a highly readable and engaging discussion of the concept of secrecy in children's lives, which touches on a wide variety of fields including literature, art history, psychoanalytic theory, and philosophy. I'll let you in on a secret: I really enjoyed reading this book. What I'm about to share, however, may not be a secret: their approach has serious flaws which render the usefulness of their revelations as little more than curious ponderings on an interesting topic.

Each chapter is liberally interspersed with vignettes of recollections of secrets. Unidentified people describe fairly ordinary personal experiences from their childhood, more or less associated with keeping a secret. The definition of secrecy is broadly applied, with virtually any childhood event presented as revealing a secret. As examples, excerpts include children explaining superstitions, waiting to receive a school assignment, desiring the affection of another, smirking, avoiding embarrassment, and many others. These snippets resonate with an authority of authenticity, likely arising from their commonplace familiarity, yet something seems missing.

The authors assert that "these fragments serve as anchors for our explorations" (p. 9), which is tenuous mooring indeed, as readers are never told how these accounts were collected, or from whom. As the substance of the book – the stated basis for subsequent speculations and revelations – these decontextualized and disembodied anecdotes represent one unresolvable methodological flaw. More must be known about these individuals in order for their experiences to inform readers, at least about the perceived role of secrets in their lives.

Throughout the book, the authors report that they are seeking to reveal the universal meanings of secrets in people's lives, assuming that by stripping away layers of etymology like so many barnacles encrusted on a ship's hull, they will somehow discover a core of the phenomenon. I have difficulty with an approach which assumes such an essentialized view of experiences.

One of their techniques to uncover hidden meanings is to engage in free association word play with common idioms surrounding key terms like secrecy, intimacy, and privacy. The result reads like an embellished page from a thesaurus, but offers frustratingly little explication beyond this fascinating, extended reporting of common usages.

Another particularly questionable interpretive technique appears in a chapter entitled "Secrecy and the Postmodern Self" in which artists' self-portraits stimulate psycho-analytic interpretations to unveil hidden contributions of secrecy to identity formation. The authors ponder: "In this self-portrait it becomes evident that the human face conceals a secret. Why? Because Rembrandt seems to look at us from the deepest sanctuary of his inner self" (p. 122). Such speculations lead to this dubious conclusion: "So when we look at paintings from different periods it seems that we can 'see' how the inner dimensions of the self seem to emerge and then disappear again" (p. 123).

For a book that purports to elucidate secrecy in human life, the authors offer a highly selective and, I would argue, conveniently sanitized selection of secrets. They posit early on that the act of keeping secrets enables children to develop a sense of self, personal responsibility, and autonomy. In proving how beneficial secrets can be to children, their thesis forces a narrow focus on a potentially risky topic, thereby negating much of the richness in the human lives they purport to explicate.

I don't think it is ghoulish to suggest that a book-length exploration of secrets kept during childhood must also address some unpleasant aspects. Avoided entirely in this text are ubiquitous childhood experiences involving cheating, stealing, child abuse, parental neglect, cruelty, and hypocrisy. Also missing is a single mention of incest or other dark family secrets. In my own research with young people I have encountered thorny issues of parental infidelity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. I would have appreciated seeing any of these potentially problematic issues of childhood addressed in an honest and revelatory manner.

An uncritical approach permeates the book, making for a literary experience which rarely provokes the reader. Moreover, the authors ignore the sociopolitical contexts for any of their analyses, only cursorily addressing

power relationships between players in their selected scenarios. In a study of children, especially as they relate to teachers and other adults, this naive perspective seems irresponsible. Also invisible are gender issues, social class considerations, and any references to racial or ethnic identities of individuals; by remaining unaddressed these issues are, in my view, symbolically marginalized and devalued by these authors.

The Eurocentric focus of the authors is perhaps explained by acknowledging their mutual origins in the Netherlands, but tacit generalizations to a universal meaning for all children's lives must be circumscribed accordingly. Virtually all of the references cited are by North American or European authors, and any historical or cultural issues imply Western societies exclusively. In their discussion of the cultural development of inwardness, for example, the only work cited is a from a German historian.

Impeded by these serious omissions and limitations, this book fails to deliver on its impossible quest to locate an essential meaning of secrecy for all children. Nonetheless the authors offer a compelling and unique look at an issue to which we can all relate at some level, for certainly, we have all been children and we have all kept secrets. Perhaps the authors' final concession serves as the best rationale for the limited relevance of their approach and the resultant findings: "The search for meaning itself and some glimpses of revelation may be more gratifying than some absolute final disclosure" (p. 171).

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Brathwaite, K. & James, C.E. (Eds.). (1996). *Educating African Canadians*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Co. 328 pp. (Softcover).

The anthology, *Educating African Canadians* focuses on the special difficulties the Canadian public schools have in educating African Canadians.