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Facing the Dark Side in Children's Books

Ellen Howard

There used to be a joke between my husband and me: When I was writing short stories and novels and articles for adults and getting rejection after rejection after rejection, Chuck would say, "Not enough sex and violence. That's the trouble with your writing. Not enough sex and violence." When at last my work began to sell, in the children's book market, Chuck's analysis was vindicated. "I told you," he said. "There's just not enough sex and violence in your stories to sell to adults. That's why they're perfect for kids."

Certainly, his assessment of my work was valid. Gratuitous sex and violence have never appealed to me. I don't like to read it, and I don't like to write it. So the question is: What's a nice woman like me doing writing a novel for children about incest?

I've thought a lot about that question. I'd like to share some of the answers I've come up with. I really don't know for sure, to this day, *why* I felt compelled to write *Gillyflower*, but the experience of coming personally to grips with the subject of child sexual abuse was an illuminating experience for me. It helped me to face what I call the dark side of human nature, of *my* nature.

So far as I can remember, I had never even *heard* of a case of child sexual abuse until I was 20 years old. Of course I had been warned not to go anywhere with a stranger, particularly a strange man, and I had heard that sometimes little girls were kidnapped by bad men who 'hurt' them. There *was* a man in our neighborhood against whom my brother especially was cautioned. But my ideas about just what such men *did* to children were vague indeed. The idea that someone among my own family members or my family's friends might 'hurt' me never occurred to me. In my case, this ignorance did no harm. But as I researched *Gillyflower*, first by extensive reading and then by attending a therapist's workshop and by interviewing social workers and police, I came to realize that similar ignorance did not protect many other little girls of my generation.

When I was 20, I worked in a pediatrician's office. In a conversation about the reasons she had quit hospital pediatric nursing, the office nurse told me one day about the six-month-old baby girl she had cared for in the hospital. The baby had been raped by an adult man. My friend was traumatized by the experience of caring for this baby. "I hated all men

for months,” she told me. I heard the story with horror and, I think, partial disbelief. I decided that such cases must be rare. Perhaps the case my friend knew first-hand was unique. The perpetrator must have been a madman, a pervert, a freak. From that time on, however, I was not completely unaware that child sexual abuse did, in fact, occur. But still, I didn’t allow myself to think of it.

I raised a daughter. As a single mother, I exposed her to the company of men whom sometimes I myself didn’t know well. While I was at work, I left her in the care of babysitters who had husbands and teen-aged sons whom I didn’t know at all. I allowed her to visit her father as often as he requested. I never thought about the possibility that she might be vulnerable to abuse. And I and she were lucky. So far as I know, so far as she can remember, she was not molested.

However, my daughter’s experience does add to the statistics of child sexual abuse. She walked to school with a friend one day when she was nine years old. A man approached the girls as they were crossing the playground and exposed himself to them. She wasn’t hurt physically, I told myself. He never touched her. *That* wasn’t sexual abuse. When my daughter was assaulted, I was upset, but I quickly ceased to think about it. It is a painful thing to think about.

So now I am going to jump ahead to what brought me to the decision to write *Gillyflower*. In 1983 and 1984, I was writing my second book for children, *When Daylight Comes*. *Daylight* is the story of an 11-year-old Danish girl on the Caribbean island of St. John in the year 1733. Rebellious slaves take the girl, Helena, captive. The idea of the book was that, through her own experiences as a slave, Helena would come to understand and empathize with her captors’ lives in slavery.

In order to write this book, I had to think about and try to understand the sufferings of a child in such circumstances. I knew she would undergo hunger and unaccustomed hard work, abandonment, humiliation, discomfort, even physical abuse. And deep in my consciousness, I knew that an 11-year-old slave girl would be raped by her male captors. That is the universal lot of subjugated women and girls.

I could not bring myself to put this in my book. I told myself it was a complication the plot could not bear.

I told myself Helena could only hate and never come to understand people who had so abused her.

I told myself it was an unsuitable thing to put in a book for children.

I was certain I made the right decision. And I felt, and I feel to this day, like a liar.

Here I suppose is where I made a decision about writing for children.

I decided I believe in telling children the truth, even when the truth is unpleasant. I believe that children have a right to know about their world. I believe they cannot learn to recognize and rise above evil if they are not taught it exists. But I decided these things *after* I had written and published *When Daylight Comes*. In that book, I did not tell the whole truth, and the leaving it out was a lie.

Perhaps that is why, even before I finished that book, I became so aware of the subject of child sexual abuse. It was everywhere I looked—in the newspapers, on radio and TV, in the movies and in the books I was reading. I could not seem to escape it.

Then an eerie thing began to happen to me. It began the evening I listened on public radio to an anonymous child tell of her own abuse. Her voice was even and unemotional, and she told what had happened to her quite simply and naturally. What she didn't tell was *what it felt like*, what it felt like to have the one person you, as a child, look to for love and protection, force you to an act you are unprepared for physically or emotionally. I tried to imagine I was that child and my father was her father. What would it feel like, I said to myself, over and over, trying to understand. That was when I began to hear Gilly's voice, a small, hesitant, little girl's voice, speaking to me in my head. "He doesn't *mean* to hurt me," she said.

Writing *Gillyflower* was one of the toughest things I have ever done. I went through periods of such sadness, I thought I could not bear it. I went through periods of such anger, I thought I would explode. I was furious with Gilly's father. How could he do this to any child, much less to his own child? "These are not nice guys, however they may appear to the world," one therapist told me. Yet I knew that they are human beings like me. In the end I had to understand that, given the proper circumstances, all human beings have the capacity for cruelty—the capacity to build a wall between self and other so that we cannot feel the other's pain.

I was furious with Gilly's mother. Why didn't she see what was going on? Why didn't she protect her child? Until I remembered how quickly I had "forgotten" my own child's experience, how gladly I had denied its seriousness.

Most of all, I was furious with Gilly. Why did she make excuses for her dad. Why didn't she hate him? Why didn't she tell?

One day almost with a jolt, I heard the name I had given to this child in my head—Gillian. And I realized how much that sounds like my childhood name, Geri Ellen. I went through a period of wondering, of searching my memories of my own happy childhood. Had *I* been sexually

abused and then “forgotten” it? That often happens, I was told. Among therapists attracted to the subject, there are often people who eventually remember their own abuse.

Today, I am certain I was not, myself, sexually abused as a child. I think that, in naming my character, I had done subconsciously what later I did quite consciously: In order to better understand “what it felt like,” I made Gilly as much like the childish me as possible. I, like Gilly, played under a rhododendron bush with dolls made of the blossoms, created imaginary worlds, liked “baby” games long after I felt I should have outgrown them, considered myself big and homely and clumsy, loved my baby sister with a fierce and protective love.

So the writing of this book, the helping Gilly to find the courage to face her pain and tell of it, became for me the helping of myself to face and tell of the pain of living in this world. It was also the rescuing of my child self from all the times I, as a child, had felt forced to do or be something that was difficult or embarrassing or painful, from all the times in my life I had been made to do something I didn’t want to do.

That, I believe, is the reason that children, reading this book, will understand Gilly. There isn’t a child in the world who hasn’t felt in one way or the other the pain, as well as the joy, of life. There isn’t a child in the world who hasn’t been made to do something she or he didn’t want to do. My hope is that children who are abused will find the strength with Gilly to bring an end to their abuse, and that children who aren’t abused will nonetheless understand her pain and learn from her that all of us, at one time or another, are capable of being victims or abusers, but that *we do not need to be either one*.

The last thing I want to tell is why I made the decision to submit *Gillyflower* for publication. Writing helps me to come to terms with what disturbs me, but it is not necessary to publish what I write for the writing to serve this purpose. I did decide to publish *Gillyflower* if I could.

Once again one evening I was listening to public radio. A woman was discussing the book she had written about the experiences of Jewish children like herself who were taken in by French Catholic families during the occupation of France in World War II. The children were passed off as Catholics in order to save them from the fates of their parents. They suffered the sudden and inexplicable loss of their parents, but they could not grieve out loud. They were forced to live a lie for the sake of their own survival and the sake of the people who sheltered them. They could not tell the truth about their pain and anger. The author had contacted many such children, now grown in silence to adulthood. They were, universally, emotionally crippled. But, the author concluded, it was not

the loss of their parents which had harmed them. It was the lie. It was the having to pretend. It was the not telling.

I thought of the women, adults who had been molested as children, who had told me of the horror of not being able to tell. I thought of my own daughter, who had not herself told me of her traumatic encounter on the playground. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked her much later. "I don't know, Mom," she said. "I guess I was embarrassed. All I remember is how glad I was when you brought it up. It felt so good to talk about it." So I decided to publish *Gillyflower*, with the hope that someday, somewhere, some child may see in Gilly a girl like herself with the strength and courage to tell.

I think there is a larger purpose still for writing and publishing books like *Gillyflower*, despite the fact that 'problem' books for children seem to have fallen out of fashion. We adults like to remember childhood as happy, carefree time. We like to forget the real pain and helplessness of even happy children, the pain and helplessness we felt ourselves. To do this, we must deny the reality of the lives of many unhappy children.

Also, I am not unaware that many people may consider *Gillyflower* an offense against the innocence of children. They may argue that books like *Gillyflower* only frighten children or make them aware of things best not known. My mother used to say, "Innocence is *not* ignorance." I believe it is not. I believe children need to know, just as adults need to know, the dark as well as the light side of life. It is knowledge that empowers. If we believe that the future belongs to children, then we must empower them to deal with it.

So the publication of *Gillyflower* has become for me a way to help empower children to deal with a terrible reality. It has also been a way to empower myself to deal with my own anger and pain at understanding that reality.

In the end, perhaps it was this that led me to write and publish a novel about incest for children. I hoped then, and I hope now that *Gillyflower* can serve to light that particular dark side of life for both children and adults.

In an article in the September 22, 1987 London *Guardian*, the British publisher of *Gillyflower* (Collins Children's Books, London) said, "this was so sensitively handled that . . . If a child didn't know about incest, it wouldn't be frightening, but a child who did would immediately recognise it." I want to believe that this is true. I want to believe that *Gillyflower* will be for its readers a helpful book, a book that faces squarely a dark reality, and in so doing becomes not just a book about incest, but a book about courage and strength and love.