Book Review


I think I was born this way: a compulsive, but picky, reader. Consequently, it is the books I review for publication that force me to persevere until the end, and I am often grateful for the experience. *Boy Crazy* is a case in point. I did not enjoy reading it, but in the end, I am glad I did. Janet Sayers is a British psychoanalyst, best known by feminists for her 1993 book, *Mothers of Psychoanalysis: Helene Deutsch, Karen Horney, Anna Freud, and Melanie Klein*. *Boy Crazy* was written in response to a request, “some years ago,” from Carol Gilligan to speak at a conference about adolescence. Sayers realized that almost nothing had been written about adolescence from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective, and of course, that “adolescence is often crucial to making us what we are as adults” (p. 3). This book, then, is her effort to fill the gap.

What I liked best is the understanding that emanated from the book’s title, *Boy Crazy*. The title recalled my own teen years, when I left a wonderful all-girls school to transfer to an inferior crowded neighborhood school so I could be in classes with boys. Thanks to Sayers, my understanding of this behavior is now enhanced. In her view, it refers to a key feature of adolescence for both genders. In short, girls are crazy about boys, and boys are crazy about themselves. Both girls and boys aggrandize and idealize the male gender. Sayers tells us why and delineates some of the problems this causes for everyone.

The author’s unfamiliar cultural style made the book difficult for me to read. A bigger problem was the book’s organization. Although the themes flowed logically one to the next, within each thematically organized chapter, there seemed to be a jumble of material. For each theme, Sayers includes memories, dreams, and anecdotes from her clients and survey respondents, excerpts from fiction and film, and a myriad of often compelling quotes and references to other psychoanalysts, theory-makers, and researchers, notably of course Sigmund Freud, but also Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion, R. D. Laing, Peter Blos, and Jacques Lacan, as well as contemporary feminists.
Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, Michelle Fine, and so on. These references to the works of others provided some of the most interesting sections of the book.

One of the book’s problems was the lack of explanation of where much of the quoted material came from. Sayers does not follow the APA citation style; she uses endnotes and no bibliography or reference list. At one point Sayers referred a “1993 mass observation survey,” and buried the reference, which was to her own survey of 1992 referrals, in the endnotes. The lack of specifics about many of these studies was frustrating. The unanswered questions included the following: How were the respondents contacted? How many women and men were questioned? And what were the age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of the respondents? Perhaps, the biggest obstacle to appreciation of this book is rooted in my long-standing love–hate relationship with psychoanalysis that began when I was in graduate school. And Sayers does nothing to shift the balance. For example she does not distinguish between Jacques Lacan’s outrageous focus on the phallus, on the one hand, and Nancy Chodorow’s cogent commentary on social roles of women and men, on the other. Concepts and quotes are presented without evaluation. At one point Sayers, referencing Freud, writes “young men imagine their mothers initiating them into sex to save them from the castrating-seeming perils of masturbation.” Happily, when I was in graduate school, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan saved me from this kind of rhetoric.

So where is the good part of this book and why did I say I was glad to have read it? First, this book reminded me that psychoanalytic theory is thought provoking and that memories and dreams are powerful. As a therapist I often focus on childhood issues and present circumstances, and this book reminded me about the significantly formative impact of adolescence. More important, this volume offers a coherent and meaningful way to conceptualize the turmoil of adolescence.

According to Sayers, adolescence is marked by divisions and contradictions, and these divisions are different for boys and girls. For boys, the major division is one of detachment from emotions and detachment from others. Consequently, boys are divided within themselves. Sayers argues that this experience of self-division contributes to a greater risk for boys, compared to girls, for schizoid and suicidal splitting. (A recent traumatic experience, the suicide of my friend’s 16-year-old son, brought this point home for me. Sayers provided a theoretical framework for a horrifying and otherwise senseless event, and brought me the comfort of at least a partial explanation.)

Adolescent girls, Sayers suggests, are not so much self-divided as they are conflicted about their attachment to their friends and families, particularly to their mothers. Girls, consequently, are more at risk than are boys of...