THE BOOK: Using data collected over a decade, this volume documents popular ideas of adult-youth sexual relations from the mid-1970s into the 1990s, a period now known as the child sexual abuse hysteria. Looking critically at both fiction (including film) and journalism, core elements of villains, victims, and heroes are drawn out and shown to be interconnected. Sources widely distributed as well as those inaccessible to others are examined and tied to a variety of products and processes of American culture to yield the most complete and in-depth study yet available of this crucial period and issue.

During the 1980s, conceptions of the child molester and the child victim were based on simplistic or incorrect assumptions, incomplete or skewed data, and distorted by personal and institutional biases. The result has been an irrational panic extracting high costs financially, personally, and socially.

"Central to the language of the period are the labels 'pedophile' and 'pedophilia.' Like the words 'homosexual,' 'heterosexual,' or 'pornography,' these are not empirical terms that describe stable, eternal, inherent, and universal forms or contents. They are the names of culturally grounded Western 19th century anxieties and aspirations for power, disturbances that still distort thinking and behavior well past the point of buffoonery. ... Despite all of the near-fanatical efforts to instill an idea of 'The Pedophile,' the concept remains specious. Since the objectivist or categorical approach has proven to be as embarrassing as it is destructive (it is ludicrous to try to speak of 'The Heterosexual' or of any of the other old homogeneous simplicities as a unified and distinct configuration of motives and behaviors), the continued forced use of such language is based in other concerns, usually psychological, economic, or political." — From the Introduction

THE AUTHOR: A sex researcher since 1961, anthropologist David Sonenschein has published or presented numerous papers in social science journals and before professional organizations, and has taught undergraduate and community courses in American culture and human sexualities. Best known for pioneering work on homosexuality and pornography, he was also a staff researcher at the Institute for Sex Research (founded by Alfred C. Kinsey) at Indiana University. He lives in Texas.
THE BOOK: The child sex abuse hysteria of the 1980s serves as a reference point for a far-ranging cultural historical survey of the ways sexual villains, victims, and heroes have been constructed and used in America. Including an extensive and unique chapter on “The Sexual Child”—one of the most avoided and undocumented subjects in history, social science, and policy research—a varied number of contemporary and historical influences are brought together for the first time around the subject of adult-youth sexual relations.

Flawed from the beginning, images of sexual actors and events have remained so because America’s use of them has traditionally been for entertainment and for the advancement of particularistic political agendas, rather than for the empirically based rational and humane guidance of public policy and personal conduct.

“To fully appreciate the decade, we would have to consider the 1980s not through dramaturgy, as it was for 1960s critics; not through Situationism, as it was for the 1970s politically astute; but rather as a cartoon: figures and landscapes drawn with heavy outlines around primary colors on a flat surface, made to move and speak by agencies not their own, all the while maintaining dignified poses while falling flat on their faces. The apocalyptic pronouncement, meant to be solemnly intoned with authority and finality, came out only as a repetitious chattering and stuttering, sweat beads bursting visibly from excitement, frustration, anger, and fear. “The End Is Near” became “Th-th-that’s all folks!” — From Chapter 9

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