Book Review

Boarding School Syndrome: The psychological trauma of the 'privileged' child, Joy Schiaverien, 2015, London and New York: Routledge, pp 247, pbk ISBN 9780415690034, hbk 9780415690027, ebk978315716305.

When I was asked to review this book, my first thought was: these ex-public school pupils not only have privilege, wealth and power, now we're supposed to feel sorry for them as well. However, as Joy Schaverien explains, not all children attending boarding school are of this ilk; for example they may be the offspring of those is the armed or diplomatic services who were posted overseas and moved from country to country every few years. Nor, it might be added, are all boarding schools leading public schools. Nor are they all British (the focus of this book) although their prevalence in British culture makes this book especially relevant to readers from the UK, while those from other countries might read with something close to incredulity how those with money choose to have their children educated. Meanwhile, the British might have been so close to the phenomenon not to have fully appreciated the horror of what was happening. For in this excellent book a convincing case is given for the harmful effects of being sent to any boarding school, resulting in what Schaverien has identified as boarding school syndrome.

The main component of boarding school syndrome is the trauma children experience when they are sent off to board, especially the first time. For a child of 7 or 8 the pain of separation can be very severe but nor should the trauma of those who begin boarding at 13 be underestimated. We learn that for some being left in this strange – and often hostile – environment is etched on their memory in vivid detail, while other have completely repressed the experience and can't remember this significant event at all – although they can remember going home at the end of a term. Schaverien likens this trauma to bereavement, as the child mourns their previous, family life at home. Now separated from significant figures (their mother in particular) they have to adjust to a life with – at best – no love or appropriate physical contact and at worst the addition of vicious bullying and abuse. Discussion of this part is informed by judicious use of John Bowlby's theories of separation.

Captivity is another element of the syndrome, with children subject to something akin to a prison routine. Although many children attending day school might also consider it like a penal institution, they are nevertheless then free to leave at the end of the school day and enjoy relative liberty. However, the boarder is subject to an array of rules and regulations 24 hours a day to which they have to conform. This can lead to disassociation and, in later life, to a difficulty in establishing loving relationships. It can also distort their relationship to sex, food and sleep. There is no safe place to shelter, while bed, normally a kind of sanctuary, is instead a place of peril. Having to repress so much leads to the stereotypical, stiff upper lip Brit, unable to express the anger and other emotions they repress.

The third important component is exile. The child is exiled from the familiar home life, but then returns during school holidays and experience this not only as temporary, but also as unfamiliar. This leads to splitting between the two selves. In later life, these people are both exiled from themselves and from intimacy with others.

A strength of this book is the effective use of examples to illustrate, illuminate and make the generalisations meaningful. These include excerpts from memoirs written by ex-boarders and from people who have written to her with accounts of what happened to them at boarding school. However, the most significant are case studies from her own practice. Schaverien is a Jungian psychotherapist and one tool she uses in her practice involves encouraging patients to draw during therapy sessions. What is revealed in these can lead to major breakthroughs. Over three chapters she gives a moving account of her treatment of 'Theo', where she employed this technique a lot. A selection of these drawings are reproduced beside the text. An example is a drawing of him as a small boy, sitting at a desk, while beside him on the floor is a corpse. This turned out to represent his first day at boarding school. As Schaverien explains it: ' The picture reveals the secret sorrow and unspoken guilt that, in order to survive in an alien environment, there was little choice but to do violence to the tender self, to kill off the feeling state, in order to comply with the institution' (pp 73-74).

As well as an overriding, psychodynamic theoretical framework, Schaverien uses various other theories and in combination these raise the level of the book from description to deep analysis. If her use of neuroscience isn't always convincing, her judicious use of feminist theory certainly is. This underpins her historical account of girls' boarding schools, as well as her analysis of boys being captive in a single-sex environment. All the same, for whatever reason the book discusses boys much more than it does girls and there are far fewer examples drawn from the latter.

If I have a quibble it is with the conflation of the effects of being sent away to board *tout court* with the particular conditions and regimes of British institutions for most of the twentieth century (corporal punishment was only banned from independent schools in England and Wales in 1999, in Scotland in 2000 and Northern Ireland in 2003). The account she often gives (and which her patients gave her) is of schools where a host of unwritten rules were learned and enforced through vicious beatings by teachers and prefects; of sadistic headteachers of prep schools; of bullying on a grand scale, some of which was sanctioned by the school; of meagre rations of very low quality food, so that children were sometimes half-starved; of having all contact with the outside world banned, apart from the weekly letter home, which was always censored. In analysing this, there is often a qualification that things would not be as bad now, that things would have changed, or changed to an unspecified extent. Most of her case studies were of people who attended such regimes in the nineteen-sixties and seventies and one wonders how much all of these other factors contributed to their difficulties as adults and indeed to her analysis which led to her theory of boarding school syndrome. On the other hand, I can only echo what she says: I don't know either whether these schools are now less brutal. Unless they've changed, it's hard to imagine present day parents sending their own children off to such regimes, but there again it's very difficult to understand how parents ever did this to their children.

The subtitle of the book reminds us that in the social sphere at least, these children are likely to be considered privileged. She explains how those who learned at these schools to conform go on to have successful careers in organisations such as the army or a bank, while those who rebelled go on to equal success heading their own business. Even if they're not all from the upper stratum of society, they are more likely to be. Schaverien leaves it to the readers to draw conclusions about what it means when all

these wounded ex-boarders fill so many powerful post in UK society. What she also leaves unsaid is that they are going to be more likely to afford a therapist's fees than, for example, someone who as a child was taken into care. Despite being a small proportion of the overall population, I would guess that ex-boarders are likely to be over-represented amongst a psychotherapist's clients. For a British psychotherapist, that is another reason to read this book.