

**Journal of the Canadian Historical Association**  
**Revue de la Société historique du Canada**



**Rethinking Youth and Transactional Sex**

Nicholas L. Syrett

Volume 32, numéro 2, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095578ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095578ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Syrett, N. L. (2022). Rethinking Youth and Transactional Sex. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 32(2), 153–158. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095578ar>

## Rethinking Youth and Transactional Sex

NICHOLAS L. SYRETT

Among the most important claims of Rachel Hope Cleves's excellent book, *Unspeakable*, is that for significant periods of time, the pederasty practiced by her subject, Norman Douglas, and by many of his friends was not so unspeakable at all. Douglas actually spoke about it *a lot*. While we may now think of Douglas's life as one "beyond sexual morality," per the subtitle, he certainly would not have agreed. His own defense of that life, as well as his extensive correspondence with others about their shared interests in sex with young people, constitutes the bulk of the evidence in this compelling and disturbing history. The tricky thing, no doubt, about choosing a title for a book like this is that Cleves is arguing that societal understandings of pederasty have changed over time, meaning that one evaluative adjective — unspeakable — is only going to be true either for then, when he practiced it, or now, when we condemn it. The contrast between these two understandings of pederasty as acceptable or not acceptable constitutes one of the most fascinating interventions of the book. In order to flesh out that conflict with some detail, I want to focus on two related avenues that Cleves explores: the role of the children's parents in brokering the sex; and the sometimes-transactional nature of the sex itself, whether formally or more casually, and what that might tell us about trauma or the lack thereof.

One of the most telling insights into how Douglas and his friends understood their pederastic practices was that they were not clandestinely having sex with children unbeknownst to those children's parents. Indeed, Douglas often paid those very parents for the privilege of so doing. In one instance, Douglas was advised by a friend, "You pay so much a year to the parents, quite a small sum, and they set her aside for you, and for you alone, till she has reached the proper age." Once you were done with her, "you could pass her on afterwards to some husband, or send her back to the family."<sup>1</sup> While the sum might have been small to Douglas and others of his ilk, it could well have made an incredible difference in the lives of an impoverished family. Alternatively, the girl herself might use the payment in order to secure a husband. Or a boy might use the capital to be able to afford marriage or the beginning of a business. In other instances, Cleves argues that parents saw Douglas's

willingness to take care of their sons as being a kind of mentorship that would help the sons in the future, at the same time that it saved the parents the cost of caring for them. He also educated some of these boys, setting them on their way toward class mobility.

So not only did these parents understand their own children differently from how most parents today might do — *not* believing in the inherent trauma of childhood sexual abuse or experience — but that also factored into how they understood their own roles as parents, not as protectors, for instance, but instead as wanting to ensure future opportunities for those kids (in the form of connections and education) *and* in being perfectly comfortable profiting from the sexual labour of their children.

No doubt this would strike many contemporary readers as rather mercenary, perhaps even comparable to the actions of Douglas and his cronies, especially given that the parents presumably loved their children and felt a sense of custodial duty toward them, or at least that they lived in a society that *expected* this of parents. But before the turn to the sentimentalization of children documented by historical sociologist Viviana Zelizer, parents often thought of their children in quite practical ways as labourers and contributors to the household economy.<sup>2</sup> They were more than cognizant of children's earning powers *and* of their drain on family coffers. Cleves offers many examples of Italian parents contracting out their children's labour in much more dangerous, indeed life-threatening, conditions.

I can also offer examples from the United States that attest to how widespread these attitudes actually were in another location from the one Cleves explores. Most of us know that young children regularly worked in dangerous factories through the early twentieth century. Of course, they had been labouring on farms for centuries; they still do. Through the nineteenth century and beyond, parents sued employers and others when their children died at work, not for the emotional damages, but for the literal cost of lost wages.<sup>3</sup> Parents also sued county clerks when they issued marriage licenses to underage children not because they despaired at the potential sexual exploitation of their children, but because the parents had been robbed of their children's labour within the home or their earnings if they worked outside of it.<sup>4</sup> Parents both loved *and* had a monetary investment in their offspring, and the two were not seen as incompatible. It is also the case that the sentimentalization of childhood that led to condemnations both of children's sexuality and their capacity as labourers arrived late to

the working classes in many countries, who simply did not have the economic ability to protect their children from much of anything and simultaneously depended on their children as fully functioning members of the household. In the US context, historian James Schmidt has demonstrated how the meanings of chronological age and childhood itself were essentially *imposed* on working-class families who wanted to continue to send their children into factories, mines, and other workplaces. In other words, families relying on their children to labour is altogether common; the sexual aspect of that labour is clearly what makes people so uncomfortable.<sup>5</sup>

Sex workers' rights organizations and those who study what traditionally has been called prostitution have long called on both governments and academics to recognize sex work as just that, a form of work.<sup>6</sup> Historians have also demonstrated the profoundly casual or transient nature of sex work. In some locations, a majority of those plying the trade had other jobs or moved in and out of sex work when unemployed or between jobs. Many lived in worlds where those trading sex for money or other favors did not identify as prostitutes, *per se*.<sup>7</sup> And to state the painfully obvious, the vast majority of those who have engaged in sex work have done so for money and have treated it as a form of labour, albeit often a temporary and sometimes unappealing one. That said, in many places and in many eras, it has paid far more than what the labour market has otherwise been willing to compensate young women, girls, and boys, the people who are most likely to turn to sex work to support themselves.<sup>8</sup>

One of the things *Unspeakeable* does so well is provide context to the sex that Douglas had with girls and boys and how that context allowed for so many to accept the sex, not least of whom were the boys and girls themselves. The sex was often transactional, and while Douglas clearly paid boys and girls for sex in straightforward, ephemeral, and quid pro quo exchanges, most of the evidence in the book relates to ongoing relationships with young people, whereby remuneration was not offered per sexual act, but rather in lump sums or in the form of ongoing education and mentoring. But in most cases it was still transactional, just not always obviously so. While much historical and contemporary sex work is straightforwardly transactional — such as picking up a sex worker on a street, visiting a brothel, calling a rentboy — scholars also demonstrate a good deal of gray-zone prostitution as well. This includes escorts who provide “the girlfriend experience” to their clients, or sex tourism in Southeast Asia where one observes a sex

worker essentially accompanying a Western visitor for the entirety of the tourist's trip; everything is paid for, and the visit is understood — sometimes only implicitly — to end with a substantial gift. In other words, there is a long history of sex work that continues to this day that exists in an in-between zone that purposely allows both sex worker and client (albeit, mostly client) not to think of it as work at all, to trick themselves into believing it is something else, or at least to soften the edges of what remains transactional.<sup>9</sup>

I think that the fact that many of Douglas's relationships were both ongoing and transactional might help us to understand more why many of the boys with whom Douglas had sex did not experience it as traumatic and indeed remained in touch with Douglas for many years. This is among the more unsettling findings of Cleves's book, the notion that sex as a child with an older person is not inherently traumatizing. In her excellent book, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*, the historian Sharon Block notes that much of what she writes about — how men raped women in colonial America and how they got away with it — will be familiar enough to readers as to almost seem transhistorical. Indeed, she demonstrates eerie similarities that make a reader think the world has changed very little in the intervening years.<sup>10</sup> Cleves, by contrast, shows us the opposite, not a transhistorical narrative of victimization and trauma, but instead context-driven understandings about what sex with a much older person might mean. I know that contemporary readers will find this notion unsettling. However, if we do not let our condemnation for men like Douglas cloud our understanding of the past, surely it should actually be a comfort to know that some of what we think would be horrifying was not experienced that way by the vulnerable, that it did not leave his victims scarred for life. Indeed, many did not think of themselves as victims in the first place.

These kinds of insights are what I love about the history of sexuality. While it is the job of all historians to explore the past as a foreign country — as L. P. Hartley wrote in *The Go-Between* (1953), a novel about a different sort of sexual impropriety and a young boy — I often think that both our colleagues in this profession and the general public more broadly are least willing to concede that sex might have been different in the past or that the meanings attached to what we experience so viscerally and so personally could be other than how we experience them today.<sup>11</sup> Rachel Hope Cleves's *Unspeakeable* goes a long way toward demonstrating how wrong that assumption really is.

\*\*\*

**NICHOLAS L. SYRETT** is a Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and an associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Kansas.

**NICHOLAS L. SYRETT** est professeur d'études sur les femmes, le genre et la sexualité et doyen associé du College of Liberal Arts and Sciences de l'Université du Kansas.

### Endnotes

- 1 Rachel Hope Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 44.
- 2 Vivana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
- 3 Zelizer, chap. 5 in *Pricing the Priceless Child*.
- 4 Nicholas L. Syrett, chap. 5 in *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).
- 5 James D. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 6 Valerie Jenness, *Making it Work: The Prostitutes' Rights Movement in Perspective* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993).
- 7 See, for instance: Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Cynthia M. Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- 8 See, for instance, Christine Stansell, chap. 9 in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Knopf, 1982).
- 9 Christine Milrod and Martin A. Monto, "The Hobbyist and the Girlfriend Experience: Behaviors and Preferences of Male Customers of Internet Sexual Service Providers," *Deviant Behavior* 33, no. 10 (2012): 792–810; Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lindsay B. Gezinski et al., "'Total Girlfriend Experience': Examining Marketplace Mythologies on Sex Tourism Websites," *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 18, no. 7 (2016): 785–798; Akiko Takeyama, *Staged Seduction: Selling Dreams in a Tokyo Host Club* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

- 10 Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 7.
- 11 L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (1953; New York: New York Review Books, 2002), 17.