



Book Review

Richard Beard, *Sad Little Men: Private Schools and the Ruin of England*, Harvill Secker / Penguin, London, 2021, 256pp, ISBN-13: 978-1529114805, price (Paperback) £9.99.

Reviewed by **Nick Duffell**

The title of this brilliant book just about says it all. My own three decades of research, recorded in three books, have convinced me that elite boarding schools keep ex-boarders immature and blighted by loss, and the nation stuck in an anachronistic and ruinous class structure. *Sad Little Men* is the established novelist's second non-fiction work, and this new book confirms the hypothesis that boarding is a real problem.

Beard has come up with a breath-taking account of the British habit of privileged abandonment and institutionalisation. His personal story – having to say ‘goodbye’ to his beloved grandfather at eight as if ‘abducted by aliens’ to begin ten years in ‘a world based upon threats and fear... [where] toughness is the price of survival’ – captures the nuances and subtleties of the boarder's psychic undermining and its lasting legacy into adulthood.

Sad Little Men is not always easy reading. The reader is taken through the experience of normalised neglect from the inside, and, although not conventionally abused, the author seems like a man profoundly dazed by the experience. But most notably, there is a claustrophobic and obsessional feel to it, due, in part, to the fact that Beard now lives half a mile away from the muscular public school he attended, and eerily takes his constitutionals

through its luxurious acres of playing fields, lost in sombre reflection. The explanation has to be that he is trying to exorcise the experience from his psyche, and his thoughts on how private boarding affects British life are right on the mark.

Wavering between self-doubt and shame at the privilege, his angry challenge is how we *can* still be doing boarding. So, Beard's book is also a wake-up call to parents considering dispatching their offspring on the lonely trajectory to social success. This is important, because private boarding, though rooted in Victorian imperialism, is still going strong today, and is thought to be a better choice than anything our state has to offer by those who can afford the staggering fees. And it turns out disastrously duplicitous leaders, as we now know – to our cost.

Beard's story and the manner of its telling get under your skin: it reads like fiction but, sadly, it isn't. I think it should be compulsory reading for these aspirant parents; while therapists engaged on the difficult work of trying to undo the damage – ex-boarders are probably the fastest-growing client group in the country now, and are certainly amongst the most difficult to work with – would do well to immerse themselves in it.

But as telling as the title, and crucial to understanding the book in its societal context, is the back-story to its reception on publication. Mainstream reviewers savagely ridiculed Beard's book. Compliant ex-boarders on the back foot as well as those who think children of the wealthy deserve no sympathy have little time for such indulgences. There is a message for us here: tread carefully if you suggest to those not ready to hear it that boarding may need to be *survived*: you *will* be attacked. Here's Nicola Schulman (a Marchioness, apparently) writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, no less: 'School taught him not to sneak: and the production of "two hundred pages of sneak" gives the book an air of desperate transgression which releases him into ever more reckless violations of the school code.'¹

And here is *Private Eye* – written anonymously, of course:

It's hard to single out the weirdest most desperate angle in *Sad Little Men* because there are so many. Is it the feeble examples of hardship, like quoting a letter home where he complained to his parents that he was running out of sweeties?²

Such derision is clearly defensive but, nevertheless, such attacks still hurt. I know. I still remember vicious letters to *Therapy Today* magazine, following an article of mine on boarding published ten years ago, that the then editor chose to publish, that really stung. Recently, as I was reviewing Beard's important book for the same publication, both my mention of the latter incident as well as Beard's attacking reviews were edited out, even though I protested that this was the context in which the book had to be understood. And this, despite the huge readership and comments to Louis de Bernières' recent *Sunday Times* two-part article entitled 'Aged 8, I was sent to hell'. The paper headlined the article: 'Boys were molested and brutalised by a sadistic headmaster at the boarding school attended by the author. It is time to acknowledge the thousands of men who have been left to suffer in silence.'³

Thank goodness, with greater understanding of trauma and attachment issues, the psychotherapy profession is now beginning to wake up to Boarding School Syndrome, even though most therapists still don't really know how to work with ex-boarders. I think it behoves all therapists to understand it fast, and Beard's book is an excellent place to start.

Notes and References

- 1 Nicola Shulman, Book review: Now boarding: The hidden costs of an expensive education, *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 August 2021, p, 5; available at <https://tinyurl.com/yc7ys3ys> (accessed 26 January 2022).
- 2 *Private Eye*, October 2021.
- 3 Louis de Bernières, Aged 8, I was sent to hell, *Sunday Times*, 18 April 2021; available [paywall] at <https://tinyurl.com/5n9y2a6h> (accessed 26 January 2022).

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