

voices intergenerational love from the mountains

BY PETER KURTH

I've just finished reading the new novel by David Leavitt, *The Page Turner*, which is the story of an 18-year-old aspiring pianist, Paul Porterfield, and the trouble he runs into when he has a love affair with an older man. About twenty years older, to be exact — more than twice his age. The object of Paul's affections is Richard Kennington, a world-famous concert pianist who was himself seduced as a teenager by his manager. Paul ends up sleeping with the manager, too, after Kennington unceremoniously dumps him, and the younger man is reduced to a bundle of disillusionment, disempowerment and heartache by the time the story ends.

"Don't have any illusions about pain," Paul's piano teacher tells him. "Only a child believes that joy is infinite and suffering is short.... Joy is short, Paul, but suffering — suffering lasts."

Two things occur to me after finishing this pop morality tale. One is the general obsession with youth in gay culture, and the other is the knee-jerk acceptance of the idea that sexual relations between older men and younger men, even boys, is by definition 'abusive.' We're so sold on the idea that sex is about power and not about pleasure, that the young are inherently good and that adults who sleep with them are inherently evil, that we've lost sight of the naturalness and inevitability of intergenerational relationships.

Please understand that when I say 'boys' I'm not talking about 8-year-olds. The law

set a limit on the definition of childhood and agrees that by 16 a young man is at the age of sexual consent, although lawsuits can still be brought against 'predators' if the 16-year-old's parents happen to object. There isn't any way around this. A line has to be drawn somewhere, but as anyone acquainted with teenagers can tell you, there's a wide variation in experience and maturity even at the magic age of 16. Some are ready, some are not. Few, in any case, are 'innocent' in the way the culture likes to think.

God knows, I wasn't. Like most teenagers, male and female, I was obsessed with sex for years before I actually had it, and so were all of my friends, without exception. This was in the 1960's, not that it matters — there was never a time in history when children weren't assumed to have 'impure thoughts' and, for that matter, to be up to no good, plotting seductions, and 'playing with themselves' when they should have been keeping their hands on the table in full view. In contrast to our current understanding of the adult/child sexual dynamic, which insists that children are always victims, earlier cultures actually saw it the other way around: Children were considered to be wild, wily, pagan, and dangerous to the stability of society. It was adults who were thought to need protection against them. You can see this for yourself by picking up any religious treatise or public health manual written before the turn of the century — before the age of psychotherapy, I should say, which regards everyone as victims, but reserves judgment and opprobrium for what are loosely

called 'pedophiles.'

The truth is that sex, at any age, is not about power or pleasure, but about power and pleasure and many things besides. Sex is nature itself, no matter who's involved in it. That children need protecting is not in dispute. That young men and women need some means of sexual expression is also not in dispute, or shouldn't be, and sometimes sex with an older adult is exactly what's called for. In my own case, I can say truthfully that my first love affair with a man, at the age of 16, was both wonderful and awful. Wonderful, because it confirmed the nature of my desire; because my lover knew what he was doing, and because wild horses couldn't have kept me out of his bed. Awful, because social strictures against homosexuality and against the difference in our ages required that we be secretive about what we were doing. We could not be open, we could not be natural, and we both internalized the experience as something shameful. It took years to work this out, not because I had been the victim of an abuser, but because we were both the victims of the culture.

That said, I want to go on the record as saying that I have no sexual interest whatsoever in teenagers. Given the choice between men and boys I'll take men any day of the week. I don't understand most of my gay male contemporaries' fixation with youth — their own and other people's — but I do remember how important it was for me to be taken in hand, years ago, by a man with hair on his chest. And I think David Leavitt ought to come up with a happy ending next time.

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Program expands

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There is also a women's program in the planning stages. Cindy Garnish, the education and prevention coordinator, along with a student from SVC, Cynthia Himmel, are working on a woman's education party.

There have been two meetings with Donna Kennedy from the hemophilia community and they are beginning to address the needs of persons suffering from this disease, with the possibility of HIV in their lives as well. The Bennington HIV/AIDS Service Program emphasizes their dependence on the support of the gay and lesbian community.