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INCEST

THE LAST TABOO

Previously suppressed material from the original Kinsey interviews tells us that incest is prevalent and often positive.

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ew things are as powerful as a deviation whose time has come. Homosexuality, wife swapping, open marriage, bisexuality, S & M, and kiddie porn have already had their seasons. Just as we seemed to be running low on marketable taboos, the unspeakable predictably popped up.

Incest is supposed to be the ultimate inhibition, universally recognized and unconsciously observed. Margaret Mead declares that widespread breaches of this primitive taboo may be more disruptive of society than crime, suicide, and murder. So incest is very serious business. Even the discontentedly civilized shudder at its mention. Yet the game that every family can play, while repulsive and resistible, appears undeniably bewitching and oddly exciting in passing fantasy.

Thematically, incest is rugged country. Although Sophocles, Shakespeare, Stendahl, Shelley, Balzac, Wagner, Mann, and Wharton have tried to express its horrible fascination, the popular literature is understandably thin. But no longer. This once unbankable subject is now the darling of the media. After centuries of restraint, incest is finally a hit.

To wit: NBC News devoted its monthly Saturday night "Weekend" show last May to a ninety-minute documentary on incest victims at a unique California child sex-abuse clinic.

In Pete Hamill's boxing novel *Flesh and Blood* (Random House), young Brooklyn heavyweight Bobby Fallon sleeps with his mother Kate and fights for the title. According to the catalogue copy, theirs is "a love affair that readers will never forget."

Carolyn Slaughter's *Relations* (Mason/Charter), an August Literary Guild alternate, tells of the intimacies shared by a brother and sister in the late nineteenth century. "The beauty of this love is inevitably destroyed, but not the memory of the beauty. . . ."

Twins (Putnam's), by Bari Wood and Jack Geasland, is a recently published novel based on the weird deaths of identical-twin gynecologists in New York City in 1975. Their fictionalized fatal flaw was incest. Paperback rights have been sold to NAL for \$902,000, and the movie version is about to be optioned.

Rewedded Bliss: Love, Alimony, Incest, Ex-Spouses, and Other Domestic Blessings

BY PHILIP NOBILE

(Basic), by Davidne Mayleas, cites cases of sex between stepparents and stepchildren and gives rules for avoiding this increasing "polyincest" in second marriages.

For her untitled book on incest (contracted by Hawthorn), children's-book author Louise Armstrong is tracking down women for first-person accounts of the ordeal.

Redbook, *Family Circle*, *People*, the *Washington Star*, and the *New York Times* have recently broken the taboo in print with major features.

Three films with incest plots were exhibited at Cannes last spring: Yves Boisset's *The Yellow Taxi*, with Fred Astaire and Charlotte Rampling; Carlos Saura's *Elisa, Vida Mia*, with Geraldine Chaplin and Fernando Rey; and Benoit Jacquot's *Les Enfants du Placard*, with Brigitte Fossey and Jean Sorel. This cluster arrives six years after Louis Malle's sympathetic treatment of an incestuous mother and son in *Murmur of the Heart*.

Incest would be just another media trend, faddishly seduced and abandoned after repeated use, were it not for two forthcoming studies that promise to turn the prohibition on its head. Both introduce and uphold the notion of *positive incest*, an especially dissonant oxymoron that will madden therapists and confuse the masses more than the Kinsey reports did twenty-five years ago. Actually, Kinsey was the first sex researcher to uncover evidence that violation of the taboo does not necessarily shake heaven and earth. Unpublished data taken from his original sex histories (some 18,000 in number) imply that lying with a near relative rarely ends in tragedy. "In our basic sample, that is, our random sample, only a tiny percentage of our incest cases had been reported to police or psychologists," states Kinsey collaborator Dr. Paul Gebhard, currently director of the Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington, Ind. "In fact, in the ones that were not reported, I'm having a hard time recalling any traumatic effects at all. I certainly can't recall any from among the brother-sister participants, and I can't put my finger on any among the parent-child participants."

The nation was hardly prepared for such talk in the fifties, but Gebhard is releasing Kinsey's startling incest material for incorporation in Warren Farrell's work-in-progress, *The Last Taboo: the Three Faces of Incest*. According to the cultural gatekeepers in New York publishing, America still wasn't ready to hear about positive incest in the mid-seventies. Farrell's impressive credentials—a Ph.D. in political science from N.Y.U., former board member of the National Organization of Women, and author of a book entitled *Beyond Masculinity*—counted as nothing. His forty-one-page outline (including two sizzling case histories—one with a New York writer who has intercourse regularly with his seventeen-year-old daughter, occasionally supplemented by threesomes with

the daughter's girl friend, and another with a Notre Dame graduate who made love to his mother for ten years) was returned by twenty-two houses last fall. McGraw-Hill's editor-in-chief Fred Hills wanted to acquire the project, but company executives said no. The top editors at a major reprint concern were anxious to buy it until their lady boss invoked an "over my dead body" line. Bantam was the only firm that dared to bid, and Farrell signed for \$60,000.

Dr. James Ramey, a sociologist with a multi-disciplinary Ph.D. from Columbia, has censored his own positive incest manuscript for the past four years. Fearing for his reputation and massive misunderstanding, Ramey hesitated to lead with an apparently permission-giving book on man's oldest taboo. He refuses to discuss specifics but volunteers that only one incest family from his 1,500-plus interviews and questionnaires ever ran afoul of the law. "And that was a setup," he adds. Feeling that others are bound to soften up the

Dr. James Ramey, a sociologist, states, "If two relatives make love in a caring situation, that's one thing. If it's rape, it's another. You can't put the incest tag on that."

opposition before him, Ramey has opened negotiations for the book. But unless he can control the publication date, promotion, and jacket and advertising copy, he will not proceed. "You have to be careful when you do a taboo-bucking book," he comments. "There are a lot of slips between the cup and the lip."

NBC's "Weekend" visit to the Santa Clara County Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Center in San Jose will not help Farrell and Ramey convince anybody that incest is less than a scourge. Host Lloyd Dobyns was so depressed by the content that he told the audience in his introduction that he wasn't sure he'd watch himself if it weren't his own program. What followed was a montage of contrite fathers and exploited daughters pouring out unrelievedly sad stories of incestuous grief. To interrupt the monotony of the documentary, producer Clare Crawford-Mason frequently cut to Hank Giaretto, director of the treatment center, for background and wisdom on the taboo. Giaretto was positively against incest and linked it to prostitution, drug abuse, and sexual dysfunction in daughter victims. In his experience the normally re-

pressed impulse overpowered abiding, middle-class fathers were worn down and out professionally alienated from their wives. They looked toward their blossoming daughter first for consolation and then self-described humanist psychoanalyst Giaretto requires every father to apologize to his daughter and be discreet to every family member as dark about his sins. Regardless of and embarrassment, he believes public prostration is preferable to private handling of incestuous elements.

For example, in a curious detail of Giaretto's records and published *Circle*, the father goes to prison months, depletes his life savings, loses his old job; his daughter has a year in school; and the other two break out and are forced into prostitution. Branded as a child molester, the dim prospects of future employment though such a cure may be worse disease, Giaretto admits he will refer over to the law any participants who sought his counsel and whom he never came across a happy incestuous family," he said on "Weekend" there is little doubt.

Although Farrell had personalized Giaretto with his findings on incest before the "Weekend," Giaretto failed to temper his anger on camera. For instance, Giaretto has hinted that his strictly paternalism was biased by definition and could not possibly provide a true practice. And he could have said that brother-sister incest, by the common kind, is known to be harmless. Producer Crawford-Mason is also a Washington correspondent. *People*, loaded the documentary with many recitals of the Auschwitz that key, clarifying questions were asked. Both Crawford-Mason and deny sensationalizing a sensitive issue before a wide-eyed audience, emphasizing that the subject about Giaretto's center, not incest subject was incest." Dobyns said "we did it poorly."

Crawford-Mason won't grant the inherent in Giaretto's sample. "You have to attack my story," she says. "Many documentaries have you know... If we didn't make it clear that sister incest was not as traumatic a mistake. We discussed incest in the time in public. And the very fact of writing this article proves that it succeeded. You have a right to know but it's Monday-morning quarterbacking."

Warren Farrell admires Giaretto's rehabilitative mission among epistemologists, for his own investigation of incest allows for considerable insight, particularly in the father-daughter category. But he faults "Weekend" for a skewed perspective. "It was like a

INCEST

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119

ing Cuban refugees about Cuba. "Week-end" recorded sexually abused children speaking about their sexual abuse, which is valuable, but the inference is that all incest is abuse. And that's not true."

Farrell was reluctant to give a tour of the heart of the country. His research is incomplete, and the data collected from 200 in-depth interviews (he plans to have 250 for the book) await a computer run. Although he vowed not to speak out prior to publication (probably in 1979), he consented to a one-time debriefing at a Chinese restaurant near his Riverside Drive apartment overlooking the Hudson River in Manhattan. At thirty-four, he is separated from his wife, who is an IBM executive, and childless.

The idea for the book struck him after reading a *Times* article about incest early last year. According to the piece, only a tiny fraction of the cases ever reaches the courts. In 1976 New York City police received merely one incest complaint and no arrests. Farrell wondered if perhaps some incidents weren't reported because the relationships went smoothly. Since nothing had been written about nonpatient-nonoffender participants, he decided the gap was too large to ignore.

What is the incidence? Farrell's survey of 2,000 undergraduates in state as well as community colleges yielded a 4 to 5 percent figure. Kinsey's incidence was 3.9, but his collaborator, Dr. Wardell Pomeroy, thinks that the real figure is closer to 10 percent. Incest is not simply a deviation: it is a crime. People tend not to respond as honestly as they would about other modes of unconventional sex. Positive incest is even more hidden, since nothing is gained by disclosure. Thus most of Farrell's positive participants who replied to his ads in the *Village Voice*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Psychology Today*, and the *New Republic* were speaking out for the first time.

Farrell cautions that his statistics are rough and confined just to his current sample of 200—including people from the unemployed, the working class, business executives, Ph.D.'s, and professional athletes. But his preliminary data suggest that the taboo needs severe overhauling. Breaking down the effects into positive (beneficial), negative (traumatic), and mixed (nontraumatic but not regarded as beneficial) categories—the three faces of incest in his subtitle—he says that the overwhelming majority of cases fall into the positive column. Cousin-cousin (including uncle-niece and aunt-nephew) and brother-sister (including sibling homosexuality) relations, accounting for about half of the total incidence, are perceived as beneficial in 95 percent of the cases.

Mother-son incest represents 10 percent of the incidence and is 70 percent positive, 20 percent mixed, and 10 percent negative for the son. For the mother it is mostly posi-

tive. Farrell points out that boys don't seem to suffer, not even from the negative experience. "Girls are much more influenced by the dictates of society and are more willing to take on sexual guilt."

The father-daughter scene, ineluctably complicated by feelings of dominance and control, is not nearly so sanguine. Despite some advertisements, calling explicitly for positive female experiences, Farrell discovered that 85 percent of the daughters admitted to having negative attitudes toward their incest. Only 15 percent felt positive about the experience. On the other hand, statistics from the vantage of the fathers involved were almost the reverse—60 percent positive, 20 percent mixed, and 20 percent negative. "Either men see these relationships differently," comments Farrell, "or I am getting selective reporting from women."

In a typical traumatic case, an authoritarian father, unhappily married in a sexually repressed household and proba-

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Both are defined by
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bly unemployed, drunkenly imposes himself on his young daughter. Genital petting may have started as early as age eight with first intercourse occurring around twelve. Since the father otherwise extends very little attention to his daughter, his sexual advances may be one of the few pleasant experiences she has with him. If she is unaware of society's taboo and if the mother does not intervene, she has no reason to suspect the enormity of the aberration. But when she grows up and learns of the taboo, she feels cheapened. If she comes from the lower class, she may turn to prostitution or drugs as compensation for self-worthlessness, although a direct cause-effect link is far from certain. The trauma is spread through all classes. Farrell observes, but incest is more likely to be negative in the lower class.

Ramey would quarrel with Farrell's classification of the above case as incest. When coercion is involved, it's plain rape in his opinion. "You can't put the incest tag on that," he argues. "If two relatives make love in a caring situation, that's one thing. If it's rape, it's another." Dr. C.A. Tripp, a New York sex researcher who is unafraid of positive incest, also contests Farrell's method-

ology. "Do you talk about rape and courtship in the same breath?" he says. "Both are defined by intercourse, but the consent and spirit are vastly different. So, too, with so-called coercive and noncoercive incest. The two shouldn't be lumped together as two aspects of the same phenomenon."

It is not difficult to guess the benefits that accrue to the incestuous father-daughter in it for the 15 percent of daughters who inform Farrell that they liked it? The answer is a tender, nonfumbling, and loving introduction to sex that is wildly arousing without its wickedness and devoid of the teenage backseat trial and error. A daughter told Farrell that she pretends to her father to "the locker room jerks" were interested only in scoring with her. She felt that they, rather than her father, were trying to take advantage. If he lets his daughter go gently, avoiding any fits, their relationship may be remembered. Some have been known to continue after marriage.

"When I get my most glowing responses, 6 out of 200," says Farrell, "incest is part of the family's open style of life, wherein sex is an outgrowth of warmth and affection. It is more likely the father has good sex with his wife; his wife is likely to know and approve in one or two cases to join in."

Incredible? Impossible? Insane? Was such a father-daughter case happen in New York City. A forty-two-year-old writer, contentedly married for 15 years, phoned Farrell after reading his book and related the following story.

Two years ago the writer happened at his beach house alone with his fifteen-year-old daughter. He was strip out of her bikini—nudity was unusual in the family—and fantasized about having sex with her while she napped. His wife's appendix operation curtailed his sex for the previous months. This day the women on the beach and a few beers had led him into temptation. When the daughter came from the bathroom in a towel, he got her in the nude and erect. Although he never consciously desired incest, he told his daughter that he missed her. Without further prompting, she began to orgasm. Then she cried until he asked her that they hadn't done anything. He asked her not to tell her mother.

Two weeks later the daughter approached the house naked until her father to their mutual satisfaction. But the father was careful not to push things. He did not want to hurt his daughter, who wanted to have an active sex life with boys her age. Several weeks later the daughter approached the initiative again, this time with a friend as a third party. This time it was the most exciting sex the father had had. Soon the father and daughter were having intercourse three times a week, repairing to motels with their permission. When they were six months

CONTINUED ON

When the wife unexpectedly returned to her apartment from shopping and caught her husband in the act. Despite some initial hysteria, she prayed everything. Apparently she was relieved that her husband's demands could be met at a level higher than with hookers, and she said she'd like to watch the two of them do it. When the writer talked with her, she said the incest had been ongoing for two years. The father is enjoying himself immensely, and he says that his daughter has the expertise to the groping of her father, and just want to be "deeply satisfied." The writer insists that they're better friends now than before. Incest is impossible. Insane. But unless the writer is deluded, it is perhaps not so definitely positive. However, Farwell became increasingly skeptical of incestuous fathers, for they are seldom loved by daughters. For a woman's incest, see Edith Wharton's unexpressed short-story fragment "The Palmato," appended to R. W. B. Lewis's biography. It is best read with one's eyes closed, as Wharton leaves nothing to the pornographic imagination.

When father-daughter relations are attended by incestuous complications, since domination is involved, Farrell recounted the history of a 25-year-old woman who had broken apart with her older brother for two years when he left home, four years ago, to go to college. They talk on the phone every week and remain very close. The woman has no regrets and regards her incest as one of the best sexual experiences of her life.

She began the long seduction of her brother at the age of thirteen or fourteen, wandering around their suburban New York town with her robe open. The tease progressed to leaving her bedroom door open when she was undressed. Apparently, the brother ignored these early invitations but later reciprocated with exhibitionism of his own when she was eighteen, the girl found masturbating in bed, naked and with the door ajar. The brother responded by masturbating in his own room. Soon they were masturbating together and performing oral sex. In a few months they engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time.

The sister was turned on to making love with her own image of herself. Breaking the incest only heightened her pleasure. They made love twice a week for the duration of the liaison, often dipping into fantasies from *Pierrot* pornography. The brother later watched her make love to another man, another time he looked on as she masturbated in the nude with a girl friend. On other occasions he made love to her immediately afterward. Their familial arguments ceased during the affair, and they became best friends. The sister now feels incest helped in overcoming her inhibi-

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tions, though she and her brother had an active sex life with other partners while they were involved. They have slept together only once since the brother married.

Farrell realizes the risks that attend publication of this book. "In a society where men are powerful and exploitive and insensitive to women's feelings, which is reinforced by female adaptiveness and a daughter's lack of power, data like these can be used as an excuse for the continuation and magnification of that exploitation. When I consider that, I almost don't want to write the book."

Since neither victim nor benefactor needs Farrell's confirmation, why does he gamble with bringing on a sexual deluge? "First, because millions of people who are now refraining from touching, holding, and genitally caressing their children, when that is really part of a caring, loving expression, are repressing the sexuality of a lot of children and themselves. Maybe this needs repressing, and maybe it doesn't. My book should at least begin the exploration. "Second, I'm finding that thousands of people in therapy for incest are being told, in essence, that their lives have been ruined by incest. In fact, their lives have not generally been affected as much by the incest as by the overall atmosphere. My book should help therapists put incest in perspective."

Farrell also hopes to change public attitudes so that participants in incest will no longer be automatically perceived as victims. "The average incest participant can't evaluate his or her experience for what it was. As soon as society gets into the picture, they have to tell themselves it was bad. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy."

If pushed to the wall, would Farrell urge incest on families? "Incest is like a magnifying glass," he summarizes. "In some circumstances it magnifies the beauty of a relationship, and in others it magnifies the trauma. I'm not recommending incest between parent and child, and especially not between father and daughter. The great majority of fathers can grasp the dynamics of positive incest *intellectually*. But in a society that encourages looking at women in almost purely sexual terms, I don't believe they can translate this understanding into practice."

The joys of incest will be lost on the therapeutic community. A pocket of Kinseyans, however, won't dispute the possibility *a priori*, as most other psychotherapists, in particular the Oedipally oriented, must. "Incest was grist for our mill," comments Dr. Pomeroy, now a marriage therapist in San Francisco. "We were interested in what people did and couldn't have given a damn about what was right or wrong or proper or improper." Yet it took Pomeroy a quarter of a century to come out of the research closet. His article in last November's *Penthouse Forum*—"Incest: A New Look"—landed like an unopened parachute in professional sex circles, but it was the first in this new antitaboo wave.

158 PENTHOUSE

Although Pomeroy reports many beautiful romances between father and daughter, he discriminates between the consenting adult variety and pedophilia. "The trouble with incest isn't incest at all," he remarks: "it's pedophilia. There are real problems with a thirty-five-year-old father having sex with his thirteen- or fourteen-year-old daughter because of his one-up position. But a twenty-five-year-old woman sleeping with her fifty-year-old father—what the hell difference does it make? It's not society's concern." (Dr. Ramey came across a son who crawled into his mother's bed for the first time when he was past fifty.)

Despite the drawbacks of pedophilic incest, Pomeroy has seen it flourish under ideal conditions. "Here's a husband who's fairly mature and thinks of incest only as a stepping-stone for his daughter in developing her sex life. So her urges her to have social-sexual contacts outside the home. I've seen cases like this, but they are the great exception. The odds are against it,

"Maybe this [incest] needs repressing, and maybe it doesn't," says author Warren Farrell. "My book should at least begin the exploration."

because the father can seldom be objective. I'm treating a man now who's had intercourse with his fourteen-year-old daughter. When he . . . tried to control her outside sex, she blew the whistle."

Pomeroy speculates that incest occurs most frequently at the two extremes of society, since rich and poor tend to be less affected by sexual taboos. He eschews elaborate interpretations of the impulse that drives mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers into bed with each other. "Sex is fun," he explains. "That's the overriding factor. You can't overlook that sex is pleasurable enough to overrule this terrific taboo in some cases."

This reporter retorted that he, too, endorsed the fun of sex but wouldn't dream of incest with any of his three daughters.

"Perhaps you wouldn't because you've been fathering too much—wiping their noses, changing their diapers, and so forth," Pomeroy replied. "The fathering principle kills the sex impulse. It certainly does for me. I wouldn't consider sleeping with my daughter, although I've given it much thought and even talked to her about it. And she said to me, 'You're a great father, but you don't turn me on either.'"

According to Dr. Tripp, the lifting of the taboo would not automatically invite an avalanche of incestuous activity. Farrell being a potential hotbed of sexual tension, the nuclear family just about his lasciviousness around the hearth—and for good reason. "It's not the fathering and the intimacy," states Tripp, "but the closeness and the lack of mystique that block out sexual interest between any two people—father and daughter, friend and friend, and comfortable 'old shoe' husband and wife. The most fascinating thing in sexual motivation is the appeal of a slightly hidden or removed object. What seems to permit incest to emerge at all is the insertion of some kind of alienation into the scene. . . . If the father is distant, often away from home and the home itself is split up, etc."

Willard Gaylin, a psychiatrist at Columbia Medical School as well as president of the Institute for Biology, Ethics, and the Social Sciences, is appalled by the incest hypothesis. For him it is an intellectual and moral contradiction. He would believe it if it lay down on his couch. "I have to say that what's wrong with incest is the same as what's wrong with homosexuality. It's not necessarily wrong for the persons to do it if it gives them pleasure. But it implies that some wrong has already occurred—that there was not a normal development out of the incestual stage involving men other than the father attracted. Incest usually represents a very distorted structure and is never a positive good. After all, a child will have plenty of incest course in life, but he or she is going to have only one crack at a caring parent."

Despite Kinsey's statistics, Gaylin remains unconvinced of nontraumatic incest. "We deal in probabilities, not possibilities, in medicine. If incest became a safe, loving way of initiating your kids, it would do more harm than good. I don't trust the wisdom of the Old and New Testaments and every other religious tradition."

Dr. Abraham Kardiner, one of psychiatry's grand old men who did early work on the taboo, worries about the impact. "You will throw a monkey wrench into society by introducing the idea that incest is beautiful," he says. "The family is in trouble already from homosexuality."

Television producer Clare Childress Mason is equally dubious. "Saying that incest isn't harmful is a male chauvinist's ploy. Father-daughter incest is the ultimate victimization. Mother-son incest may be devastating to the son. . . . The medical profession ignores two- and three-year-olds with gonorrhea of the throat. The doctors insist they catch it from bed sheets."

Warren Farrell prophesies that incest will be a major social issue in the eighties. "The debate will be bloody and destructive. Those who accept the traditional sin of incest, the great Judeo-Christian majority, will not be dissuaded by case studies. The last taboo case study is the last straw as the Save Our Children movement heads closer to home."