

Incest: The Last Taboo

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This article is a *historical document*, presenting a facsimile of Philip Noble's December 1977 [Penthouse](#) article "Incest: The Last Taboo". A [PDF copy](#) of the Penthouse article is also available.

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

Few 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, Shelly, 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 the 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 their 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 (Basic), by Davidyne 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 *Jackquot'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*.

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Incest would be just another media trend, faddishly seduced and abandoned after repealed 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, the 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 form 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 Warran 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 for 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 with threesomes with the daughter's girlfriend, and another with a Notre Dame graduate who made love to his mother for ten years) was returned by twenty-two houses last fall. MacGraw-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 Farrall signed for 60,000.

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." ' 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 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."

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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 their 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 repressed impulse overpowered law-abiding, middle-class

fathers when they were down and out professionally and alienated from their wives. These men looked toward their blossoming daughters first for consolation and then for sex. A self-described humanist psychologist, Giaretto requires every father patient to apologize to his daughter and confess his secret to every family member still in the dark about his sins. Regardless of the cost and embarrassment, he believes that public prostration is preferable to discreet, private handling of incestuous entanglements.

For example, in a curious composite portrait of an incestuous family drawn from Giaretto's records and published in *Family Circle*, the father goes to prison for six months, depletes his life savings, and loses his old job; his daughter has to repeat a year in school; and the other two children freak out and are forced into therapy. Branded as a child molester, the father has dim prospects of future employment. Although such a cure may be worse than the disease, Giaretto admits he would hand over to the law any participants in incest who sought his counsel anonymously. "I have never come across a happy incestuous family," he said on "Weekend". Of this there is little doubt.

Although Farrell had personally familiarized Amaretto with his findings on positive incest before the "Weekend" taping, Giaretto failed to temper his apocalypticism on camera. For instance, Giaretto might have hinted that his strictly patient population was biased by definition and therefore could not possibly provide a true picture of the practice. And he could have explained that brother-sister incest, by far the most common kind, is known to be relatively harmless. Producer Crawford-Mason, who is also a Washington correspondent for *People*, loaded the documentary with so many recitals of the Auschwitz of incest that key, clarifying questions were never asked. Both Crawford-Mason and Dobyns deny sensationalizing a sensitive sexual issue before a wide-eyed-audience of millions, emphasizing that the show was about Giaretto's center, not incest. "If the subject was incest," Dobyns conceded, "we did it poorly."

Crawford-Mason won't grant the bias inherent in Giaretto's sample. "You're trying to attack my story," she says testily. "How many documentaries have you produced? ... If we didn't make it clear that brother-sister incest was not as traumatizing it was a mistake. We discussed incest for the first time in public. And the very fact that you're writing this article proves that the show succeeded. You have a right to comment, but it's Monday-morning quarterbacking."

Warren Farrell admires Giaretto's rehabilitative mission among legitimate victims, for his own investigation allows for considerable negativity, particularly in the father-daughter category. But he faults Weekend for its skewed perspective. "It was like interviewing Cuban refugees about Cuba. Weekend 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 positive. Farrell points out the 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 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 probably 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 methodology. "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, but what's 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 for all its wickedness and devoid of the usual teenage backseat trial and error. One daughter told Farrell that she preferred her father to "the locker room jerkoffs" who were interested only in scoring with her. She felt that they, rather than her father, were trying to take advantage. If the father lets his daughter go gently, avoiding jealous fits, their relationship may be fondly remembered. Some have been known to continue after marriage.

"When I get my most glowing positive cases, 6 out of 200," says Farrell, "the incest is part of the family's open, sensual style of life, wherein sex is an outgrowth of warmth and affection. It is more

likely that the father has good sex with his wife, and his wife is likely to know and approve — and in one or two cases to join in.”

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Incredible? Impossible? Insane? Well, just such a father-daughter case happened in New York City. A forty-two-year-old Jewish writer, contentedly married for twenty years, phoned Farrell after reading his ad and related the following story.

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

Two weeks later the daughter walked around the house naked until the father approached her. That day he deflowered her to their mutual satisfaction. But the father was careful not to push things. He did not want to hurt his daughter, who seemed to have an active sex life with boys her own age. Several weeks later the daughter took the initiative again, this time with a girl friend as a third party. This threesome was the most exciting sex the father had ever had. Soon the father and daughter were having intercourse three times a week, repairing to motels with their secret passion. When they were six months into the incest, the wife unexpectedly returned to the apartment from shopping and caught the pair in the act. Despite some initial hysteria, the wife okayed everything. Apparently she was relieved that her husband’s strong sexual demands could be met at home rather than with hookers, and she hinted that she’d like to watch the two of them in bed. When the writer talked with Farrell, the incest had been ongoing for two years. The father is enjoying himself immensely, and he says that his daughter prefers his expertise to the groping of her boyfriends, who just want to be “deepthroated.” The writer insists that they’re both much better friends now than before.

Incredible. Impossible. Insane. But unless the writer is deluded, it is perhaps true and definitely positive. However, Farrell has become increasingly skeptical of reports from fathers, for they are seldom confirmed by daughters. For a woman’s view of positive incest, see Edith Wharton’s long suppressed short-story fragment *Beatrice Palmato*, appended to R.W.B. Lewis’s biography. It is the best read with one’s feet in holy water, as Wharton leaves nothing to the pornographic imagination.

Brother-sister relations are attended by fewer complications, since domination is not a factor. Farrell recounted the history of a twenty-five-year-old woman who had happily slept with her older brother for two years until he left home, four years ago, to get married. Today 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, prancing around their suburban New York home with her robe open. The tease progressed to leaving her bedroom door open while she was undressed. Apparently, the brother ignored these early invitations but later reciprocated with exhibitionism of his own. When she was eighteen, the girl started masturbating in bed, naked and with the door ajar. The brother responded by simultaneously masturbating in his own room. Soon they were masturbating together and performing oral sex. In a few weeks they engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time.

The sister was turned on to making love with a mirror image of herself. Breaking the taboo only heightened her pleasure. They had sex twice a week for the duration of their liaison, often dipping into fantasies and Polaroid pornography. The brother once watched her make love to another man;

another time he looked on as she exercised in the nude with a girl friend. On both occasions he made love to her immediately afterward. Their familial arguments ceased during the affair, and they became the best of friends. The sister now feels the incest helped in overcoming her inhibitions, though she and her brother had an active sex life with other partners while they were involved. They have slept together only once since her 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.”

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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.

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 a 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, 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. Far from being a potential hotbed of sexual tension, the nuclear family just about kills 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, i.e., 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, e.g., the father is distant, often away from home, or the home itself is split, etc."

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Willard Gaylin, a psychiatrist at Columbia Medical School as well as president of the Institute for Biology, Ethics, and the Life Sciences, is appalled by the positive incest hypothesis. For him it is an intellectual and moral contradiction. He wouldn't believe it if it lay down on his couch. "I'd 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 — the there was not a normal development out of the incestual stage into finding men other than the father attractive. Incest usually represents a very distorted structure and is never a positive good. ... After all, a child will have plenty of intercourse 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 fun-loving way of initiating your kids into sex, it would do more harm than good. I tend to trust the wisdom of the Old and New Testaments and every other religious group."

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

Television producer Claire Crawford-Mason is equally dubious. "Saying that incest isn't harmful is a male chauvinist cop-out. Father-daughter incest is the ultimate victimization. Mother-son incest must 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. If so, the debate will be bloody and presumably unproductive. Those who accept the original sin of incest, the great Judeo-Christian majority, will not be dissuaded by anyone's case studies. The last taboo could become the last straw as the Save Our Children movement heads closer to home.

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