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## She was 15. He was 26. Sonia Orchard's *Groomed* Proves her Abuser was Wrong: Age isn't 'Just a Number'

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I was in my mid-twenties and lecturing at QUT when I was sexually assaulted by a student. It was the last Friday of semester. After class, he – a private school boy and writing major – accompanied me to the car park. He had offered to carry my books. When I turned to thank him, he pinned me against the car door and jammed his tongue in my mouth.

After I fended him off, he slithered away to meet his mates and I never told anyone what happened. Smart girls – university lecturers – didn't get themselves into these situations. And, besides, it was just a kiss. *It wasn't that bad*. He hadn't held a knife to my throat or threatened me.

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*Review: Groomed – Sonia Orchard (Affirm Press)*

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And so, years passed. And the memory of that moment faded. In fact, I didn't think about it again until recently when I read Sonia Orchard's new memoir [Groomed](#).

Orchard's book is her account of being groomed and sexually abused, at age 15, by a man almost double her age – her “first boyfriend”.

S – as Orchard refers to him – was 26 when he met the teenage Orchard at a Melbourne nightclub and, one week later, started having sex with her. The relationship, which began at the end of 1985, lasted almost a year. It took the author three decades to recognise what had happened to her.

“I believed that I had been in a romantic relationship,” Orchard writes. “I managed to skip over what I believed to be an inconsequential detail – that I was a child.”

### **‘A cat toying with a mouse’**

As a teenager, Orchard believed she was in love with her abuser. Like many victims of sexual grooming, she felt adored as never before.

For a year, S lavished her with affection and attention, treating her to live gigs and expensive dinners, spoiling her with roses and romantic weekends away. He picked her up from school and supplied her with drugs and alcohol. On at least one occasion, he drugged her with wine and speed.

Through a combination of control tactics and coercive techniques, S manipulated the 15-year-old into believing that theirs was a regular relationship. “Age is just a number,” he would tell her.

And the young Orchard believed him: “he had his choice of other adult females, but he had chosen me.”

It wasn't until 35 years later, when Orchard had teenage daughters of her own, that she realised “something bad – something very wrong” had happened to her.

For most of her adult life, the script of childhood grooming – so often a story of being chosen and special, of consenting – is the story Orchard told herself in order to survive. Even when the pair broke up, the teenager recorded the event in her diary as if it were a mutual decision: “We will still be friends (my choice) and still have sex (his choice).”

With the vantage of time and therapy, she finally saw the “relationship” for what it was: “a cat toying with a tiny mouse”.



Sonia Orchard. Jessica Tremp/Affirm

With unflinching honesty, Orchard shows how “abuse is the most potent when it is interlaced with love.” She tells how S ridiculed her, ordering her to lose weight, calling her “a hopeless kisser”, and casually informing her that she needed to see a doctor because he had an STD.

## Rewriting the script

Orchard’s book, like many #MeToo memoirs, is part of a global reckoning with the wrongs of the past, with the bystanders who remained silent and complicit, and with a judicial system that not only fails to protect the most vulnerable, but retraumatizes the victim.

At once forthright and thoughtful, Orchard recounts her decision to report the abuse to the police, only to learn that historical sex crimes in Australia are notoriously difficult to prove and, if investigated, often take years to process.

*When I had my day in court, I knew that I would be picked apart, told I was lying, that I was manipulative, that I’d fabricated a story because I’m a vengeful so-and-so [...] Defence lawyers know that deep down, most sexual assault victims feel incredibly shaky about coming forward.*

With controlled fury, Orchard exposes the legal loopholes and evidence issues that eventually stymied her case, destroyed her long-held belief in justice, and made her feel like she was “the guilty one”. In court, after she is cross-examined for two and half a hours, she writes:

*I had to keep telling myself, You don’t need to memorise your statement; you know what happened; it happened to you; you were there.*

In New South Wales, only 7% of sexual assaults reported to police result in a guilty conviction. Orchard asks: “Is it worth going to the police on the chance you might be one of the 7 per cent?”

Orchard, like me, once believed that the abuse she endured *wasn’t that bad*. Women who are sexually abused and harassed often buy into this notion in order to turn their trauma into something manageable, something they can carry with them.

In her collection of essays, Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture, Roxane Gay writes: “I taught myself to be grateful I survived.” Gay was gang-raped in the woods behind her house at the age of 12.

In *Groomed*, Orchard rewrites the script by intellectualising her trauma – in her words, by “placing [her] abuse in a Petri dish and gazing at it under a microscope, poking it, trying to get it to move [...] or talk back”.

She unravels and relearns her own story. At the same time, she reappraises the deep-seated social and cultural factors that allow such crimes to persist. Fittingly, the book’s epigraph is from rape survivor Gisèle Pélicot: “It’s not for us to have shame – it’s for them.”

# GROOMED

A memoir about abuse,  
the search for justice and how  
we fail to keep our children safe



'Groomed is THE book  
for our times.'  
CLARE WRIGHT

'Brave and unflinchingly  
honest.'  
GINGER GORMAN

'Orchard's writing is  
impactful and enduring.'  
HANNAH FERGUSON

'Essential reading for all.'  
VANESSA HAMILTON,  
sexuality educator  
and author

## SONIA ORCHARD

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*If this article has raised issues for you, or if you're concerned about someone you know, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.*