

Narrating Male Victimhood: Child Sexual Abuse, Gender, and Institutional Failure in *Boy Toy*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in Barry Lyga's *Boy Toy*, focusing on the complexities of male victimhood within institutional and gendered frameworks. While existing scholarship on CSA has largely centred on female victim narratives and conventional trauma-based approaches, this research shifts attention to the lesser explored terrain of male survivorship in contemporary young adult fiction. Drawing on Jennifer J. Freyd's concept of institutional betrayal, the paper posits that the protagonist's experience of abuse is escalated by the negligence of educational, legal, and social institutions. Furthermore, R.W. Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity is employed to demonstrate how gendered expectations obscure recognition of male victimhood, often reframing abuse in ways that normalize coercion. The analysis also engages Miranda Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice to examine how the victim's testimony is undermined by broader cultural limitations in understanding male-centred CSA. Through close textual analysis, this paper contends that *Boy Toy* reveals CSA as a structurally mediated experience shaped by institutional failure, gendered misconception, and epistemic constraints.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, male victimhood, trauma, injustice, institutional betrayal

Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) remains one of the most widespread yet unexplored forms of violence in social discourse as well as literary representations. While scholarly attention towards this issue has significantly expanded in recent times, most of the existing research continues to privilege female survivor narratives, often overlooking the complexities surrounding male survivors. This gendered imbalance not only shapes public understanding of abuse but also influences how victimhood is recognized, narrated, and legitimized. In literary studies, such gaps are particularly evident in the limited critical engagements with texts that foreground male experiences of CSA.

Barry Lyga's *Boy Toy* offers a compelling site for analysing such issues. The novel revolves around the abuse and grooming of twelve-year-old Josh Mendel by his twenty-four-year-old history teacher, Eve Sherman. Rather than portraying abuse as an isolated or psychological phenomenon, the narrative exposes the broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts that shape its interpretation. Josh Mendel's experience is marked not only by trauma but also by confusion, misrecognition, and an insistent struggle to articulate the nature of the harm inflicted upon him. This complexity calls for a critical framework that moves beyond conventional trauma theory to account for the systemic and epistemic dimensions of Child Sexual Abuse.

The present paper argues that *Boy Toy* restructures the representation of CSA through the lens of male victimhood, exposing how institutional failure and gendered norms obscure and complicate the recognition of abuse. Drawing on Jennifer J. Freyd's concept of institutional betrayal, the paper examines how structures and societal attitudes fail to protect victims. By doing so, they exacerbate the harm of abuse. R.W. Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity is employed to analyse how dominant gender norms render male victimhood culturally unintelligible, often framing abuse in ways that minimize or distort its impact. The paper further engages Miranda Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice to analyse how the protagonist's testimony is undermined by a lack of interpretive frameworks capable of adequately recognizing male-centred CSA.

By situating CSA within institutional, epistemic, and gendered contexts, this paper seeks to shift the critical conversation from individual pathology to structural conditions. In doing so, it highlights the necessity of rethinking how abuse is represented and understood, particularly in narratives that challenge assumptions about victimhood and gender.

CSA and Institutional Contexts in *Boy Toy*

Boy Toy by Barry Lyga situates Child Sexual Abuse within a network of institutional structures that shape not only the occurrence of abuse but also its interpretation

and aftermath. The plot focuses on a teenage boy's sexual abuse by his female teacher that foregrounds the school as a site of exploitation. The teacher's position is not merely personal but institutional, deriving legitimacy and power from the educational system itself. This imbalance underscores how authority operates within structured environments, rendering the victim particularly susceptible to manipulation and coercion.

The abuse depicted in the novel does not occur in isolation but is embedded within broader framework of institutional failure. Eve's role as a trusted educator allows her to initiate and sustain the abusive relationship under the guise of care and mentorship. Her ability to isolate Josh through private meetings, emotional manipulation, and the gradual blurring of professional boundaries reflects how institutional authority can be mobilized to facilitate abuse rather than prevent it.

Crucially, Josh's initial ability to identify the relationships as abusive is tied to the institutional context in which it occurs. As a student, he is conditioned to trust and obey teachers, a dynamic that complicates his understanding of coercion and consent. Moments in the novel where Josh recalls feeling "chosen" or special underscore how abuse is framed in terms that align with institutional hierarchies, rather than appearing as overt violence. This ambiguity is not accidental but produced through the structural power imbalance that the school environment sustains.

The institutional dimension becomes even more pronounced in the aftermath of the abuse. When the relationship is exposed, the response shifts from private experience to public spectacle. Josh's testimony is mediated through legal proceedings and media narratives that sensationalize the case, often reducing it to a scandal rather than treating it as a crucial case of CSA. His identity is labelled as "boy toy", a term that trivializes his victimhood and reflects broader societal discomfort in acknowledging male-directed abuse. In these instances, the legal and media institutions fail to provide a framework that adequately capture the complexity of his experience.

Furthermore, the long-term impact of this institutional failure is evident in Josh's continued struggle to articulate his past. Even after the abuse has ended, he remains caught between conflicting interpretations- those imposed by institutions and those he attempts to form for himself. This tension highlights how CSA, as portrayed in the narrative, is not confined to the moment of abuse but is extended and reshaped through institutional responses that minimize, distort, or sensationalize harm.

By embedding CSA within these layered institutional contexts, *Boy Toy* demonstrates that abuse is not simply an individual transgression but a phenomenon sustained and complicated by systems of authority. The novel compels a rethinking of CSA

as a structurally mediated experience, in which institutional power plays a central role in both enabling abuse and obscuring its recognition.

Gender and the Misrecognition of Male Victimhood

While *Boy Toy* foregrounds Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) within institutional contexts, its most striking intervention lies in its representation of male victimhood and the ways in which it is persistently misrecognized. The novel exposes how gendered expectations shape not only the experience of abuse but also its interpretation, often rendering male-directed CSA difficult to acknowledge within dominant cultural frameworks. In doing so, it challenges deeply ingrained assumptions about masculinity, consent, and vulnerability.

Josh's relationship with Eve is repeatedly framed- internally and externally- through narratives that obscure its abusive nature. At several instances, Josh recalls feeling complicit or even responsible, struggling to reconcile his emotional responses with the language of victimhood. This confusion is not merely psychological but socially produced. Within prevailing gender norms, masculinity is associated with agency, control, and desire, leaving minimal room for the recognition of boys as victims of sexual exploitation. Ultimately, Josh's experience is filtered through a framework that implicitly denies the possibility of his victimization.

This gendered misrecognition becomes particularly evident in the reactions of others. The tag "boy toy," circulated in the aftermath of the scandal, encapsulated the trivialization of Josh's abuse by reframing it as a form of sexual initiation rather than coercion. Such language reflects a broader cultural tendency to interpret female-perpetrated abuse of male minors as less harmful or even desirable, thereby erasing the asymmetry of power that defines CSA. In this context, Josh is not only a victim of abuse but also of the narratives that seek to redefine his experience in terms that align with hegemonic masculinity.

Drawing on R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, it becomes evident that Josh's inability to articulate his victimhood is tied to the pressures of conforming to socially sanctioned ideals of manhood. To view himself as a victim would require a departure from these norms, exposing him to disbelief, stigma, and ridicule. Consequently, his narrative is marked by hesitation, contradiction, and self-doubt, reflecting the limited cultural vocabulary available to male survivor of CSA.

This limitation can be understood through Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice. Josh's account is not easily recognized as credible, as it conflicts with dominant assumptions about gender and power, reflecting testimonial injustice. At the same time, the

lack of adequate frameworks for understanding male-directed CSA points to hermeneutical injustice, where the experience itself resists clear articulation. Through these dynamics, *Boy Toy* exposes that male victims of CSA are not merely overlooked but actively misrecognized. The novel thus calls for a rethinking of how gendered norms shape the representation and recognition of abuse.

Institutional Betrayal and the Aftermath of CSA

The long-term impact of CSA in Barry Lyga's *Boy Toy* is inseparable from the institutional contexts that shape its aftermath. Drawing on Jennifer J. Freyd's concept of institutional betrayal, the novel highlights how the impact of abuse is intensified when systems entrusted with protection fail to respond adequately. Josh's experience does not end with the cessation of the abusive relationship; rather, it is prolonged through legal proceedings, public exposure, and the absence of meaningful institutional support. These responses transform a private trauma into a public narrative that often prioritizes spectacle over understanding, thereby compounding the initial violation.

This institutional failure intersects with gendered expectations to further complicate Josh's recovery. The societal tendency to interpret male-centred CSA through the lens of masculinity- where vulnerability is minimized and sexual experience is misread as agency- undermines the recognition of his victimhood. Therefore, Josh is left navigating a fractured sense of self, caught between external narratives that belittle his experience and an internal struggle to comprehend it. The tag "boy toy," repeatedly invoked within the narrative, encapsulates this tension by reducing abuse to a culturally palatable trope that coercion and power imbalance.

By bringing together institutional betrayal, gendered misrecognition, and epistemic limitation, *Boy Toy* ultimately reveals CSA as a structurally mediated experience rather than an isolated act of deviance. The narrative underscores how systems of authority and cultural norms work to shape not only the occurrence of abuse but also its interpretation and visibility. Hence, it calls attention to the urgent need for a more nuanced that can sufficiently account for male victimhood within both institutional and literary contexts.

Conclusion

Barry Lyga's *Boy Toy* reconfigures the representation of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) by foregrounding male victimhood within institutional and gendered contexts. This paper posits that the novel moves beyond an individualised understanding of abuse, revealing how institutional negligence intensifies them. Through Jennifer J. Freyd's concept of institutional betrayal, it becomes clear that systems meant to protect instead contribute to the victim's prolonged trauma.

Simultaneously, gendered norms, as theorised by R.W. Connell, obscure recognition of male abuse, while forms of epistemic injustice identified by Miranda Fricker further undermine the credibility of the victim's experience. These forces position CSA in the novel as a crisis of recognition shaped by institutional and cultural constraints.

Ultimately the novel, *Boy Toy*, calls for a more inclusive and critically attentive framework for understanding Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)- one that moves beyond gendered assumptions and acknowledges the structured conditions that shape both the experience and interpretation of abuse. By foregrounding the misrecognition of male abuse, the novel challenges dominant narratives and opens space for more nuanced engagements with Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in both literary and social contexts.

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