

When the Unspeakable Happens

BY SILENCE BETRAYED***Sexual Abuse of Children in America***

By John Crewdson
Little, Brown, 228 pages, \$17.95

REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

John Crewdson, chief of the Chicago Tribune's Los Angeles Bureau, won a Pulitzer Prize for articles he wrote about immigration, and he authored "The Tarnished Door" (also about immigration). He then spent over two years reporting on the sexual abuse of children. He was the first journalist to extensively cover the two most highly publicized sexual

abuse cases in the country — McMartin Preschool in Los Angeles and the alleged "child-swapping" parties in Jordan, Minn. Both of these cases are examined in his new book, "By Silence Betrayed."

The word "silence" has accompanied many media accounts of child sexual abuse. But according to the immensely readable facts, figures and analyses John Crewdson presents in this book, perhaps the most comprehensive work on the subject, it is not a lack of voice that betrays the victims of sexual abuse but rather a legal bureaucracy unresponsive to the needs and rights of children.

"For many victims, the journey through the criminal justice system can be an ordeal that matches and sometimes even surpasses the abuse itself," Crewdson suggests.

Among the book's most useful features is Crewdson's presentation, in concise and matter-of-fact prose, of material previously available only in the ponderous and inaccessible language of social scientists. He clearly explains various theories of pedophilia and possible treatments, and less thoroughly examines the etiology and meaning of incest taboo.

Of particular value in "By Si-

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ence Betrayed" is Crewdson's organized and comprehensive presentation of research findings on the subject. Beginning with East Bay sociologist Diana Russell's pioneering investigations nearly 10 years ago, through an inventive national phone survey conducted by the Los Angeles Times, Crewdson presents the awesome, though no longer startling, facts: Nearly a third of all American adults were sexually abused as children, one of four girls and one of seven boys are probably being molested today, and abusers are usually someone the child is related to or otherwise knows and trusts.

Crewdson calls efforts that encourage children to "say no" to molesters "a simplistic answer to an extraordinarily complicated problem." But his own proposal to require higher academic stan-

dards of child-care workers, particularly in light of findings that show children are more likely to be sexually abused at home than in day-care or school, seems equally simplistic. Crewdson writes that "Child abuse knows no class or culture" and that "Except for the fact that they like to have sex with children, child abusers look and act pretty much like everyone else ... the sort of people whose friends will say, 'It can't be true ... He's a nice guy.'"

Similarly, although he blames professionals for their laxity in reporting suspected child abuse, he also reveals that "The California Department of Social Services admits it investigates fewer than half the child abuse reports it receives each year." Perhaps many professionals, despite their legal and ethical obligations, do not report suspected child abuse because they

know their reports will do nothing but lose them the trust of the people involved.

If the sexual abuse of children is, as Crewdson concludes, an illness that can be eradicated (by honoring children's testimony in court, giving longer sentences and rehabilitative services to offenders, and requiring more rigorous standards of employment at child oriented workplaces), then perhaps it can be prevented by social concern and shared responsibility for the rights and well-being of all children, remembering that "Nearly all adults who have been caught having sex with children were badly mistreated by somebody when they were children." ■

San Francisco writer and counselor Sheila Koren has worked with sexually abused children.