

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Whose Child Cries

"Some people think it's wrong and the people who think it's right, probably are. And some people don't even have a choice. Cause when you're it, you don't know what it feels like when you're not. So if you're not and you get to be it—you'll probably like it."
—Annie, age 8, on homosexuality

Whose Child Cries: Children of Gay Parents Talk About Their Lives, by Joe Gantz, Jalmar Press, Rolling Hills Estates, CA, 1983.

Revised by Sheila Koren

Since anti-gay forces seem to hit hardest with arguments about the negative influence they think homosexuals have on children, Joe Gantz' responsible investigation into gay family life, *Whose Child Cries*, filled with quotes like Annie's above, is a much welcome and needed addition to the literature of parenting.

Inspired during a stay near Provincetown, Massachusetts, Gantz, who was previously involved in other aspects of children's literature, decided to advertise in gay publications for families willing to be interviewed about their lifestyles.

What emerges from the author's presentation of in-depth interviews with five families, some parented by gay men, some by lesbians, and one by both (a married couple who both came out of the closet), is an across-the-board rather ordinary existence, usually indistinguishable from any other family that has undergone divorce or separation.

Most of the families portrayed by Gantz (who never actually appears as questioner in the book, so that it is often unclear whether its subjects are talking directly to him or into a tape recorder) lead rather middle class suburban lives. Only one parent involved was active in gay politics and culture (outside of going to bars). Even his son Eric, age 8, expressed dismay about political meetings: "I feel so boooooored! I never listen. If I do, I get even boreder!"

It would be well worth the consideration of people like Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly to note that those they commonly brand as perverse, hedonistic and worse are, as parents, most likely giving their kids piano lessons, cooking casseroles for dinner and arguing about TV usage.

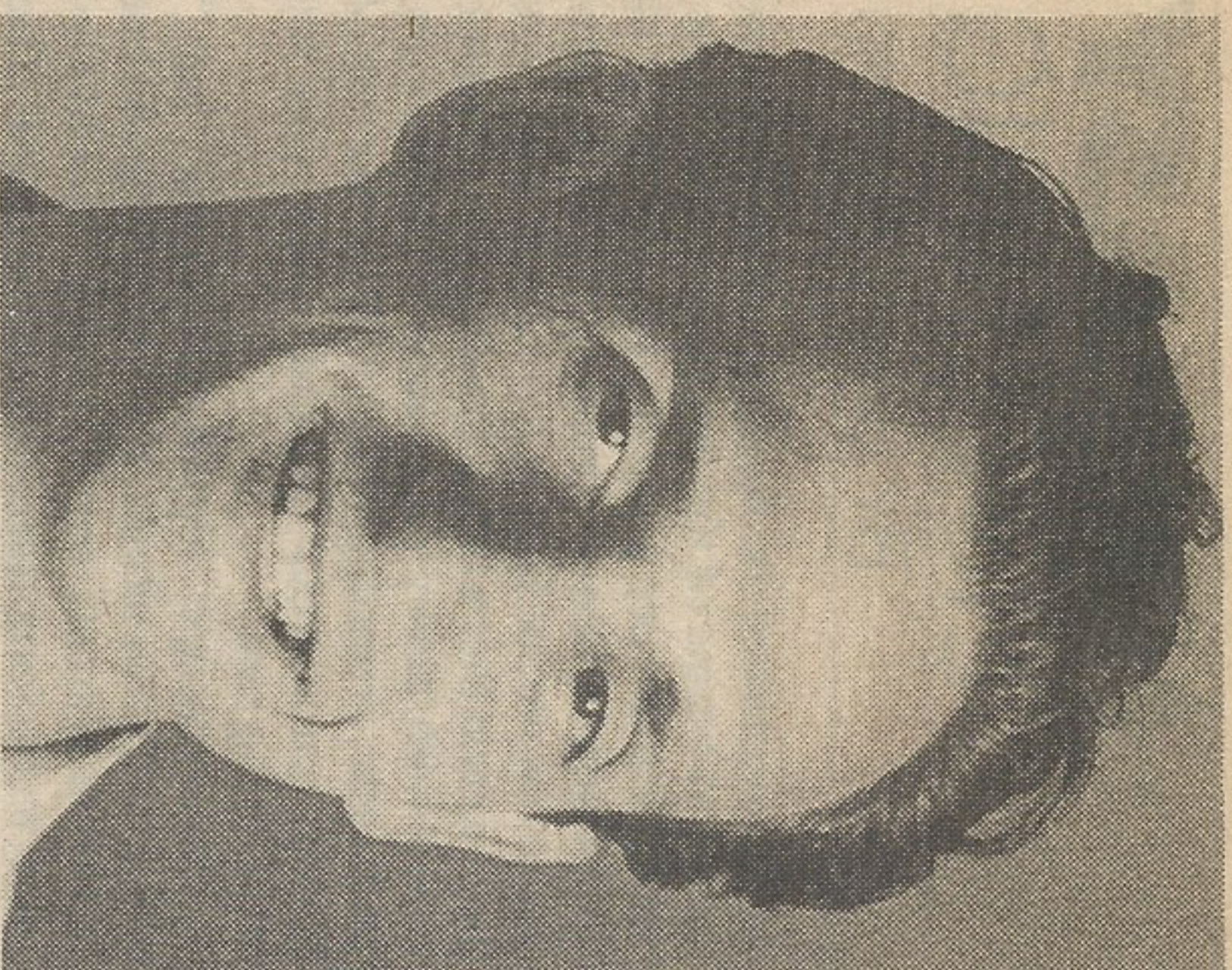
Without question, the largest issue for all families interviewed was dealing with "others:" how to tell friends, neighbors, classmates; how to deal with social rejection and misunderstanding; how to live in a culture that, despite growing numbers of homosexual relationships and families, still produces literature, TV programs, movies and dramas with an almost exclusive heterosexual bias.

The issue becomes not at all how gay parents are treating their children, for as gay parents' groups like to point out, almost all child abuse and neglect situations involve straight parents, but rather how to live happily and healthfully in a culture that barely acknowledges your existence.

How many heterosexual parents could counter the balance and respect involved as when father Jeffrey relates that: "In the last year I've just had hunches that Eric might be straight. And in thinking about it, I've tried quite conscientiously to talk more about positive images of straight people."

The fear of public discredit and ostracization can be so great that some gay parents have not even talked to their children directly about who their new "roommate" really is. "But," as Gantz puts it, "by not openly announcing it, they effectively deprive their children of the opportunity to ask questions."

Many of the homosexual parents interviewed lacked feelings of community with other gays. None of the interviews in this book took



place in San Francisco, New York, Florida or even Provincetown, where the experience of being gay (and presumably of being or having gay parents) would be different. As a lesbian foster parent in San Francisco, I've been pleasantly surprised at the acceptance of my partner and I by representatives of school districts, social service agencies and neighborhood groups. Gantz' interviews took place in locations as diverse as Montreal, Montana, and Seattle, Washington.

It struck me quite profoundly that so many of Gantz' "voluntary subjects," people who actively responded to the author's advertisement for gay families willing to be interviewed, were closeted in their neighborhood and school communities. "Guarding the secret," observes the author, "in these cases thus assumes a large part of these children's lives." Even in the one gay fathers' group mentioned, "most of the fathers are not out to their children."

The ways in which an outsider can subtly misunderstand and reject a gay household is made poignantly clear in the situation of 13 year old Serena, who lives with her father and his lover Andrew in Montreal. "When Serena was younger," Andrew relates, "each morning I would get her dressed, brush her hair, and send her off to school. She thought it was marvelous. In addition to that, I was sewing most of her clothes because she was an odd

size. Serena's teacher came up to me one day at a school picnic. She said 'We feel so sorry for Serena. She doesn't have a mother to do things for her.'"

Serena, who not surprisingly says, "I don't think I ever want to be normal," is aware that she lacks a female role model at home (not unlike other daughters of runaway, incarcerated or deceased mothers). But she comfortably turns to friends for such, "taking," as she puts it, "bits and pieces from each one. Which is probably what a lot of kids do anyway, despite having two parents." One lesbian mother dealt with the role model issue by enrolling her son in a Big Brother program.

It doesn't take most children long to become aware of the social prejudices against gays—and to fear it. "If I fell in love with a girl," says Annie, age 8, "I'd just be roommates with her...you know? Sleep in our own beds, in our own bedrooms. I wouldn't like it if anyone found out about it. If it was one of my friends, I'd just think they wouldn't like me anymore."

"Not all straights are bad," one child said, "Just plain old straight people are ok if they have one exception, which is...that they believe in gay people."

So, although their parents' sexual preference seems itself to have little affect on children, the fact of their parents being outcast can certainly have its negative effects. In one situation described, a babysitter who refused to work for gays was perceived by the child involved as rejecting him.

One mother describes it well in saying of her son: "He's literally forced to become sensitive at any early age. He understand things other kids will maybe understand when they're twice his age."

Among the many other perceptions illuminated by Gantz is how gay parents can run the risk of becoming too lenient by pitying their children too much (because life is difficult for them). In addition, the partner of a gay parent may come to feel less authorized than would a heterosexual step-parent to criticize or otherwise relate as co-parent or authority.

Whose Child Cries is supplemented by an excellent and extensive bibliography and resource guide. The book itself may be somewhat limited in scope, but it still covers a lot of territory and will hopefully pave the way for additional literature on the subject.