

***Boarding School Syndrome: The Psychological Trauma of the 'Privileged' Child (2015)***  
by Joy Schaverien, published by Routledge

Simon Partridge

**Why upper class boys do not cry**

**T**his book is the culmination of twenty-five years of Schaverien's painstaking observations in her psychotherapy consulting room of the sometimes far-reaching effects of boarding school on her clients. She is a highly-respected, Jungian analyst and art therapist, well informed by attachment theory, trauma studies, and neuroscience. Somewhat surprisingly she is a non-boarder, but she lets us know her father was badly bullied at his prep school. Her book, in its helpful historical chapters, informs us that boarding schools, originally of monastic origin, have been in existence in these islands since 598<sup>AD</sup>, that is nearly 1,420

years! It is hard to disagree with Schaverien's judgement that there is a "cultural taboo on noticing that there is a problem with this socially condoned abandoning of the very young" (p. xi). And until very recently, as I know to my cost, this taboo extended to the realm of psychotherapy as well as the wider society of the British Isles. Boarding schools still are a legacy of British culture and were implanted widely at the time of imperial expansion.

I want to start by giving an impression of the broad scope of the book, and then later return to Schaverien's theoretical innovation, her concept that she calls "boarding school syndrome".

The book is wide-ranging and at times requires a strong stomach to take the historical and not so historical accounts of violence, abuse, and neglect. It is divided into four parts: the first covers the history of both boys and girls boarding schools; the second looks at the developmental trauma that boarding can cause, and focuses on case studies; the third examines more closely how primary attachments can be broken; and the last looks at how bodily functions are affected by the institution of boarding. I think few will come away from the book without learning several things for the first time. For instance as a survivor from a boys-only prep school from the mid-1950s I had little idea of what went on in a girls-only boarding school, even though my sister, thirteen months younger, was in one only a couple of miles away—now I do.

The non-monastic tradition of sending children as young as seven away from home seems to have originated with the aristocracy of the Late Middle Ages and was unquestioned until very recently. Preparatory schools were not introduced until the late eighteenth century, so children from four upwards could be found in the same school (that seems to be the case in the new Chinese boarding schools today). Schaverien describes in harrowing detail the overcrowding and medieval brutality: for example, boys being beaten to death or roasted on a fire was not unknown in such institutions, where older boys usually ruthlessly exploited the younger, both sexually and otherwise. Things had reached such a pitch by the mid-nineteenth century that a Royal Commission, The Clarendon Report (2005), was established in 1861 (reported in 1864) to inquire into the nine major public schools of the day. This led to the curbing of some of the extremes, but also gave a stamp of approval to this form of "away from home" education because they "moulded the character of English gentlemen". However, as Schaverien points up, elements of this institutional brutality lingered until fagging<sup>1</sup> and beating were abolished in the 1980s and 1990s.

Girls' boarding schools were only established after the Clarendon reforms and were never in the same league of brutality, yet as Schaverien records girls were also subjected to dehumanising and restrictive controls in other ways. It is well to remember that private boarding education is far from having a "glorious tradition". It is the psychological repercussions of these insensitive institutions that Schaverien explores from a relational and psychological perspective, informed by trauma studies, in the rest of the book.

Schaverien has an acute clinician's eye and she uses this to great effect in her illustrative case study vignettes. Her first concerns a client she calls Theo, a pupil at a Catholic prep school from eight to thirteen, and a major public school until seventeen. Theo's journey through therapy is documented in great detail and I think will be helpful to any therapist faced with a boarding school survivor. Theo is an exemplar of someone abandoned by his mother, severed from his familiar home environment and attachments, and then expected to survive basically on his own in a frightening, even terrifying world, from which there is no escape. Schaverien powerfully conveys that this normative educational practice (for his class) bears all the ingredients necessary for developmental trauma, though she recognises some schools were worse than others.

Theo's recovery of his dissociated memories is brilliantly documented and illustrated through a series of drawings he did with Schaverien's encouragement, drawing on her Jungian and art therapy expertise. Many images are reproduced and vividly bring home the various "horrors" Theo had to face if he was to cease endless unconscious repetitions of the traumatic abuse he had suffered in school. I think they leave no doubt whatsoever as to the damage that can be done to a young mind and body when subjected to gross unkindnesses and degradation. And one has to admire the tenacity with which both client and therapist stuck to the task.

By steps we are led to what I consider to be the pivotal heart of Schaverien's book. In Chapter Seven, titled "The return", Schaverien gently enables Theo to bring into verbal consciousness a terrifying "flashback" where he is convinced that he had killed someone: "I think the corpse had the significance of an accuser or mute witness to a crime, and I was literally terrified of it coming to light." I do not have space to replicate the unpacking of what lay behind the terror associated with the corpse—it is a very convincing piece of psychotherapy—but with the aid of a picture created by Theo earlier it becomes very clear that the flashback refers to the point at which, in defence of his feeling, "home self", Theo's psyche had split in a fundamental way. He had witnessed the headmaster beating a boy's hands with a leather-covered truncheon, realised it was wrong but had been powerless, as a captive, to do anything about it. Theo shut down emotionally to deal with the extreme cruelty he witnessed. This is the moment of "the split" when what he called the feeling "home self" is sundered from the observing/intellectual "school self". It is at this juncture Schaverien pinpoints the creation of what she calls a "Boarding School Syndrome", "vulnerability is hidden from then on . . . the initial traumatic event varies but the effect is the same . . . an *encapsulation of the self takes place and may last a lifetime*" (p. 98, original italics). At several points in the book Schaverien identifies the "traumatic event"—sometimes remembered, often repressed or dissociated—as the "threshold moment" when the six-, seven-, or eight-year-old child realises that parents really are disappearing from their life for weeks on end, for what at that age is an unmeasurable length of time.

It took Schaverien and Theo some four years of twice a week psychotherapy to access his hidden horrors and work through the psychological and somatic consequences. As an ex-boarder I was profoundly and very uncomfortably moved, and I defy any half-sentient psychotherapist or counsellor not to feel likewise. As they review their work together and Schaverien tells Theo she is writing up his story (with his approval), he wonders whether readers will say “it is not like that now”. Reflecting further he commented, in a way that Schaverien highlights, that for him even more significant than the cruelty experienced and seen was the realisation of the “terrible loss of the abandonment by his parents” (p. 108). It seems with the best of intentions, they had sent him away and placed him in harm’s way. But Theo is emphatic that the *loneliness* he experienced was “the primary wound”. I think therapists would do well to remember that the parental/caregiver failures of omission are sometimes more damaging than the ones of commission—neglect can outweigh abusive actions.

The book contains many other interesting and useful insights into matters as diverse as: trauma theory (indeed it is a good introduction if one is unfamiliar); broken primary and secondary attachments; child boarders from the Empire suffering the double rupture of loss of parents or employees in the family/nannies and familiar location. She discusses homesickness—reframed as akin to bereavement; the intimate implications of boarding for boys’ and girls’ bodies—usually ignored and taking us beyond the purely psychological. The implications of “the split” for sexual development and identity—leading often to a confused and emotionally illiterate sexuality with profound ramifications for later “relationships” are also explored. In short there is much to take in and ponder.

However, Schaverien seems unaware of the alternative boarding tradition of *Efterskole* in Denmark where pupils can elect to go to boarding schools, from the age of fourteen onwards. They are open to all and based around principles of “enlightenment for life, general education and democratic citizenship”. Proportionately four times as many pupils attend boarding schools in social democratic Denmark than the UK<sup>2</sup>—here is an alternative democratic model that deserves further attention.

In the final chapter Schaverien returns to her innovatory conception of a “Boarding School Syndrome”, though acknowledging antecedents among work with First Nation children removed to boarding schools in Canada and Australia to “deculturalise” them (Smith, 2009). This is what the final report of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls “cultural genocide”.<sup>3</sup> I welcome this innovation as a boarding school survivor because it is clear that it has helped to put the “taboo topic” on the intellectual map, evidenced by the media coverage of the book and its inclusion in the bestselling Routledge Mental Health titles for 2015. However, as Schaverien acknowledges the topic needs further research. Serious dissociation of the self due to *external* trauma or the failure of primary caregivers, as Fairbairn (1952) discovered as long ago as the 1940s (and later developed by other analysts such as Winnicott, Guntrip, Sharpe, Payne,

Rycroft, Sutherland, and Bowlby), can arise long before schooling begins. I think we need to ask how such very early splitting interacts with that associated with boarding. This might partly explain why some boarders become what Schaverien calls “casualties”, exhibiting unresolved disorganised states of mind (p. 229), rather than “strategic survivors” (Duffell, 2000, p. 10) who fall into a more ambivalent–avoidant attachment category. The theory also has to take into account further reforms in British boarding itself: for example, the advent of professional pastoral care, growth in co-educational boarding and flexi-boarding where pupils are not in boarding school seven days a week. On the negative side is the fact that British boarding schools now draw around a third of their pupils from overseas and thus the imperial boarding tradition with its grave dangers of multiple rupture will be repeated in a new guise.

What does seem unchallengeable from the work of Schaverien and her colleagues is that the prospect of serious splitting or dissociation of the self (though it usually remains encapsulated and is of varying degrees of seriousness) is inevitable if one is sent away to board at a young age. The human body/psyche is simply not equipped for such autonomy then, and no institution, however caring, can really substitute for good enough parental care (of course, such care is not always forthcoming at home, but that is another issue).

I think this practice really amounts to socially sanctioned child abuse and it is high time as a civilised society that we set legal limits on the lower age at which children should be allowed to be sent to board. There is an argument to be had about what age that should be, but surely there is now no excuse for the therapy world not to be at the forefront of this debate. It seems to me we have it within our grasp to prevent “early” boarding school syndrome at least. We should also not forget that private boarding school pupils make up less than 1% of the school population yet exercise quite disproportionate influence on British political life (disproportionately 18% of May’s Cabinet are ex-boarders), the professions, and wider culture. It is not far-fetched to link the current government’s enthusiasm for “austerity” with their capacity to “split”, which has been so subtly conditioned by years of boarding school.

My conclusion is that this brave, honest, and helpful, though disturbing, book should be on the shelves of any psychotherapist who wants to understand and help heal the psychological perils of boarding, particularly of the early kind. It should also inform educationalists, social workers, and social policy makers as well.

## Notes

1. Fagging was the system whereby house prefects used younger boys as slave-like servants, who could be summoned at whim to make tea, toast etc. This was an integral part of the “hierarchy of oppression” whereby much of the school authority was sub-contracted to older pupils and provided fertile ground for abuse of various kinds— a precursor of “divide and rule”. I remember it well.

2. See [www.efterskole.dk/en](http://www.efterskole.dk/en). Accessed 16 January 2016.
3. See news of final report of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission dealing with boarding schools for First Nation peoples—[www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/12/15/time-to-lift-the-burden-of-residential-schools-trudeau-says.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/12/15/time-to-lift-the-burden-of-residential-schools-trudeau-says.html). Accessed 7 February 2016.

### References

- Duffell, N. (2000). *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*. London: Lone Arrow Press. Available at [www.boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk](http://www.boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk) (accessed 16 January 2016).
- Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1952). *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Smith, A. (2009). Indigenous peoples and boarding schools: a comparative study. *Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Eighth session*, New York, 18–29 May 2009. Available at: [www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E\\_C\\_19\\_2009\\_crp1.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E_C_19_2009_crp1.pdf) (accessed 16 January 2016).
- The Clarendon Report (2005). *English Public Schools in the Nineteenth Century*. Thoemmes Continuum. <http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/the-clarendon-report-9781843711063/#sthash.13DUGw4f.dpuf> (accessed 22 November 2016).