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BOOKS & CRITICS

BOOKS

BABES IN THE WOODS

Anybody could be tracking your children online. Even me.

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

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I spent the summer I was 19 at my parents' house on the north shore of Long Island, which was pleasant enough but hardly the last word in teenage excitement. When a friend called and invited me to spend a weekend with her family in Delaware, I was packed by bedtime. At first light, I was sitting at the Stony Brook train station with a round-trip ticket and a tin of cookies for my friend's mother. Life had taken a delightful turn, and the only fly in the ointment was that a young man was trying, desperately, to catch my eye.



JULIA STAITE

He walked past me once, turned around and walked by again, and finally made a wide circle around the bench, sat down next to me, and said, "Hi, Caitlin!" That caught my attention. "Hi," I said politely and tried to place him. He was scruffy and a few years older than me—was he a handyman my mother had hired? There was something mocking about him, but he asked about my parents very respectfully, calling my father "Mr. Flanagan." He wanted to know if I still lived on Gnarled Hollow Road. I did. He said that he'd called me the week before, but that no one had answered. And then he did something that changed my feeling of annoyance to one of alarm: He rattled off my parents' phone number.

My mother had taught me quite a few things about men: I should be wary of those I did not know, polite to those I did, and tough as nails with those who were disrespectful or in any way threatening. But none of these rules seemed to apply in this situation.

That young man didn't do me any harm, but neither was he a good-natured kidder. The train arrived, and he lingered behind me as I boarded it. Then he pulled himself up to the bottom step and called my name. When he had my attention, he said—quietly, but with just enough menace that I have remembered him to this day—"You ought to be more careful about what you write on that tag." I stared

Generation MySpace: Helping Your Teen Survive Online Adolescence

by Candice M. Kelsey
Avalon

To Catch a Predator: Protecting Your Kids From Online Enemies Already in Your Home

by Chris Hansen
Dutton

dumbly at the cardboard luggage tag I had filled in so carefully. He jumped back down to the platform, the train pulled away, and that was the last I saw of him.

He'd tricked me by using two things against me: some personal information and my youth. My ability to recognize social cues, to distinguish an approach that was well-intentioned from one that was threatening, was not what it would be in five years' time. I wasn't an unworldly person or an especially naive one; I was just young. My mother hadn't left me at the train station for five minutes before someone caught sight of me—a pretty girl, dressed for an excursion. That's the way of things, I suppose: Set your children loose, as you someday must, and there will be all kinds of people waiting for them.

The history of civilization is the history of sending children out into the world. The child of a 17th-century weaver would have been raised and educated at home, prey to the diseases and domestic accidents of his time, but protected from strangers who meant him harm. As the spheres of home and work began to separate, cleaving parents from their sons and daughters, children faced dangers of an altogether different kind. The world is not, nor has it ever been, full of people who prey upon children. But it has always had more than enough of them, and it always will. Think of the Children's Crusade: Several thousand children marched out of Cologne to liberate the Holy Land but barely made it to Brindisi; they ended up dead or sold into sex slavery, an army of innocents easily picked off within a few weeks' march from home.

With the Internet, children are marching out into the world every second of every day. They're sitting in their bedrooms—wearing their retainers, topped up with multivitamins, radiating the good care and safekeeping that is their lot in life in America at the beginning of the new century—and they're posting photographs of themselves, typing private sentiments, unthinkingly laying down a trail of bread crumbs leading straight to their dance recitals and Six Flags trips and Justin Timberlake concerts, places where anyone with an interest in retainer-wearing 13-year-olds is free to follow them. All that remains to be seen is whether anyone *will* follow them, and herein lies a terrifying uncertainty, which neither skeptics nor doomsayers can deny: The Internet has opened a portal into what used to be the inviolable space of the home, through which anything, harmful or harmless, can pass. It won't be closing anytime soon—or ever—and all that parents can do is hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

Those preparing for the worst will find their darkest fears realized in [To Catch a Predator](#). The show is a spin-off of the news program *Dateline NBC*, and every episode features the same satisfying format: The network has partnered with an organization called Perverted Justice, which is dedicated to luring and then busting the creepy men who use the Internet to seduce youngsters. The team creates a decoy: an online presence claiming to be a teenager who eagerly participates in increasingly pornographic online chat with an adult male. The “teen” arranges an assignation—the parents are supposedly out of town for the weekend—and the scumbag wanders into a setup par excellence: NBC has the house rigged with cameras and microphones, local law enforcement is watching the whole thing from a van parked at the curb, and cops are hiding in the bushes ready to bring the guy down if he bolts.

What makes the show so fantastic is not only the deeply satisfying element of watching justice instantly meted out. It's also that before the perp gets cuffed and loaded into the paddy wagon he's grilled by the show's host/anchor, a journalist named Chris Hansen, who in every episode gets to deliver, straight-faced, lines that sound like they come from a Will Ferrell movie, as when he confronts a pedophile (hell-bent on bestiality and dessert) with the evidence against him: “You're naked. There's a 14-year-old girl. You're chasing a cat around. You've got Cool Whip.” The show's been on the air long enough that when Hansen suddenly walks into the room and confronts the predator, it's a bit like the moment when Allen Funt would suddenly show up in the middle of a screwy day at the dry cleaners. (“I knew it!” the perps sometimes say when Hansen appears.)

To Catch a Predator puts an innocent in contact with a trickster and then allows the inevitable to take place. But after you watch a few episodes, it dawns on you that the naifs in this equation are actually the idiot perverts who take the bait and end up in the slammer. Calling this sad-sack collection of wankers and flashers “predators” accords them a level of evil genius they haven’t earned; most of them look like they couldn’t track down the towel department in a Wal-Mart. I won’t lie: Sweet little Mary may swear like a sailor when she logs on to [MySpace](#); but unless she’s the kind of gal who responds to a stranger’s request to “cum in you” with a cheery “I don’t want to get preggers!” she should be safe. And a significant number of the decoys who successfully lure predators are male, a fact that one senses is a grave disappointment to the producers and probably reveals less about Internet crimes than about one of the sad, old truths about sexual initiation for gay teenage boys.

Hansen has written a book about the program, which he created. The book is also called *To Catch a Predator*, and its subtitle—“Protecting Your Kids From Online Enemies Already in Your Home”—is true to the spirit of the show, which involves both informing viewers and scaring the bejesus out of them. When I was a kid, the most frightening moment in horror movies occurred when the terrified girl learned that the creepy telephone caller was making his calls from “inside the house.” It never made any sense—nobody had two phone lines back then. But the idea itself was horrifying enough to warrant a bit of poetic license. The sensation of being home—safe, behind locked doors—must have some strong hold on the human psyche, because we’re particularly outraged and horrified by crimes that occur to people in their own houses. As hideous as the Polly Klaas kidnapping-and-murder case was, it had an added resonance because the 12-year-old had been in her own room—*home*—before she was taken into the night and killed. Hansen’s subtitle, lurid though it may be, speaks to the fear that makes parents so queasy: Flooding through that Internet connection are any number of people whose interest in their children could be predatory.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children maintains that one out of five kids who use the Internet has been propositioned for sex. It’s hard to know just how accurately such events can be quantified, and when I first read the statistic, I found it hard to believe that, if indeed so many children were being propositioned, more parents weren’t uniting in outrage, rather than wiring up their kids at a blistering pace. My friends with teenagers were very open with them and were well-informed about the dangers of the Internet; I couldn’t imagine one out of five of those kids being propositioned by a stranger and not telling their parents.

But Hansen provides a second bit of information that made me wonder if that statistic wasn’t in fact on the low side. As part of the first episode of his show, Hansen convened a panel of tweens and teens, among them children of some of his colleagues at NBC, and asked how many of them had been “approached online by someone in a sexual way that made you feel uncomfortable.” Almost all the kids raised their hands. Then he asked how many had told their parents. Not a hand went up. And when he asked why they hadn’t told their parents, all the kids in the room said they didn’t tell because they didn’t want their parents to take away their Internet connections.

Suddenly, it all made sense to me: Teenagers don’t tell their parents that someone nasty got through to them for the same reason I didn’t tell my parents that kids were dropping acid at a party—because they wouldn’t let me go to those parties anymore. That’s the horrible, inescapable fact of coming of age: The moment you choose the world over your parents, you’ve chosen to make your own decisions about what’s safe and what’s not, with only your own wits to protect you.

Just how dangerous is the unsupervised use of the Internet by adolescents? Nobody knows. I suspect that in a decade or so we’ll all have a very different set of beliefs about how and when and for what purposes teenagers should be allowed to go online. When something new comes along, it takes a while for parents to sort out what’s safe and what isn’t, and even longer for their

conclusions to become commonly held assumptions about good parenting. In the future it may be unheard-of for a teenage girl from a loving family to disappear into her room every night for two hours of unsupervised e-chatting and instant messaging and MySpacing. Then again, it may be even more common than it is today. All we know for sure is that our children are living in the midst of a technological revolution, and that they're drawn to it like moths to a flame.

Most parents of teenage girls with Internet connections will tell you that their daughters' physical safety isn't in jeopardy—they've taken all kinds of precautions they think ensure this—but that the online experience is doing nothing for the girls' peace of mind. Not many people are as ill-served by having their natterings subjected to instantaneous, global transmission as adolescent girls. In the first place, these girls' feelings can be hurt by even a well-intentioned comment or question, and having a caustic remark that would have been bad enough if kept between two people suddenly unleashed to the whole clique, team, or school can be a wretched experience. Furthermore, because this new technology can make the old girl standbys of gossip and social exclusion and taunting more efficient—and therefore more cruel—many girls arrive at school each morning having experienced the equivalent of a public hazing in the privacy of their own rooms. While Johnny's upstairs happily sneaking hard-core pornography past his Internet filter, poor Judy is next door weeping into her pillow because everyone in the eighth grade now knows that she still uses pads, not tampons. (Meanwhile, in a galaxy far, far away, Mom and Dad are trying to figure out how to watch *Dancing With the Stars* now that the remote's on the fritz again.)

If you have an adolescent and you're clueless about the "social networking" sites they love, it's probably a good idea to pick up a copy of a first-rate new guidebook, *Generation MySpace*, by Candice M. Kelsey, a teacher at a private high school in Los Angeles. She's the kind of super-pretty, nonjudgmental young adult kids adore, and seems to have a sensible grasp of both the fears of parents and the desires of teenagers. She's also particularly perceptive about why MySpace can cause a teenage girl so much pain. As she began to understand the site's increasing hold on her students, she writes,

fewer and fewer days would go by that didn't end with a distraught student sitting on the floor of my office in search of advice about how to respond to various MySpace-related dilemmas.

Kelsey describes an experiment she conducts each year in which kids are asked not to log on for an entire week. Many of them can't hack it, but the ones who do often find themselves happier and calmer.

Some of the most harmless aspects of MySpace would have crushed me at 14. Members get to list their "Top 8" friends, a list they can change at whim. It's an ingenious number, because it's just large enough to make exclusion really hurt—eight people, and there wasn't any room at all for me?

One of the great paradoxes of our age is that at the exact moment when a huge number of teachers, parents, and school administrators have dedicated themselves to the emotional well-being and self-confidence of adolescent girls, a technology has come along that's virtually guaranteed to undermine that confidence. A girl can go to school and happily discover that it's possible for her to become a scientist when she grows up, but that may be cold comfort when she comes home to discover that five people just dropped her from their Top 8.

The primary engine of MySpace's stupendous growth isn't the Internet or the additional opportunities for cattiness it provides, but the fathomless narcissism of the young. There's no more ardent devotee of a MySpace profile than its creator, lovingly adjusting the lighting on the perfect self-portrait, changing the song that serenades it, the graphics that surround it. The page can speak broadly to others, but others are almost beside the point; every profile is a sonnet to the self. Today's girls spend hours looking at their

MySpace profiles, fiddling and tinkering with them—much as I once sat in front of my vanity mirror, holding my hair up and letting it fall, smiling one way and then the other. For girls, the powerful need to be alone in their bedrooms—dreaming, writing in diaries, looking at themselves in the mirror—is married to a kind of exhibitionism. Why was I trying out my hair so many different ways, if not to calculate its potential effect on others? The Internet makes it possible to combine these two opposed desires: to be alone trying something out and to be exposed in public for everyone to see. A decade from now, a large group of parents may be telling anyone who will listen that this is a very dangerous combination indeed.

Last year, all of a sudden, the phrase *Club Penguin* entered my house via my 8-year-old twin sons, and they were so completely immersed in recounting to me its endless complexities that there was no way to slow them down and elicit a concise definition. I did grasp that it was on the Internet and that it was “safe”—they kept repeating this to me, as though somehow they’d absorbed (accurately) that it was an essential part of the incantation that gets a mother to allow you to do something online. So one day, with me sitting beside them and feeling as though I were summoning Beelzebub, they logged on and played for a while—their first Internet gaming experience.

What fun they had! [Club Penguin](#) is a cute, happy virtual world in which you create an adorable little penguin in whose guise you can travel to all sorts of fun spots and play video games (making pizzas against the clock, playing ice hockey, going inner-tubing), for which you win coins. With the coins you can buy clothes and furniture and cool stuff for your virtual igloo. The boys loved it. Everyone loved it. Club Penguin was the most happening event of the second grade; to be denied it was to be denied not just a pleasure but an essential mode of schoolyard discussion and inclusion, a way of being a second-grader.

But I never let them play again, because something about it scared me: The penguins could chat with each other. True, the chatting is monitored by paid professionals and a citizens’ army of tattlers, children who’ve been members for more than 30 days and who’ve been commissioned as “Secret Agents” to loiter in the public spaces and report on inappropriate chat, including the exchange of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. But these protocols only highlight the paradox at Club Penguin’s core: It’s certainly the safest way for unsupervised children to talk to potentially malevolent strangers—but why would you want them to do that in the first place?

Shortly after that first visit, once my interfering children had been packed off to school, I made myself a nice cup of coffee and logged on. I chose a pink penguin, and because no versions of my real name were available, I picked one of my mother’s nicknames for me. But—O, hated Internet, and its font of unwanted knowledge—even that turned out to be taken, so I had to be “Tootsabella2.”

For a long while nobody wanted anything to do with me (I cannot adequately describe how much this felt like a real-life snubbing), so I just waddled around, wallflower at the orgy. It was immediately apparent that girls and boys have very different attitudes about what to do in Club Penguin. The girls want to hang out, chat, and send little hearts to people, and the boys want to play video games. It’s this dynamic that makes social-networking sites so much more dangerous for girls than for boys: It’s in girls’ nature to form relationships, to trade intimacies, to console and confide. It’s also in the nature of the Internet to allow emotions to escalate in the blink of an eye; indeed, many of the traits that concern parents of adolescent girls—meanness, aggressive flirting with boys, budding Internet addictions—are clearly being born out there on the icebergs and snowcaps of Club Penguin. It has lowered the point of entry to social-networking sites from middle school to elementary school, opening up young children to a type of interaction that even tweens and teenagers often find overwhelming and hurtful. Did I see anything dangerous happen? I did not. But I saw any number of flame wars, and—more unsettling—even more cases of penguins deep in happy conversation who suddenly vanished from the scene,

perhaps off to a private chat in an out-of-the-way igloo, safe from the prying eyes of the Secret Agents.

The next time I logged on, I was at last befriended—or should I say, courted—by a wonderful blue penguin whom I'll call "Denks." He treated me the way a girl wants to be treated: He took me to great places, he paid for everything, and he showed me how to do things. We went sledding, we played Mancala, and Denks turned out to be excellent at Connect Four, so we played a lot of that, too.

I realized, during our second or third game, that I was having my very first online relationship. And as I sat there, dropping my blue pieces into the grid (something I'd done countless times in the real world with my own children), I wondered who was playing the game with me. The thought that Denks might actually be a pervy adult wasn't nearly as unsettling as the thought that he might really be a little boy somewhere, home from school for the day, entertaining himself by logging on to a safe Web site and making friends with someone he thought was a little girl named Tootsabella.

MySpace has more than 100 million members and an unknown number of unregistered lurkers. Last spring, I became one of the latter. The site seemed hopelessly confusing at first, so to get started, I went to the search box and typed in the name of the high school closest to my house. It's the best girls' school in Los Angeles, with a walled and beautiful campus. As soon as I entered the name, the profiles of several girls popped up, and I clicked on the first one, a girl I'll call "Jenna." (Protecting her identity seems at once important and ridiculous: I am taking pains to make private information that she has taken pains to make public.)

I could tell in a minute that this was no fake profile. I taught at a Los Angeles private school for many years, and the associations and places to which she made reference were all of a piece—at once too prosaic and too specific to be fabricated. She was a nice girl, you could tell that right away: Her profile picture showed her in a bikini at the beach, but it wasn't posed or self-consciously provocative. There were pictures from all kinds of parties and from trips to Disneyland and the Santa Monica Pier, and she had a steady boyfriend who posted to her page all the time, as well as a group of friends and family members who clearly thought the world of her. As I read her messages (especially the charming ones between her and her boyfriend, who had moved from "best friend" to "lover" status over the course of many sweet and well-documented months), I felt guilty, as though I were looking at things I shouldn't have been, as though I were lingering at a doorway, overhearing something private. And yet all of them were posted in a place that was designed not just to allow me in but to welcome me.

In that moment, the reality of my new life on the far side of a generation gap hit me fully. My fundamental understanding of privacy—the notion that one shouldn't listen in on the personal conversations of others—marked me as old. I'm not old because I like to peek into people's private lives; I'm old because I feel guilty about it. And I couldn't shake the feeling that—merely by trolling slowly and patiently through her pictures and conversations and lists of favorite things—I had become predatory. Dwelling secretly in the private life of a beautiful young girl seemed inherently sinister, and I had to remind myself, over and over, that I was doing nothing wrong.

Because I'm the mom of two preteens growing up in a social milieu not so different from Jenna's, her MySpace page was a comfort to me. Her friends were nice, their pursuits and pleasures were wholesome enough (much more wholesome than what my friends and I were up to a quarter century ago), and her boyfriend was pure gold—a stalwart encourager of her studies, a champion of her parents and family whose own MySpace photo was a picture of the two of them. And because I'm someone who loves to read about the day-to-day nature of people's lives, the page was very interesting to me. But if I were the kind of person who regards beautiful teenage girls—especially cloistered ones from good families—as objects of irresistible erotic desire, I would not have been comforted or merely "interested"; I would have been excited, perhaps unbearably so.

The current resurgence of girls' schools like Jenna's is based on the idea that to become strong and powerful, girls need an environment in which they are protected from the various energies and appetites of adolescent boys. Free of the sexually charged atmosphere that will always pervade coed high schools, they can emerge and evolve in ways they never could in the presence of ogling, domineering boys. What contemporary parents of daughters—among them some of the most liberal-minded—have come to believe is not so different from what 19th-century parents believed: The sexual unfolding of a young girl is such a fraught process emotionally as well as physically that she needs to be carefully sheltered from the myriad forces that would seek to exploit or coarsen her as she reconciles the girl that she was with her biological destiny. That Jenna's parents would pour such a river of cash into her school tuition to grant her that safe and gentle place, and that—at the cost of not one cent—she would have created a MySpace page so dangerously revealing (in every sense of the word) is a terrific irony.

In the middle of Jenna's profile was a calendar relentlessly ticking down the days, hours, minutes, and seconds until graduation, which was a little more than a week away. I glanced up from the computer screen, through the scrim of leafy branches and out in the general direction of the school, startled by the realization that Jenna—this person I had never heard of 20 minutes before and about whose intimate life I now knew quite a bit—was a flesh-and-blood human being who was at that moment sitting in a building a few blocks away. I minimized the MySpace page on my screen and typed the name of Jenna's school into my search engine; the school's home page had a calendar button, and I clicked on it. I waited for the site to ask me for a password, but it didn't. Up came a complete record of Jenna's whereabouts for the following week: the exam schedule, the school awards ceremony, the graduation exercises, the faculty-appreciation luncheon.

Just about every kid in the country knows not to post his or her last name or address or phone number on the Internet. The paltry set of facts that I so innocently wrote on my luggage tag so long ago are the only bits of information that kids guard jealously today. What they don't realize is that when the vast matrix of information easily available on the Internet is cross-referenced to the bountiful data they supply on MySpace, it can lead right to them. You tell me where your daughter goes to school and what sport she plays, and I'll tell you what day and time she'll be playing a game in a public park. Look around that park while you're watching the game—it's not inconceivable that one of the men there has come to catch a glimpse of a particular girl on the team.

I'm a well-intentioned, busybody mom who's forever sharing snacks and finding Kleenexes for kids I don't know. Like most former high-school teachers, I can't help thinking that whenever there are teenagers in a crowd, they must be on a field trip that I'm chaperoning. Something in my mien and voice must make them think so too—I've scolded some pretty tough-looking teenage boys for swearing around my children, and I've never received anything other than an embarrassed apology. There couldn't be any stranger in the world less inclined to cause harm to Jenna than I was—and thank God for that, because when I saw on the school's Web site that her graduation rehearsal was the following week, I flipped open my calendar and jotted down the day and time.

The day of the rehearsal was glorious, the way days in early June often are in this part of Los Angeles. I wore a pink linen skirt, a white sleeveless top, and a pair of low-heeled leather sandals, and I was so caught up in congratulating myself for approximating so exactly the look of a middle-aged, private-school mom that I had to remind myself that that's exactly what I am.

At the school, things were hopping: Younger girls were being dismissed, a party-supply truck was delivering hundreds of white folding chairs for the ceremony, a uniformed guard was waving car-pool drivers onto the horseshoe drive in front of the school. I walked down the sidewalk and passed the front gate—something I've done literally hundreds of times (I used to live just down the street), but this time my heart was racing. I gave the guard a big, familiar smile, and she nodded and smiled back—she had

the look of someone trying to place a familiar face. I kept walking down the block.

I wasn't sure what I was trying to prove to myself, but it certainly wasn't that someone like me could slip onto the campus—the school that several of my friends' children attend and that is my own polling place. I got to the end of the block and turned the corner; I knew the rehearsal was to be held in the field behind the main building, and I was hoping that maybe I could get at least a glimpse of the seniors. And that's when I heard them: Girls, a lot of them, were laughing and talking, and a teacher—her voice much louder, coming through speakers—was trying to impose some order. A piano played the first notes of something that sounded like a processional march, and it was soon joined by the sweet music of a hundred girls singing: They were preparing for graduation by practicing their alma mater. They started, they stopped, they squealed with laughter. The teacher spoke into the microphone, more sternly this time, and they began again.

But that, you will be relieved to know, was as close as I got: The campus was surrounded by a wall as thick and imposing as any ever built around a school dedicated to the teaching and sheltering of girls. So I stood there feeling foolish, slid my camera back in my purse, and slunk away. The place to meet Jenna (without breaking the law) was not on the walled campus of a private school.

There would be other opportunities. Every so often, for the rest of the summer, I'd log on to Jenna's profile. I just missed the gang's trip to a hot-dog stand in Hollywood, and I would have gone to the fast-food place on Wilshire where they went for burgers one afternoon, but Jenna said she wasn't going, so I skipped it, too. Whenever a group of girls came bouncing down my neighborhood shopping street, I scanned their faces, and once I thought I saw her through the big plate-glass window of Jamba Juice, but I wasn't sure. Her boyfriend went away on vacation for a couple of weeks, and she missed him terribly. But then he came back, and before you knew it, they were both ready to go off to college.

I sort of drifted away after that, although I keep an eye on Jenna now and then. Her university has a helpful online student directory, so I know her campus address and phone number; it was also surprisingly easy to learn the times and locations of two of her courses. According to Mapquest, I could be waiting outside her French class in a little over two hours. But what do you think I am—some kind of creep?

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