

# Abuse excuses

By David Futrelle

**W**e live in an age, it is perhaps now commonplace to observe, obsessed with victims and victimhood. Daytime talk shows offer a daily parade of victims—ranging from victims of sexual abuse (and alleged abuse) to those who claim to have been abducted and tortured by aliens. Lawyers plead the “abuse excuse” in attempts to save their clients. White male “patriots” claim to be victimized by affirmative action. Nearly half the states have adopted constitutional amendments said to protect the “rights” of victims of crime, and a national victims’ rights amendment has already been introduced into the Senate.

Yet for all the attention paid to victimhood, our thinking on the subject is terribly crude. Victims are so idealized, and perpetrators so demonized, that we often come a cropper when we are faced—as we often are—with a perpetrator who has himself or herself been victimized. If we claim to truly care about all victims, we surely can’t ignore these stories—but do they convey a kind of pardon on the perpetrator? Do we excuse a criminal because he is poor—assuming (as they sing in *West Side Story*) that he is deprived on account of being deprived? Do we excuse a child abuser because he was himself abused?

Sharon Lamb, to her credit, puts these difficult questions at the heart of *The Trouble with Blame*, an attempt to sort through the complex issues surrounding the notions of victimhood and responsibility, particularly as they relate to the intimate crimes of child abuse and domestic violence.

It is a thoughtful, but often quite troubling book. While Lamb tries valiantly to push the discussion of victimhood beyond the simple polarities of conventional debate, her effort is only partially successful; the book often falls back

upon notions as conventional—and as retrograde—as many of those she condemns.

Lamb’s discussion of the psychology of both abusers and abused is sharp and generally to the point. It is easy enough, Lamb points out, to condemn an abstract villain. But in cases of sexual abuse, perpetrators are all-too-real people—usually men, and often enough relatives of the abused—who have stories of their own. Once you put a face on the abuser, it is harder to blindly condemn him. Nothing excuses the abuse, of course, but there are always extenuating circumstances: poverty, stress, and, all too often, a history of abuse as a child.

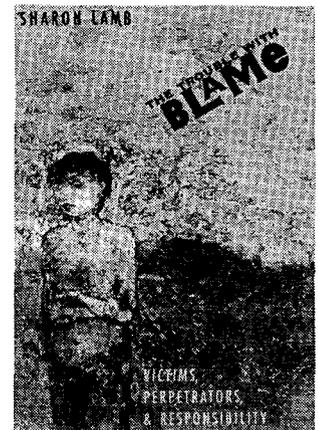
As Lamb points out, abusers are ready to pour out their tales of woe, in some cases making themselves appear (at least to themselves) even more a victim than those they have victimized. “Perpetrators are masters at self-deception, blaming themselves too little,” Lamb writes. Some claim complete innocence; others insist, to themselves and others, that what they did “wasn’t so bad,” or that they have some excuse for their action—they weren’t really responsible.

Though we can’t dismiss the extenuating circumstances, Lamb argues that we nevertheless can’t accept them as an excuse: We must hold perpetrators responsible, and steadfastly oppose their attempts to pass the buck. Indeed, she suggests that we don’t hold perpetrators of abuse responsible enough for the damage they do.

While perpetrators tend to make too many excuses, victims tend to saddle themselves with too much self-blame—either taking the abuser’s excuses at face value, or assuming that somehow they invited (or even deserved) the abuse. Such impulses in many ways simply perpetuate the abuse: After being tormented by another, the victim torments herself; in some cases, victims do actual physical violence to themselves.

What makes the issue so maddeningly complex, Lamb suggests, is that some of the victim’s self-blame is not entirely misguided. No woman deserves abuse, and no woman should blame herself for the behavior of another. But, Lamb notes, an abused woman is probably right to ask herself, “What is it about me that makes men do this to me?” Answering such a question may well enable her to keep from returning to her abuser—to overcome what some have called an “addiction to trauma.”

And it is as important for



**The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility**

By Sharon Lamb

Harvard University Press  
244 pp., \$22.95

victims to take responsibility for their lives as it is for victimizers to accept responsibility for their actions. Responsibility, Lamb points out, is not a zero-sum game; by insisting that victims take more responsibility for their lives, we are not thereby absolving abusers of their responsibilities.

In short, Lamb suggests that we apply the same standards to both abusers and abused, neither sanctifying the victim nor demonizing the abuser, but treating both as human beings who can and should take responsibility for their lives—and who will benefit from doing so. As Lamb persuasively argues, “If there is an excuse that we won’t allow a perpetrator to make in his attempt to disclaim responsibility for his actions, then we surely can’t allow a victim to use the same excuse to disclaim responsibility for her actions.”

Ultimately Lamb contends that we need to see both victims and perpetrators as the complicated, and flawed, people that they are, not as pawns in a political game of pass-the-blame. “When we blame perpetrators too little,” she writes, “the self-blame of victims is supported and encouraged; when we blame victims too much, perpetrators need not admit responsibility. When we blame perpetrators too much, they lose the much-needed support to help them in their process of rebuilding their character, reforming, and making reparations. When we blame victims too little, we make them too small as individuals and reinforce the passivity that was inherent in the experience of victimization.”

Indeed, a more realistic conception of victimhood will do real victims more good than one that exaggerates their “innocence.” By urging victims not to blame themselves, Lamb writes, the public “creates a category of victimhood that requires blamelessness, leaving real victims with a private sense of guilt that they dare not talk about and that may prevent them from carrying on the task of living.”

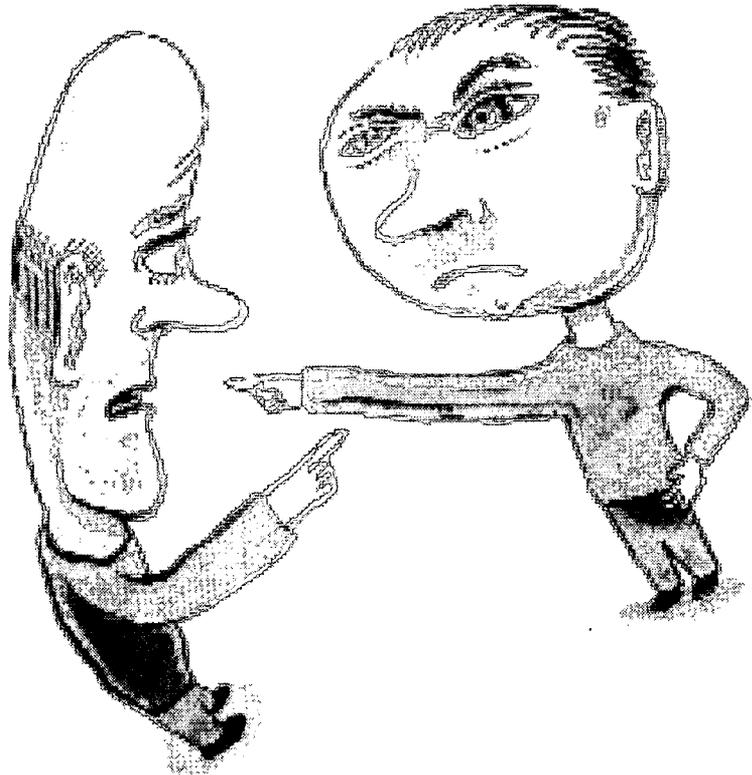
Lamb’s portrait of victims and victimhood is essentially a psychological one. This is both the book’s central strength and its central weakness. While Lamb is (for the most part) able to avoid the reductionist political sloganeering that often accompanies the discussion of victimhood, she is unable to effectively place her psychological arguments in a broader political context.

Her chapter on “The making of perpetrator and victims,” for example, almost completely disregards political and social forces, particularly the inequalities of race and class, that so complicate the issues of victimhood.

And Lamb’s vision of gender inequality is, to say the least, simplistic. In Lamb’s view of the world, the archetypal perpetrator is male and the archetypal victim, female; indeed, a “note on terminology” at the beginning of the

book explains that Lamb has “used the male pronoun for perpetrators and the female pronoun for victims.”

This is, at least according to most statistics, a rough approximation of the truth: Most perpetrators are indeed male, and victims are all too often female. But abuse is too complex, and its causes and effects too varied, to fall easily



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into such simple categories. And though Lamb insists she doesn’t intend to slight male victims of abuse, there’s little room for them in her gendered world.

Lamb writes of men and women almost as though they came from separate planets. Women and children (the two groups are frequently equated in Lamb’s account) are easily incapacitated by abuse, trapped by irrational bonds to their tormentors; by contrast, men share a common sense of “entitlement” to female bodies. But such imperious generalizations beg more questions than they answer. Are all women such fragile flowers? Are all men really, as Lamb suggests at one point, “potential perpetrators”? Don’t such notions in many ways replicate the ancient prejudices of the most patriarchal of thinkers?

It’s a strange paradox: After insisting that victims need to take responsibility for their lives, Lamb falls back into precisely the kind of paleo-feminist thinking that most insistently denies them this responsibility. After gently pushing the victim off her pedestal, Lamb erects another pedestal for her to stand upon. In the process, she derides as “backlash supporters” those who challenge her particular brand of feminism. Indeed, at one point Lamb suggests that the work of “backlash” writers “aids and abets perpetrators.” It’s quite

an accusation—equating intellectual disagreement with criminality—which is perhaps why Lamb leaves most of these writers unnamed.

The one writer she does explicitly attack is Katie Roiphe, author of the controversial *The Morning After*, an indictment of what Roiphe called the “date rape hysteria” said to be afflicting our universities. (Lamb notes, patronizingly, that Roiphe’s “youthful exhortations” cause her to “worry about [Roiphe], as a mother would worry about a daughter staying out at night.”) Lamb’s lambasting of Roiphe is—to say the least—strange, especially since some of Roiphe’s ideas are in fact not very different than hers: Both writers challenge the idealization of victims and victimhood. Both want women to take more responsibility for their lives.

Lamb’s contradictions suggest how difficult it is to combine psychology and politics in any straightforward way. Perhaps, in this case, it is wiser not to try to combine them at all. The legal system is designed—at least in theory—to punish the guilty and protect the innocent; it is not designed to heal the wounds caused by violence or abuse.

“Justice is not a form of therapy,” social critic Wendy Kaminer has cogently argued. “[W]hat is helpful to a particular victim, or defendant, is not necessarily just and what is just is not necessarily therapeutic.” A victim may feel a momentary sense of relief when a perpetrator is put behind bars, but no amount of punishment can erase the damage the perpetrator has done. That is the job of therapy, not politics. ◀

*Continued from page 25*

thought were his friends. He named names—citing, among others, Randy “Stretch” Walker, a producer employed by Bad Boy—and he intimated that his would-be assassins were motivated by regional animosities. On November 30, 1995, exactly one year after Shakur’s shooting, Walker was murdered execution-style a few blocks from his Queens, N.Y. home. Shakur has since signed with Death Row and done his best to escalate East-West tensions with numerous statements designed to disrespect East Coast artists.

At a party in Atlanta last October, which the heads of Death Row and Bad Boy attended, a member of the Bad Boy entourage shot and killed an employee of Death Row.

During a New York City video shoot, assailants fired on the trailer of Tha Dogg Pound, the Death Row group, in a drive-by shooting. Luckily no one was injured. Witnesses claimed the gunmen shouted anti-West Coast slogans before speeding away.

Reflecting how the bicoastal conflict is heating up, touring rap artists say they are encountering more regional animosity. An article on the subject in the February 1996 *VIBE* quotes Death Row’s Dr. Dre as saying, “If it keeps going this way, pretty soon niggaz from the East Coast ain’t gonna be able to come out here and be safe. And vice versa.”

Commenting that “the rumblings, innuendo and outright flame-fanning has gone on long enough,” *The Source* sent writer Selwyn Seyfu Hinds to talk to O’Shea “Ice Cube” Jackson, a thirtysomething elder statesman who was a former member of N.W.A. The magazine hoped that he would

help cool the hostilities. No such luck. Instead of chilling things out, Ice Cube brought heat.

He railed against the New York chauvinism of East Coast rappers. “I feel that us on the West Coast feel like our backs are against the wall,” Ice Cube says. “We feel like we’ve done so much for hip-hop, and we take so much abuse. And it’s to the point where the groups out here are just like, ‘Yo, it’s time for this shit to be over. Whatever is going to go down is going to go down.’”

The Philadelphia summit failed to resolve the issue because Bad Boy Entertainment’s Combs didn’t show, but efforts to bring peace to this hip-hop civil war are continuing. As tensions simmer, observers warn that things may soon get out of hand. The feud once again makes clear just how closely the musical form called hip-hop reflects the dreams and ambitions—as well as the fears and contradictions—of its young, black creators. ◀

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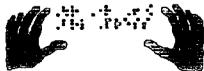
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