

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994 – philosophical hitmen, dancing!). The show utilizes flashbacks, alternate timelines, dance sequences, and even a brief visit to the afterlife to develop both plot and characters. There are many psychiatric themes to unpack and discuss in the series, including an exploration of Vanya Hargreeves' mental state and *mens rea* as she comes into her power. This will make the series particularly appealing to forensic mental health professionals.

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## Leaving Neverland: HBO's Controversial Documentary

Directed and produced by Dan Reed. Premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival on January 25, 2019. Broadcast on HBO Network in two parts, March 3–4, 2019.

In this three hour and 56-minute documentary, Dan Reed tells a story through the eyes of two men, Wade Robson (born in Brisbane, Australia) and James Safechuck (born in Simi Valley, California), and their families. Both men assert that they were sexually abused by Michael Jackson when they were boys. The first part of the documentary introduces the story of each man's family of origin and how they met Michael Jackson. Their mothers were also introduced, and each explained their background and the initial positive effect of meeting the superstar. For example, Wade Robson's mother described the anticipation of meeting Michael Jackson for the first time as feeling like something "magical was going to happen." Throughout the documentary, videos of the families and Michael Jackson were interspersed.

There were many commonalities between the two men's stories, including that both families were middle-class (Wade's father had a fruit business and James's father had a rubbish business), and both boys were very talented. Both had older siblings. Both boys were enamored by the idea of Michael Jackson. Wade Robson won a dance competition when he was five, and the first prize was to meet Michael Jackson at a concert in Australia. James Safechuck starred in a

Pepsi commercial with Jackson when he was 10 years old. James Safechuck explained, "How do you explain Michael Jackson? He's larger than life. There's no stars like that now, that kind of mega star."

What is most notable about the documentary is the juxtaposition of Michael Jackson as a larger-than-life star and as an alleged sexual abuser. Wade Robson described that, prior to meeting Michael Jackson, he had practically wall-papered his bedroom walls with images of Michael Jackson when he was four and five years old and watching videos over and over to imitate his dance moves. He described first meeting him as "other worldly" and as if he had been "anointed."

In *Oprah Winfrey Presents: After Neverland*, which aired after the second part of *Leaving Neverland*, Oprah Winfrey emphasized that, regardless of whether the men are to be believed, the documentary is an excellent description of the concept of grooming. She said that over the years, she spent 217 episodes of her show discussing child sexual abuse and the idea of grooming and seduction, but that Dan Reed did in less than four hours what she could not do in 217.<sup>1</sup> Both men described how being seduced made them feel complicit, as if they desired the sexual attention. It was also noted in Oprah Winfrey's special that there was a context of litigation, but that the documentary was focused on grooming and the boys, rather than being focused on Michael Jackson.

Grooming is the seduction stage that child molesters use to gain access to future victims. Bennet and O'Donohue explain that part of the difficulty in clarifying the definition of grooming is that some of the methods used by perpetrators can also be seen in normal adult-child relationships, such as buying them presents or taking them on an outing. They proposed that grooming be defined as "antecedent inappropriate behavior that functions to increase the likelihood of future sexual abuse" (Ref. 2, p 969). Examples of grooming given by Bennet and O'Donohue that were also each reported in the documentary included inappropriately discussing sex, showing pornographic material, inappropriate gift-giving, "inappropriate nonsexual communication with the child" (Ref. 2, p .969) (e.g., telling the child he or she is the only one who understands the adult), inappropriate touching of the child (e.g., excessive hugging, tickling, sitting on lap), bribes for inappropriate contact, inappropriate isolation of the child (i.e., separating the child from family), favoritism

directed toward the child, boundary violations (e.g., the child sleeping in the adult's bed), asking the child to keep secrets about the abuse, providing the child with drugs or alcohol, and "misstating moral standards" (Ref. 2, p 970) regarding sexual activity (i.e., telling a child that their love is sanctioned by God).

In the documentary, examples of some of these types of grooming are interspersed with calming music and videos of Neverland. James Safechuck describes sitting on a plane with Michael Jackson on the way home from a Pepsi Convention and pretending to interview him; this was actually recorded, and the footage was played in the documentary. When little Jimmy Safechuck asked Michael what his favorite part of the trip was, Michael said, "My best thing about being in Hawaii? Being with you." Adult James Safechuck explained that it is difficult for him to listen to this now because he can now hear the infatuation and attraction on both sides. As an adult, he described that he and Michael Jackson exchanged rings and vows when Mr. Safechuck was a little boy, though as an adult his hands shook when he handled the rings.

Another memorable and heartbreaking depiction in the documentary was the grooming of parents, because a sexual offender needs to make the family feel that the child is safe to be alone with the offender. Reports of sexual abuse in the documentary are interspersed with interviews with the men's mothers, who both described having had innocent ideas about the relationships their boys shared with Michael Jackson at that time. An Australian study interviewing 24 parents found that there was a gap between knowledge of child sexual abuse and communication with their children about dangers. One goal of the research was to help parents become better protectors of their children.<sup>3</sup>

Both mothers in the film describe how, in retrospect, they were also (nonsexually) seduced by Michael Jackson. Both men describe suffering from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and that they are both working on forgiving their mothers. Their respective wives also explain how they did not know what was ailing their husbands for a long time until the secret of the abuse was revealed. Wade Robson described that, one day, he looked at his son when he was about the age Wade was when he first met Michael Jackson. In that moment, he realized his young son was vulnerable (and so was he), and that he could no longer keep silent.

James Safechuck had only recently begun to speak publicly about what happened to him. When he described it, he used the second person "you," which Oprah Winfrey also noted (i.e., "you spend a lot of time in the hotel room with him"). This use of second person can be a way of distancing oneself from trauma.

Even if one were to dismiss both men as liars (e.g., Wade Robson had testified previously that Michael Jackson never touched him), Dan Reed's documentary is still a powerful illustration of the grooming process, the message that sexual abuse can happen to anyone, and that it can destroy childhoods and families. *Leaving Neverland* should lead to further discussion, and, although controversial, it yields some explanations about years of sexual abuse allegations against Michael Jackson.<sup>4</sup>

*Leaving Neverland* is also a chilling exploration of the power of celebrity on society's bar of what is normal and acceptable. As Oprah Winfrey noted in her special, this is not about what Michael Jackson did or did not do. She quoted Maureen Dowd from the *New York Times*, saying, "Celebrity supersedes criminality. How can you see clearly when you're looking into the sun? How can an icon be a con?" (Ref. 5). As forensic psychiatrists, we may be asked to evaluate celebrities or otherwise prominent public figures, and this message is helpful to keep in mind. It is important to strive for objectivity in all cases and not let the cachet of celebrity affect our judgment, whether in a clinical or forensic setting.

## References

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