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## Book Review

***Circumcision Scar: My Foreskin Restoration, Neonatal Circumcision Memories and How Christian Doctors Duped a Nation (2020)* by Jay J. Jackson. Hookona Books. 388 pp. ISBN-10: 1734555807; ISBN-13: 978-1734555806.**

*“We have to confess that there have been no major studies, no large-scale studies, no really analytic studies that I know anything about, to prove what the consequences might be later in life from infant circumcision.”*

- APPPAH Past President David Chamberlain interviewed in the film  
*Whose Body, Whose Rights?* (1995)

*“It’s clear my circumcision didn’t just hack my prepuce, it gashed my psyche” (p. 216).*

- Jay J. Jackson

In 2014, well before Jackson published *Circumcision Scar* (2020), Watson authored *Unspeakable Mutilations: Circumcised Men Speak Out* (2014), a groundbreaking collection of 50 men’s stories detailing the lifelong harm they continue to endure from childhood genital cutting to which they did not consent. In that landmark book, Watson wrote:

[T]he process of grieving for a lost foreskin closely parallels the experiences of those who have suffered amputation, rape, body dysmorphic disorder, the death of a loved-one, or delayed post-traumatic stress. Circumcision advocates assert that the pain of circumcision is trivial and momentary; these accounts show that the pain of foreskin loss may last a lifetime. (back cover)

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**Tim Hammond** has been a genital autonomy advocate for more than three decades. He co-founded the National Organization of Restoring Men (1989), the Children’s Health & Human Rights Partnership of Canada (2012), and the International NGO Coalition on Genital Autonomy (2016). He founded the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males (1992), produced the video documentary *Whose Body, Whose Rights?* (1995), published two harm documentation surveys (1999, 2017), and is an Honorary Member of the Brussels Collaboration on Bodily Integrity (2021). Email: circharmsurvey@gmail.com

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Now comes another landmark book recounting the personal life experiences of circumcision sufferer Jay J. Jackson. A metaphorical ‘canary in the coal mine’ of circumcision, Jackson’s book offers intensely personal and often times gut-wrenching insight into the lasting harm of imposing the American social custom of medically unnecessary genital cutting onto boys’ bodies. Based on my three decades of listening to such men, his journey is not uncommon. In Jackson’s own words, “The first cut is truly the deepest” (p. iii).

Psychologist Ron Goldman, author of *Circumcision: The Hidden Trauma* (1997), posits that infant circumcision “has potential effects not only on men and sexuality, but also on mother-child relationships, male-female relationships, and societal traits and problems” (p. 184). Jackson (2020) embodies many of these problems in a life journey he distills into a lengthy passage, abridged by this reviewer for space considerations:

We all know the common meaning of the word rape, and circumcision is not forcible sex. Yet by its very nature, circumcision is a sexualized act—the male genitalia is surgically modified and its mechanics are forever altered, all to fit a preferred cultural aesthetic and fulfill an imaginary mandate with a mythological deity. And yes, it all has striking similarities to violent rape—the rape of innocence, the rape of religious freedom, and the ritualistic defilement of the human body:

- the victim is restrained and overpowered
- the victim is harmed or brutalized
- self-esteem is forever impacted
- it is forced on the innocent and unwilling
- the victim’s pain and suffering is marginalized
- the trauma lasts a lifetime (p. 187)

In Chapter 11, Jackson offers insights into his trauma and subsequent PTSD by connecting fragments of his circumcision nightmares over a number of pages that, in my experience of listening to hundreds of neonatally circumcised men, is not uncommon.

Throughout my childhood and well into my teen years, I’d had a recurring nightmare that was deeply traumatizing. ...I’d wake up from this recurring nightmare screaming in terror with a sick feeling deep in my gut, and a vague sense that someone was trying to get me... (p. 204). The crux of these nightmares was an immense feeling of oppression...of being pinned down and unable to move no matter how hard I tried. ...By far the most unsettling aspect...were these two disembodied heads. I could clearly see their faces and always recognized them straight away—an older man and a younger woman. ...The male seemed to have the most to say, and when he left, the

female would move toward me and hover close. She was doing something to me...it seemed like torture (p. 206).

Why am I so haunted by my circumcision? Why are my memories surrounding it so vivid yet so vague? Why do I experience such intensely disturbing feelings during sex? Why do I see razor blades, scalpels and carved flesh? (p. 196)

Looking back, I now realize the circumcision awakening I experienced in my 20s overwhelmed me because I'd always had memories of the procedure itself buried deep in my mind. ...My circumcision awakening was like a sucker punch to the groin that haunted me relentlessly. I was powerless to stop it and couldn't run away from it. ...That's the whole point behind circumcision—to forcibly bind all males to god and religion 'for their own good'—sure, 'cause that's not creepy (p. 189).

Indeed, long before Jackson's book, researchers Immerman and Mackey (1997, 1998) touched on the effects of infant male genital cutting. From their perspective:

Neurological data suggest that early lesions of the prepuce/foreskin tissues would generate a reorganization/atrophy of the brain circuitry. This re-organization/atrophy, in turn, is suggested to lower sexual excitability...biasing young males... less toward individual goals of amorous exchanges. (1997, p. 265).

Stated differently, they hypothesized: "Circumcision reorganizes the male's sensory somato-cortex to raise the threshold of sexual excitability/distraction, thereby allowing the young men...to be more tractable in executing corporate activities beneficial to the community" (1998, p. 367).

In other words, from its earliest roots, circumcision was most likely a form of sexual control of males for a perceived social benefit. This impulse has manifested itself throughout history; from as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1963) stated:

The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened. ...None of the activities necessary for the preservation of the individual is harmed thereby ...but violent concupiscence and lust that goes beyond what is needed are diminished. (p. 378)

...to the inventor of corn flakes, John Harvey Kellogg, who in 1888 expounded upon the personal, moral, and social evils of masturbation:

A remedy that is almost always successful in small boys is circumcision. The operation should be performed without administering anesthetic, as the brief pain attending the operation will have a salutary effect upon the mind, especially if it is connected with the idea of punishment, as it may well be in some cases. (p. 383)

Clearly, circumcision does not prevent sexual activity or masturbation, although removal of the gliding and highly erogenous foreskin sheath does alter the natural mechanical functioning of the penis and hence the dynamics of intercourse and self-pleasure (Waskett & Morris, 2007). Being blissfully ignorant of those earlier motivations, some in today's society persist in trying to justify this sexual modification with specious medical, social, and religious excuses.

Skeptics might scoff at Jackson's pleas for awareness of circumcision harm, countering that the medical and psychological literature do not point to any lasting harm from non-therapeutic, non-consensual infant circumcision. However, let's recall that, as David Chamberlain noted (in the film, *Whose Bodies, Whose Rights*, 1995), there have been no serious psychological studies of the long-term effects of cutting the genitals of male newborns.

Additionally, it's important to remember that no evidence of harm does not mean evidence of no harm. As Earp & Darby (2015) explain, empirical sciences alone may be unable to capture the often very subjective responses to childhood genital cutting. Indeed, as Toubia (1994) noted with regard to female genital cutting, "...for most girls and women, the psychological effects are more likely to be subtle, buried beneath layers of denial, mixed with resignation and acceptance of social norms" (p. 132). Why should this be any different if the child being traumatized has a penis?

Alice Miller (1993), when speaking of genital cutting customs involving boys and girls, adds that "they repress their feelings, banishing 'consciousness,' and even idealizing the custom, eventually justifying the procedure as harmless and necessary" (p. 74).

In a study of almost 1,000 circumcised and intact American men, Earp et al. (2018), found that "the lack of harm reported by many circumcised men, like the lack of harm reported by their female counterparts in societies that practice female genital cutting, may be related to holding inaccurate beliefs concerning unaltered genitalia and the consequences of childhood genital cutting" (p. 945).

From these perspectives, this reviewer finds it to be not only bold and courageous—but also refreshing and encouraging—that Jackson appears

to have done the self-reflection necessary to break through the denial, resignation, repressed feelings, banished consciousness, and false beliefs revealed by the above researchers. Fortunately, Jackson is just one constituent of a large and growing demographic of circumcision sufferers who are publicly sharing their lived experiences with the world (see websites for Bloodstained Men; Global Survey of Circumcision Harm; and Men Do Complain). As such, I doubt that he will be the last man to publish a book recounting his personal circumcision trauma, pain, and anguish.

Jackson not only reveals a history of recurrent nightmares and an emotionally painful journey of foreskin restoration to regain his genital integrity and take back his body from the circumciser, but he also exposes multiple infuriating encounters with medical ignorance, arrogance, and callousness. In this passage, Jackson summarizes his totally unhelpful and dismissive experiences after visiting close to ten urologists for a solution to his erectile dysfunction as a young man:

What these jerks in white lab coats were essentially saying was, ‘Okay, so you’re young and circumcision screwed you over for life. But hey, you might get a hypothetical disease when you’re 70, and we helped you dodge that imaginary bullet, so it’s all worth it — right? Now run along and try not to think about it.’ (p. 64)

I concede that any man who was circumcised as a child, or any parent who allowed it to be done to their child, might view Jackson’s complaints as unusual and not representative of all circumcised males. This may only be true however because each individual’s response to the trauma of childhood genital cutting is unique on a variety of levels—physically, sexually, emotionally and psychologically—and remains concealed for many of the reasons cited by Toubia, Miller, and Earp (2015).

Even if the initial trauma is never consciously recalled, there is for many a later trauma that occurs when the individual learns the functions of the ablated body part and that the cutting was unnecessary; that it was a choice, an intimately personal choice over their bodies that was usurped. Throughout his book, Jackson revisits this theme of choice, which a growing number of human rights advocates and ethicists have termed “genital autonomy” (see Earp, 2021).

My two surveys of more than 1,500 men who documented adverse long-term consequences of childhood circumcision (Hammond, 1999; Hammond & Carmack, 2017), tell me that *Circumcision Scar* will strongly resonate among many affected men, but especially so among circumcised gay men who’ve witnessed very intimately the functional differences between themselves and their intact partners and who’ve become acutely aware of this unjust loss of bodily integrity and genital autonomy. As Jackson puts it, “Most people are straight, but some of us are gay. Most people say they’re OK with circumcision, but some of us aren’t. How many

more would admit the truth if they felt safe to speak up?” (p. 344). When he considered foreskin restoration surgery, the author shares his belief that it “...was about the freedom to be who I was born to be without others forcing their will upon me—we gay people tend to be a little sensitive about that one” (p. 344).

As a gay man myself, I’m hopeful that politically aware LGBTI readers will recognize the intersectionality of homophobia and prepucephobia (fear of foreskin) that underpin the historical and ongoing desire by certain societies to defy nature and attempt to eradicate both of these human characteristics, as well as the parallels between gay rights and children’s rights when it comes to the oppressive forces of medicine and religion over our bodies, our sexuality, and our lives. In this respect, Jackson skillfully argues why true gender equality can never be achieved until society respects the genital autonomy of *all* children—regardless of sex or gender—and asks, “How do women reconcile asking people to support their right to dictate what happens to their own bodies, then turn around and deny their own sons the same liberty?” (p. 116). He continues with the powerful assertion that, “Once equality stops being a two-way street it stops being equality” (p. 108).

Ultimately, *Circumcision Scar* asks hard questions and is recommended reading for any man circumcised as a child who has ever pondered, however fleetingly, whether this unnecessary surgical alteration was done ‘for’ him or ‘to’ him. In this sense, Jackson’s story is the journey of every man who was genitally cut as a child. *Circumcision Scar* is a testament to the heroic and courageous persistence to heal and to be heard, as well as to the power of resistance and the refusal to be silenced.

As Jackson himself notes:

Once the bell of your circumcision awakening has been rung, it usually can’t be unringed—man or woman, parent or son, it will reverb through your head for the rest of your days. ...[M]aybe sharing my intensely personal story will lead us out of the closet to the truth, a truth we certainly won’t get from the medical community or religious leaders bent on keeping us blissfully ignorant and unquestioningly obedient. (p. 34)

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