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PLAYGROUND PAIN AND PLEASURE

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VIEW FULL SCREEN

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES MOLLISON, COURTESY APERTURE AND FLATLAND GALLERY, AMSTERDAM

The following is drawn from the author's foreword to the book "Playground (http://aperture.org/shop/mollison-playground-book)," by James Mollison, which is out April 30th from Aperture.

James Mollison's playground photographs are fantastically complicated. They're as fun as a "Where's Wally?" book and as chilling as my own school-playground memories. James tells me that they were a bureaucratic nightmare to pull off. Most of the schools he approached said no. One British school had a security guard accompany him everywhere. The children aimed footballs at James's head, and cheered when one missed him and scored a direct hit on the guard. They wobbled James's tripod and called him a pervert. Why else would he want to photograph children?

At Cardiff High School in Wales, between 1983 and 1985, I was blindfolded and stripped and thrown into the schoolyard. Kids would spit in my food. I was tossed into a lake. No matter how great one's subsequent life turns out to be, memories like that will follow you around, like the cloud of dirt that follows Pig-Pen in the "Peanuts" cartoons. Playground experiences can mold a lifetime.

This is why I don't see James's project as a record of adorable, rough-and-tumble hijinks. I see it as a book of horror photographs: little flashes of violence and cruelty. My eyes skip past the comfortable little cliques and the best friends holding hands to the outcasts, the pariahs, the ones protecting their faces from the blows. What's that happening in the photo from the Thako Pampa School, in Bolivia, in the bottom right-hand corner? Look at that little girl sitting on the immaculate lawn of the Seishin School, in Tokyo. Why is she covering her eyes? James pointed out to me an

altercation unfolding between a boy and a girl on a British playground. A few moments before he took the photograph, he said, the girl shouted at the boy, “You’re a queer.” The boy replied, “I’m not. I’m not.” The girl yelled, “Yeah, you are.” “And then he just lost it,” James said. “He started shaking. And he hit her. He couldn’t control it. ... Suddenly, the whole playground focussed in on it. All the kids standing around were totally thrilled. He was in this moment of complete humiliation. I really felt for him.”

James lived in Kenya until he was five, and then his family moved to Oxford, where he spent the remainder of his childhood. James’s school, like mine, was a mix of posh kids and estate kids—kids who brought in guns, kids who died of heroin overdoses, kids who went on to be academics or successful photographers. James is good-looking, tall, nice, and a little nerdy. I bet he was one of the lucky ones: not quite nerdy enough to be bullied, not quite sporty enough to be a thug.

“Were you ever picked on?” I asked him.

“I remember a group in my class turning on me,” he said. “They trapped me in the toilets. I was in there sobbing. It was terrifying. Those raw emotions that you feel as a kid.”

“Did you do it to other people?” I asked.

There was a pause. “Who knows,” he replied.

“ ‘Who knows?’ ” I said.

“My sister is in touch with someone in the class who says I really upset her,” he said. “I wasn’t particularly aware of it. I did tease her. But I thought it was joking, banter.”

I feel bad that I’ve focussed on the sad, painful, angry moments captured in James’s photographs, when in fact there’s an awful lot of happiness here: the hula hooping and skipping girls in L.A. and Tokyo; the Bedouin boys climbing in the West Bank. My favorite photograph of all is the leaf-throwing contest taking place in the field at Thornton College, in Buckinghamshire. It’s so familiar and lovely, so British and autumnal.

“I forgot that playgrounds were that fun,” I told James.

“That moment when the lesson is over and you just run,” he said. “The sheer excitement of it. The lesson ends, and you just explode out into the playground.”

An exhibition (<http://www.aperture.org/exhibition/playground-photographs-james-mollison/%20>) of Mollison’s playground photographs opens at Aperture on April 16th and at Flatland Gallery, in Amsterdam, on May 16th.

Jon Ronson, a writer and documentary filmmaker, is the author of many books, including “Lost at Sea” (2012), “The Psychopath Test “(2011), “The Men Who Stare at Goats” (2005), and “So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed” (2015). He cowrote the screenplay for the 2014 film “Frank,” starring Michael Fassbender.
