



The Girl: A Life in the Shadow of Roman Polanski

By Samantha Geimer



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In this searing and surprising memoir, Samantha Geimer, "the girl" at the center of the infamous Roman Polanski sexual assault case, breaks a virtual thirty-five-year silence to tell her story and reflect on the events of that day and their lifelong repercussions.

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March 1977, Southern California. Roman Polanski drives a rented Mercedes along Mulholland Drive to Jack Nicholson’s house. Sitting next to him is an aspiring actress, Samantha Geimer, recently arrived from York, Pennsylvania. She is thirteen years old.

The undisputed facts of what happened in the following hours appear in the court record: Polanski spent hours taking pictures of Samantha—on a deck overlooking the Hollywood Hills, on a kitchen counter, topless in a Jacuzzi. Wine and Quaaludes were consumed, balance and innocence were lost, and a young girl’s life was altered forever—eternally cast as a background player in her own story.

For months on end, the Polanski case dominated the media in the United States and abroad. But even with the extensive coverage, much about that day—and the girl at the center of it all—remains a mystery. Just about everyone had an opinion about the renowned director and the girl he was accused of drugging and raping. Who was the predator? Who was the prey? Was the girl an innocent victim or a cunning Lolita artfully directed by her ambitious stage mother? How could the criminal justice system have failed all the parties concerned in such a spectacular fashion? Once Polanski fled the country, what became of Samantha, the young girl forever associated with one of Hollywood’s most notorious episodes? Samantha, as much as Polanski, has been a fugitive since the events of that night more than thirty years ago.

Taking us far beyond the headlines, *The Girl* reveals a thirteen-year-old who was simultaneously wise beyond her years and yet terribly vulnerable. By telling her story in full for the first time, Samantha reclaims her identity, and indelibly proves that it is possible to move forward from victim to survivor, from

confusion to certainty, from shame to strength.

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The Girl: A Life in the Shadow of Roman Polanski By Samantha Geimer Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #539817 in Books
- Published on: 2013-09-17
- Released on: 2013-09-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.00" w x 6.00" l, 1.10 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover

- 272 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"[The Girl] might be the most important and valuable book of the century so far...an emotional rollercoaster...smart and articulate....Geimer puts complicated thoughts out there, alongside her anger, not because she's too damaged to think clearly but because she can't bear the world's oversimplification....Her voice is strong." (*The Guardian*)

"This book is a total surprise. After decades of hearing about 'the Roman Polanski rape case' via third-hand reporting and ossified assumptions, here is the startlingly fresh, personal account from the young woman who lived through it, only to be set upon by the American legal system. Witty, snarky -- but also precise and thoughtfully observant not only about herself but also the mores and culture of a very different time -- Samantha Geimer is a reflective guide as she humanely tells of a complex violation that hurt but didn't defeat her." (Sheila Weller, author of the New York Times bestseller *Girls Like Us*)

"[Geimer] is able to channel the bewilderment she felt while in Mr. Polanski's company, and the terror that came later." (*The New York Times*)

"Her explosive account... is at once a tabloidy page-turner, and a thoughtful memoir." (*Time Magazine*)

"An astonishingly well-written, engaging book that is admirably subtle in its depiction of events... Her prose is lucid and compelling. The memoir, which winds its way through the painful vilification of her mother by the press, and a spectacular failure of the legal system, is masterfully clear-eyed." (*Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*)

"A feisty, almost jaunty you're not the boss of me account of a really awful thing and its long aftermath... The lively, pugnacious narrative voice manages to sound simultaneously like a provocative kid and a wise-up adult." (*The New York Times Book Review*)

"Disarmingly honest and intensely personal, *The Girl* is a fascinating memoir: the absence of self-pity and frankness with which it is told is as shocking as the story itself." (Portia de Rossi, author of the New York Times bestseller *Unbearable Lightness*)

"Sex, youth, and power have always fueled Hollywood and, as this book proves, never with more combustible results than in the story of Roman and Samantha. *The Girl* is a pleasure to read." (Joe Eszterhas, New York Times bestselling author of *American Rhapsody* and *Hollywood Animal*)

About the Author

Samantha Geimer is married and has three sons. She divides her time between Hawaii and Nevada.

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The Girl

PREFACE

No. No freakin' way. I can't do this again.

September 27, 2009, Estes Park, Colorado. A chill in the air, snow on the mountaintops, leaves cinnamon and gold—so different from the glorious monotony of our Hawaii weather. My husband and I were in the middle of a long-anticipated vacation on the mainland—celebrating family birthdays, catching trout, watching elk rut. We were feeling particularly festive. At 6:00 AM Dave left our hotel to fish. I collapsed gratefully back into bed. At 8:15 AM the phone rang.

It was my friend Dawn. She was always looking out for me. “I have to tell you something, and you have to wake up and be ready,” she said. I was instantly awake. I knew something bad had happened to her. I steeled myself.

“Roman Polanski got arrested.”

Oh God. This wasn't her bad news. This was my bad news.

“Sam? Did you hear what I said?”

When I'm upset, I curse. I can't help it. I become a fourteen-year-old boy. “Shit shit shit shit, what the fuck.”

“They arrested him in Switzerland,” Dawn said. “I just heard it on the news.”

Sickness, panic. Need my family. Need my mother. Need a Xanax.

CNN had the story:

Oscar-winning filmmaker Roman Polanski has been arrested in Switzerland on a decades-old arrest warrant stemming from a sex charge in California, Swiss police said Sunday.

Polanski, 76, was taken into custody trying to enter Switzerland on Saturday, Zurich police said. A spokesman for the Swiss Justice Ministry said Polanski was arrested upon arrival at the airport.

He has lived in France for decades to avoid being arrested if he enters the United States and declined to appear in person to collect his Academy Award for Best Director for “The Pianist” in 2003.

The director pleaded guilty in 1977 to a single count of having unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor, acknowledging he had sex with a 13-year-old girl. But he fled the United States before he could be sentenced, and U.S. authorities have had a warrant for his arrest since 1978.

Here's a problem: This story doesn't mention the insanity that preceded his flight—the egomaniacal judge, the unconscionable uncertainty of the sentencing, the case being played out not in the courtroom, but in the media.

And here's another problem: Roman Polanski's arrest was, in a sense, my arrest. Because I am that thirteen-year-old girl.

Oh for God's sakes, it's all such ancient history, you might say. After all, it's 2013: he's eighty, I'm fifty. He is one of the most celebrated filmmakers in the world. I have a great husband, great kids, a great life. What do his problems, at this point, have to do with me?

Well, nothing. And everything.

To say that the Roman Polanski rape case was a circus is only the mildest exaggeration. For the media, there was nothing to equal its heady combination of sex, celebrity, and depravity until the O. J. Simpson trial in 1995. Just about everyone who lived through or read about this sordid chapter in Hollywood history had an opinion about the renowned director and the girl he was accused of drugging, raping, and sodomizing—me.

Opinions on the Polanski case go something like this: He was a vile pedophile whose power allowed him to escape the long arm of the law. Or: He was a troubled man whose own horrific background did not allow him to gauge the difference between a child and a young woman. And the girl? She was an innocent victim. Or, no: She was a cunning Lolita. Or, perhaps most commonly: She was a reluctant but ultimately willing player in the crazy ambitions of her stage mother, who wanted her little girl to be a star.

Who was the predator? Who was the prey? We were all suspect: Was Roman a rapist? Had my mother set up the famous director to blackmail him, using her daughter as bait? The arguments went on and on and on. Maybe the only person who lived through that time who has not weighed in on the crime and its aftermath in any significant way is . . . me. Which is why I thought it might be a good idea to tell my story.

But these thoughts only occurred to me a few months after Polanski's arrest. That day, I was in a very different frame of mind. I was thinking: Goodbye, peace. Hello, Media Nightmare. Because I knew that whenever Polanski was in the news, I would be, too.

Ask yourself this: Would you like the craziest thing that ever happened to you as a teenager broadcast and then dissected over and over on television, in the blogosphere?

Right. I didn't think so.

I called home and told my sons to unplug the phone—there were already thirty messages that had landed in the first few hours, and within the next couple of days my lawyer, Lawrence Silver, would be inundated. As much as I dreaded any time Roman Polanski was in the news, I never imagined that the appetite for this story would lead reporters to show up on Kauai. On my doorstep. My sons became prisoners in their own home. Photographers had staked out space in front of my property, sitting in their cars, waiting and drinking stale coffee. What did Rape Girl look like now? Was she fat, thin, pretty, wrinkly? Imagine how much my sons, who were then seventeen, twenty-one, and twenty-seven, enjoyed thinking about why their mom was getting this attention. Nobody likes to think about their mother getting kissed, never mind something like this.

As soon as I heard, I called Dave: "Sorry, fishing trip is over. We have problems. Come back now." I called Mom, who'd been staying with my aunt up the road. "What did he do now?" she asked. It didn't occur to her that his arrest, thirty-two years later, could have anything to do with me.

We made our way to Denver, staying overnight in a hotel near the airport. Roman's arrest was in all the newspapers and running on the ticker on the news channels. My face was on all the televisions in the lobby bar. "Everyone's staring," Dave whispered. Were they? I don't know. Maybe it was his imagination. I kept my head down. But the woman at the front desk noticed my photo in the Denver paper and upgraded us to a more secure floor. I was so grateful to that hotel, because that would be the last time I'd have any peace for

the next few weeks.

In the Hawaiian airport a smattering of photographers were waiting for us. How did they even know what flight I was on? I guess all airline companies have moles. It was uncomfortable, but it was quickly over. Still, Dave and I had no choice: I couldn't go home and face the paparazzi. We slept that night at my office. A couple of days later, an article ran that said I was "clearly upset and looking tired and drawn." More like exhausted and furious.

By the time I dared to go home, most of the stalkerazzi had grumpily given up camping outside my door. I had to hand it to my sons; they helped. They monitored the cars parked in front of the house, and shouted at anyone who came by to gawk; my son Alex even went out and continually photographed one of the photographers until he left. They had to discourage their friends from confronting the photographers; my sons were having to be peacekeepers as well.

Over the next few days, we would receive more than two hundred calls, almost all from the press, and that doesn't include the ones that came to Larry's office. At the same time, my husband's cousins—the Geimer relations in California—were dealing with people knocking on their door. Geimer was an uncommon name, and reporters figured these people might have some idea where I was and what I was up to. Probably, in the minds of these media folks, I was having horrible flashbacks from decades ago. I was—but it was horrible flashbacks of them.

Why would all this be happening now? True, the United States could have sought Polanski's arrest and extradition worldwide at any time since 1978. But at that moment, we knew nothing. I never even realized Polanski could leave France; I had no idea he had a chalet in Switzerland and traveled, semi-covertly, in and out of several countries. At the moment all I could think was, Why would he do something so stupid? And why should I have to live through it all—again?

I called my lawyer, Larry Silver, who said, "I don't know what this is about, either. Do nothing. I'll find out."

Something, or someone, had stirred up old wounds. Maybe Steven Cooley, the Republican district attorney of Los Angeles—who, not coincidentally, was running for state attorney general—felt he had to show everyone who was the big masher and push for resolution in this famously unresolved case.

I suddenly recalled how uncomfortable I'd felt for many years in California, and in Los Angeles in particular. Celebrity didn't just count for a lot; to a certain segment of the population, it was everything. And wherever a celebrity was involved, all emotions loomed large. Adulation, yes. But retribution, too. I had this sense that the entire legal system was saying to Polanski, You think you're better than us? Well, just wait.

The purpose of the legal system is to punish criminals, of course, and there were many ideas about what this meant for Polanski—had he been punished enough for what he did? Did he still deserve to be held accountable? Or had the punishment been bungled so stupendously that anything further was cruel and unusual? And then there was the other purpose of the judicial system: to protect victims and protect society from criminals. So what was the sense of arresting Polanski now? Did society need to be protected from him? Did I?

Over the years, I have had bad dreams about the legal morass, the publicity, the questioning in the courtroom. But I don't think I ever dreamed about Roman or that night at Jack Nicholson's house. That doesn't mean it wasn't terrible. It was. But its terribleness didn't haunt me. Other aspects of that time did.

When Roman was arrested in Switzerland, it wasn't exactly déjà vu, but it reminded me of the sense of powerlessness I had experienced as a thirteen-year-old girl. With the passing years, it had come to seem less and less likely that Roman would ever return to the States. He would live and die a celebrated director in France, where he was beloved, and I would hold on to the anonymity I cherished. And if he were to return, I assumed it would be because he'd resolved his legal problems and come back voluntarily. How could he be arrested again, thirty-two years later?

In a blink everything had returned nearly to the way it was decades before. Roman was sitting in a jail cell, and I was being hounded by the press. It was just like all those many years ago when we first met Judge Rittenband, the man who oversaw the case: we were bound again by a legal system that valued the headlines it could generate more than the effect its actions had on individuals. His rights as a defendant, my rights as a victim, were being stomped into the ground.

As the case moved again through the courts and old atrocities were revisited, my lawyer, Larry Silver, again beseeched the court to finally make the whole thing go away.

"The victim is once again the victim," he wrote. "Everyone claims that they are acting to vindicate justice, but Samantha sees no justice. Everyone insists that she owes them a story, but her story continues to be sad.

"She endures this life because a corrupt judge caused, understandably, Polanski to flee. No matter what his crime, Polanski was entitled to be treated fairly; he was not. The day Polanski fled was a sad day for American justice. Samantha should not be made to pay the price. She has been paying for a failed judicial and prosecutorial system."

"This statement makes one more demand, one more request, one more plea: Leave her alone."

. . .

Now listen: I am not naïve. If you write a book, you're not asking to be left alone. You're inviting people into your life. I know that. Welcome.

But I do have a reason. So much has been written about the Polanski case, but none of it has been written by me, the person at the center of it. So many years have gone by; it's time. I've had so many years to rage, to laugh, to marvel at what people say and why they say it. In a sense I want to take back ownership of my own story from those who've commented on it, without rebuke, for so long. Because my story is not just pure awfulness. It's crazy and sad, but yes, sometimes funny, too. It may have been messy at times, but it's my mess and I'm taking it back.

There is even, as we parents say, a teachable moment. We have what I think of as a Victim Industry in this country, an industry populated by Nancy Grace and Dr. Phil and Gloria Allred and all those who make money by manufacturing outrage. I've been part of it. If you spent years reading about yourself in the papers with the moniker "Sex Victim Girl," you'd have a lot to say about this issue, too. But for now I'll leave it at this: It is wrong to ask people to feel like victims, because once they do, they feel like victims in every area of their lives.

I made a decision: I wasn't going to be a victim of anyone or for anyone. Not Roman, not the state of California, not the media. I wasn't going to be defined by what is said about me or expected from me. I was going to tell my story, my truth, through nobody else's perspective but my own.

And that is what I have done.

Users Review

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