

Zen Sex-Abuse "Single" Kindles An E-Revolution

BY Paul Bass | NOV 18, 2013 3:27 PM



CHION WOLF PHOTO

Oppenheimer, author of the new *Zen Predator of the Upper East Side*

Mark Oppenheimer had an old story to tell—and found a new way to tell it. Then he spoke about it. Kind of.

The story concerns wide-scale sexual abuse by a religious leader, abuse that had been covered up for decades. Oppenheimer followed the trail of victims of a leading Zen Buddhist monk named Eido Shimano, and wrote a book about it called *The Zen Predator of the Upper East Side*—"one man's half century of sexual exploitation under the cover of religion."

Oppenheimer (pictured), who lives in Westville, has written numerous books before, published by major publishing houses. (He also writes a biweekly religion column for *The New York Times*, runs Yale's journalism initiative, finds time to write for half the legitimate publications on all American newsstands and on the Internet, all while, with his wife *Cyd Oppenheimer*, raising four young daughters). This time he took a risk: reporting and writing the Zen predator book without an advance, then having it published as a "Kindle Single"—an electronic-only book—through Atlantic Books. It's one of several new approaches established companies are taking to book and long-form journalism publishing in the modern era.

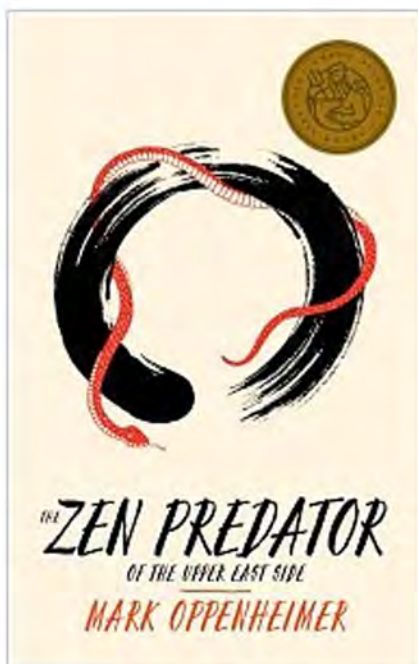
Oppenheimer still gets the benefit of a marketing and distribution from a commercial publisher. But he makes money per sale of the book, period. And you can't hold the book in your hand. You have to turn it on, on a Kindle.

Oppenheimer found time in his unimaginably crowded schedule to chat with the Independent about the book as well as the new frontier of publishing of authoring he has entered.

Well, we "chatted" not in person, but via GChat.

It seemed only fitting for an interview about the brave new world of ebook authorship to dispense with old-fashioned interview tools like looking at each other face to face. Or talking on the phone and typing. Or turning on a tape recorder, or even a digital recorder.

A transcript of the "conversation" follows. Decide for yourself if, like ebooks, GChat interviews represent an advancement of the form.



me:What got you interested in writing about Zen Buddhist sexual abuse?

Sent at 1:44 PM on Thursday

Mark: I initially found out about Eido Shimano and his misdeeds because (if I remember correctly) someone forwarded me a blog post from a Buddhist website. This would have been Summer 2010. Shimano had just been called out publicly, at a Buddhist dinner, for his abuse, and he was stepping down. I wrote a column about it, then thought I was done with it. But then I began getting emails from victims of his, and also from Kobutsu Malone, a former monk of Shimano's who had been collecting a dossier on the guy's screwing around. He'd been tracking him for over 10 years.

So as I began poking around, I realized there was so much more to the story. I drove up to Maine a year ago to meet Kobutsu and look at his archives, and was off to the races...

The original column was for the NY Times, where I write a biweekly column.

me: So you decided to do a longer piece on this. Did you shop it around to magazine editors, or go straight for a book?

Sent at 1:48 PM on Thursday

Mark: I shopped it around to every last magazine editor in New York, and a few in Idaho. Well, not Idaho. But yes, it would have been great if a magazine had given me a contract, because with a contract comes an expense account. But instead I did all the work on my own time, and spent my own money out of pocket. One problem, for magazine editors, was that the sex scandals at Horace Mann School had just broken, so there was a sense that the media had just covered a NYC-based, upper-crust, elite-world sexcapade.

me: It also sounds like other religious sex scandals, where one victim ends up collecting information and leading a reporter to a treasure trove of information. Was that the case here?

Sent at 1:50 PM on Thursday

Mark: Absolutely. But more important, the victims had found each other online. A lot of victims of sex abuse in tight-knit worlds like Zen sanghas (communities) just drop out, disappear, want nothing more to do with the community, ever. So they aren't around to see that another woman goes through the same thing a year later, and another five years later. They are isolated. But in this case, the web helped them find each other. Of course, the guy I am writing about, Shimano, was alleged to often have many women at once — so this really was an open secret. But yes, a couple victims became the keepers of the knowledge. The main keeper, Kobutsu Malone, created an incredibly useful website, ShimanoArchive.com. Shimano had slept with his ex-wife while they were married.

me: you still there?

Mark: yup.

get that long reply?

me: Got it now.

Did you get to interview Shimano?

Mark: I did! I interviewed him twice, each time at a fancy restaurant of his choosing. He liked to live well. Then I meditated with him one time, at the very swank Greenwich Village townhouse of a follower who has stayed loyal to him.

me: Did you feel your professional distance at risk when you guys approached the possibility of levitating together?

Mark: Levitating?

me: I thought if you meditate well enough, you get lifted off the ground. At least that's what they told me at a pitch on Dayton Street back in the early 1980s....

Sent at 1:54 PM on Thursday

Mark: I guess I didn't do it well enough. Anyway, I don't think the Zen promise that. Not to me, anyway. But to answer your question: No, I had never meditated before, and he offered, so how could I say no? I didn't think I was at risk of falling for his famous charisma. But I had one victim of his tell me not even to bring a tape recorder near him, that he could de-magnetize it with his energy. They attribute magical powers.

me: The release for your book said the story was spiked decades back. Why was it spiked?

Mark: According to Robin Westen, who wrote a terrific, long piece back in 1982, it was spiked by two major magazines because they were afraid of lawsuits. The Village Voice told her they would run it only if she gave Shimano a pseudonym — which she was unwilling to do.

me: Do we have a double standard about Buddhism and Catholicism or even [now Orthodox Judaism](#)?

Mark: I don't think I do. I point out in my piece (available for \$2.99 as a Kindle ebook!) that all religions make big demands on their followers, and that Zen Buddhism is not the only tradition that can totally take over one's life.

me: I didn't mean you. I meant society at large—I wondered if it would have been easier to sell another story about [Catholic](#) or [Orthodox Jewish](#) abuse...

Sent at 1:58 PM on Thursday

Mark: Oh...so the double standard favors Buddhism? Absolutely. People like to think of Buddhists as more peaceful, kinder, better. But in fact, percentage-wise, they seem more likely to be sex abusers. And there is deep sexism in the community, too.

Sent at 2:00 PM on Thursday

me: I wanted to switch now to asking you about the mechanics of becoming an "e-writer." (Wonder if someone will write an update to the Beatles' "Paperback Writer." Since we lost our connection, want to try switching to a Google Doc for this part of the interview? I sent you an invite.

Mark: nah, this is okay.

me: OK. What made you decide to write an e-book rather than get a conventional contract, as you have for your previous books?

Mark: Being an e-writer is exhilarating but tough. You get paid per sale. From the first sale, you are making money. It's priced at \$2.99, and I get something like 60% of that. So if I sell 100,000 copies, I have enough money to open my planned indie bookstore in Westville Center here in New Haven. If I sell 10 copies, I go to a movie at Criterion ... by myself.

That said, this was "published" in a series curated by the Atlantic Magazine, so they lent me the services of a great editor, a guy named Geoff Gagnon, who improved the piece a ton. And they are helping with marketing, too.

me: But you had to spend all the time writing a book with no advance, correct?

Sent at 2:05 PM on Thursday

Mark: Absolutely. I probably put in a couple hundred hours, with no guarantee of payment. I didn't have to. I could have turned it into a short column for the Times or one of the other places I write for. I am very fortunate that way. But the piece kept calling out to me.

me: Do you think the advent of ebooks will enable more Mark Oppenheimers to become published authors than in the past? Or fewer? Or will it work differently—with more people getting some support to write a book, but not enough to quit a day job?

Sent at 2:07 PM on Thursday

Mark: It has been a huge boon for a few writers who have had big careers just in ebooks. Look up Joseph Bottum if you want to know what I mean. And established writers can make a quick kill this way: if you are Ann Patchett, or Dara Horn, and you have a fan base of 10,000 or 20,000 readers who want whatever you put out there, then it's a much /better/ deal to write an ebook than to write a magazine article, perhaps even a book. But look: the talent pool is still finite. Most people who want to write aren't very good. (Same with most people who want to be rock stars, or painters, or basketball players.) The fact that they can self-publish on the web doesn't mean much.

me: Do you feel any differently having an ebook come out from having your previous books come out? More like, perhaps, a musician releasing a single?

Sent at 2:10 PM on Thursday

Mark: Well, I did this once before, with my ebook *Dan Savage: The First Gay Celebrity*. That was really wild-west, because I didn't even have an editor to help me (although my wife is a superb editor). Having the Atlantic to sponsor this ebook made it seem a lot like my magazine work.

Ten years ago, I thought work had to be on paper for it to be real. I got over that.

me: How did that Savage book do?

And who published it?

Mark: I self-published it. I used a platform called PressBooks.com, which was very elegant. I think maybe I sold 1,000 copies?

Which is good—but again, I had spent many months on it. Bad hourly rate.

me: Can people like me who don't have Kindles and prefer to read Dara Horn books (and your NYT columns on people like Joseph Bottum) in print get a copy of your new ebook?

Mark: Yes, there is a site called read.amazon.com where you can read it at your desktop or laptop.

As for print...maybe we can work out a deal for me to run off a copy.

me: So no real book-book options? That's bad news for people like me. Electronics take all the fun and relaxation and soul out of book-reading for me.

Mark: I agree. And I am with you: I printed out the Ann Patchett ebook (*Getaway Car*) to read it. I like getting coffee stains on my reading.

me: Will the advent of ebooks change the way we read and write books, in your opinion? (I don't mean the technical process. I mean the purpose of reading and writing long form.) If so, how?

Mark: There is also a Kindle app for Droid and iPhone and all tablets...but that doesn't solve your problem, does it?

Sent at 2:15 PM on Thursday

Mark: I do think the big upside is that people can write at any length. The past 20 years have been bad for writers who work in the 4,000–40,000-word length (to use my friend Fred Strebeigh's formulation). Writers like John McPhee, Lawrence Weschler, Connie Bruck. And novella writers, as far as fiction goes. Magazines want something shorter, books have to be longer. The new technology solves that problem. My new ebook, which we're discussing, "The Zen Predator of the Upper East Side," is about 50 pp., in that in-between length.

me: Last question (thanks for hanging in!): How did you find doing an author interview via Gchat rather than over the phone or in person?

Mark: I have high confidence that I'll be quoted correctly. With a reporter I trust, like you, I'd rather talk in person or by phone. But with somebody I don't know, this feels safer. I feel like we're in a safe space. You know who wasn't in a safe space? The students of Eido Shimano.

Tags: [Mark Oppenheimer](#), [ebooks](#), [Google chat](#), [Zen Buddhism](#), [Eido Shimano](#)