> *Your abusive partner doesn't have a problem with **his** anger; he has a problem with **your** anger.*
>
> *One of the basic human rights he takes away from you is the right to be angry with him. No matter how badly he treats you, he believes that your voice shouldn't rise and your blood shouldn't boil. The privilege of rage is reserved for him alone. When your anger does jump out of you - as will happen to any abused woman from time to time - he is likely to try to jam it back down your throat as quickly as he can. Then he uses your anger against you to prove what an irrational person you are… Why does your partner react so strongly to your anger? One reason may be that he considers himself above reproach, as I discussed above. The second is that he senses - though not necessarily consciously - that there is **power in your anger**.*

I call this the Anger Litany, and reading it allowed me to understand for the first time the nature of a relationship that I had just narrowly gotten out of. I remember that relationship mostly in terms of the arguments, which would come as abruptly as a lightning bolt- something I'd done or said would set him off, and I would know I was in for an hour or more of having my efforts sneered at, my competence mocked, my words interrupted mid-thought, and my statements twisted around, then flung back at me in unrecognizable new forms. My attempts to defend myself would go ignored unless I criticized him; but if I did that, I quickly learned, it would only intensify and prolong the anger. Later, I'd get an "apology" somewhere along the lines of "Yeah, when that happens I kinda lose it" or "I guess what you said really touched a nerve, huh?" or "Look, I've had some bad experiences, alright? You should know by now how sensitive I am!" - always with the implication, "now you know what to avoid, so we'll be fine as long as *you* tread more carefully". If I'd gotten heated, that apology would be replaced with "Well, you said some

pretty hurtful things yourself"; the implication became "whatever else you do, don't forget; only *my* anger is justified."

When I read these words, I felt as though the author had finally described how I felt about this anger that I was expected to tolerate but never return. As soon as I could, I read the book it was excerpted from, and recognized other characteristics of his, spelled out again and again, page after page. But also, I found reassurance that there were reasons why this was happening, clear explanations of what he was getting out of this song and dance, examinations of the things I was trying to prevent the next blow-up (and why they never worked), and finally, some solid advice on how to get away from the situation once and for all. The question this book answered for me is found in its title: *Why Does He Do That?*

HISTORY

Why Does He Do That? was the first book written by Lundy Bancroft, an American counselor who specializes in treating, preventing, and investigating domestic abuse. In 1987, Bancroft began work with a counseling program that focused on helping abusive men change their behavior towards their partners, the first of its kind to do so. A key innovation in their approach was the format: while Bancroft and other counselors would be working with the abusers in weekly group sessions, they would insist on also speaking regularly with the partners and getting their unfiltered perspective on the state of the relationship, both before and during the program. Bancroft credits this dual viewpoint, hearing both the abusers' self-reported progress and their victims' assessment, with clueing him in to when and where the abusers weren't giving him the whole story - and the ways that how they saw the world diverged from the realities.

While Bancroft describes early attendees as voluntary, most of them had partners who had either declared their intent to leave the relationship or already taken steps to end it; the number of participants who entered the program without significant external pressure was so small as to be negligible, and would remain so throughout his career. In the early 90s, this pressure would take on a new form as legal courts became more aware of programs like Bancroft's, and began to issue mandates requiring convicted domestic abusers to attend such a program. While this demographic shift changed the specific abusive behaviors Bancroft was trying to curb - fewer verbally and psychologically abusive attendees, and more direct physical assault - what struck Bancroft was the common threads, in attitudes and thinking, between all the varieties of abuser he was encountering. *Why Does He Do That?*, first published in 2002, represents Bancroft's literary attempt to illustrate and illuminate these common factors, in the hopes that learning to recognize them will make abuse easier to combat.

Before we get into those commonalities, though, it's worth looking at his definition of abuse, and what does or does not fit that label. Bancroft describes *abuser* as a shorthand for "men who chronically make their partners feel mistreated or devalued". You may notice that this definition doesn't list any specific behavior at all; Bancroft deliberately refuses to draw a line in the sand and say "This is where Abuse starts; everything before this point is Not Abuse". He explains that for every imaginable behavior-based definition, he has seen people who haven't gone *quite that far* yet tell him, and themselves, that this proves they aren't "really" abusive: "I've yelled at her but I never laid a hand on her, I've shoved her but I've never hit her, I've hit her a couple of times but never anything worse than a bruise" - all the way up

to the man who insisted that beating his wife so badly that she needed hospitalization didn't count as abuse, because he's also the one who drove her to the hospital.

Bancroft's definition of abuse covers such physical attacks. However, he's also seen abuse be purely verbal, or focused around sexual coercion, or various kinds of psychological campaigns that wear their victim down without ever leaving a physical injury on her. (Bancroft is careful, though, to state that criticizing a partner, becoming angry with them, or even having fights does not automatically make a relationship abusive.) Bancroft's key insight was that all these forms of abuse - physical, verbal, sexual, psychological - arose from the same underlying core set of beliefs, and that focusing too much on the behaviors was so much hacking at branches; understanding these core beliefs, and challenging them, was the only way to strike at the root.

(A quick note on gender demographics: the overwhelming majority of the abusers Bancroft treated were male with female partners, and throughout the book, Bancroft refers to abusers with male pronouns and their targets with female ones. He is very specific not to imply that all men are abusive or that women are incapable of abuse, but he does see it as primarily a male-on-female problem, and gives his informed opinion on why that is the case. His thoughts on this, as well as mine, later in the review.)

WHY DOES HE DO THAT?

Why Does He Do That? states that its primary goal is to be a resource for women seeking to understand and escape the patterns of abuse, but that's not the only objective it sets out. It

also serves as a debunking of many misconceptions about the origins of abuse, a psychological examination of what abusers actually get out of their actions, a historical cross-section of the situations and stories Bancroft has witnessed, and a call to action for cultural shifts intended to prevent people from becoming abusive in the first place. Despite this, and the heavy subject matter, it is a remarkably accessible read. Bancroft divides it into mostly self-contained sections, with the most common questions he is asked highlighted, and encourages the reader to skim sections not immediately relevant to them or jump directly to the most pressing questions they want answered. His writing style avoids technical terms, employs a gentle and even humorous tone where it's appropriate, and manages to instruct and warn while leaving the reader to choose a course of action for themselves.

Something else that struck me about the book is how candid Bancroft is. First, on the history of his program: as said, it represented a new way of dealing with the problem of abuse, and in some cases Bancroft has the unpleasant job of having to warn us against something by telling us what happened when his team tried it. Bancroft tells the cautionary tales as well as the success stories. The abuser who tried to butter him up every week in group sessions by gushing about how much he was learning, before going home, telling his girlfriend that the whole thing was "bullshit", and continuing to batter her. The abuser who told Bancroft that his partner felt neglected, and drew up a plan of action that included "Spend more time with her"; his partner had actually told him that she needed a break from the relationship entirely, only for him to show up waving the plan and claiming that he was now under counselor's orders to spend more time with her, not less. The abuser who seemed like a model patient, making steady progress in sessions and at home, until a crucial

court appearance where he was ruled low-risk, at which point he dropped the pretense, went back to abusing, and stopped attending overnight. Bancroft doesn't come across as reckless or an easy mark, but simply as someone who's working with dangerously amoral people who have a lot of practice manipulating those around them. When the book was published, he'd already spent fifteen years refining his methods and revising the rules to make the programs he ran less vulnerable to such exploitations; sadly, some of those rules are written in blood.

On how likely his program or others of its kind are to "cure" an abuser, Bancroft is again up front: the odds of this are always low. Bancroft has seen it happen, but he's also seen abusers make apparent progress only to backslide into the old ways, or make superficial changes that don't satisfy anyone but themselves, or not change at all, or become *worse* - Bancroft notes that it takes skill on the part of the counselors to steer the sessions to challenging abusive mindsets rather than reinforcing them, and a poorly run abuser program can quickly become a symposium where abusers swap tips on how to make their abuse more effective and less perceptible.

While Bancroft takes steps to avoid enabling such a disaster in his own programs, by and large he doesn't expect that any given attendee will make lasting change unless they decide to put the work in, which most of them won't. Bancroft doesn't see this as a failing of the program, however, but a misplaced definition of success. In Bancroft's mind, the primary client whose needs he is serving is not the abuser, but the target (or targets) of his abuse, and their situation frequently improves whether the abuser successfully changes his ways or not. The program enables them to find resources or other groups that can help them, learn to advocate more effectively for themselves, or regain enough sense

of self to get out of the relationship entirely. Even just having the clarity of knowing that what's happened to them is not normal and not their fault can be immensely empowering as they go forward.

WHAT AN ABUSER IS(N'T)

Before Bancroft explains the core beliefs that define an abusive mindset, he devotes a considerable portion of the book to debunking common ideas of what causes abuse. He describes these ideas as so pervasive that most people unwittingly harbor several of them, and indeed there were ones that I was surprised to see on the list of myths. Also surprisingly, while some of the myths have retained their popularity more than others, none of the ones he lists have fallen off the radar in the two decades since the book's publication; I've heard literally every single one.

Many of the things that people think of as the root causes of abuse are problems that have well-established solutions, and Bancroft is obligated to repeat the same cautionary note several times in slightly different permutations: since this or that problem in his life is not actually the cause of the abuse, fixing it will not stop the abuse, and may in fact make it worse:

- "He says his mom beat him when he was a kid, so now he doesn't know what a healthy relationship looks like, what if he goes to therapy?" Well, you'll get a more confident, centered, and psychologically resilient spouse who still screams and throws things, but now when you tell him to stop, he's picked up enough therapy-speak to armchair-analyze your behavior and explain how you're actually the one provoking his outbursts ("Well, if you practiced active listening instead of making me bottle up my

feelings, my anxiety issues wouldn't be causing me so much stress!").

- "He has these really misogynistic attitudes, so surely the solution is making him learn more about feminism!" You can certainly try that, if you want a partner who will tell your friends all about his newfound admiration and respect for women, then call you a fat bitch on the drive home- and good luck convincing your friends that he did that, because they've just seen how in touch with his emotions and knowledgeable about social justice he is. Everyone knows abusers don't look like *that*. You know, he was saying you throw the word *abuser* around a little too freely…

- "He's meanest when he's been drinking, so if he stops abusing alcohol, will he stop abusing me?" Unfortunately not; attaining sobriety (or getting clean from other drugs) often just means that the abuser has more energy for abusing, and more of his wits about him to do it in subtler ways. The stereotype that recovering alcoholics end up being judgemental about other people's drinking is in most cases unfair and unfounded; an abuser on the wagon, however, can absolutely be expected to live up to this where his partner is concerned, often demanding that she also abstain "in support". He even has a new weapon to guilt you into carrying out his will; if you put him under too much stress, he says, he'll start drinking again and it will be your fault! (Incredibly, this is not hyperbole: Bancroft describes one abuser who ended both an argument with his wife and a nine-month stretch of sobriety by ordering several cocktails, then downing them without breaking eye contact with her.)

Per Bancroft, most mythical explanations for abuse are seized upon and popularized by the abusers themselves; they try whichever ones they think will garner sympathy or deflect blame, and cycle them out as needed. Any explanation for abuse that goes "I do this because of this problem I have; help me solve the problem, and the abuse will stop" is an evasion; the abuser gets to have *you* spend time and effort on *their* issue, while also feeling justified continuing the abuse as long as it hasn't been fixed to their satisfaction.

Several also take the form of "I do this because of [trait that I can't possibly change]", whether that's a physical or mental condition, a sob-story past, or some other form of special appeal to extenuating circumstances. Bancroft notes that they usually have little trouble controlling these issues in circumstances outside of the abusive relationship, or in situations that might have unwanted consequences for them: the man who claims a bad relationship left him with "issues trusting women" frequently hooks up with other girls in absurdly risky ways, the "uncontrollable rageaholic" never has a blowup at work or in public, or the man who claimed he would go "completely out of his head" and smash random things around his house; in this case, his wife eventually noticed that nothing he destroyed on these allegedly irrational rampages ever belonged to him, only her.

Also, the signs of abuse are often completely absent early in a relationship, and abusers can be extremely charming at first; this stands to reason, as very few people will become invested in a relationship that is obviously rotten from the outset. Abusers early in a relationship will paint rosy pictures of the couple's future together, talk about how great they're going to be for each other, and generally lay on the charm as thick as they possibly

can. The specifics vary: some perform elaborate gestures of self-sacrifice (which makes the victims feel indebted, and reluctant to back out later), some sprinkle in references to their tragic backstory of choice, others just stick to promises about the future, writing emotional cheques the victim will only find out later are uncashable. This is another key insight about abusers; most are not abusive all the time. Things will start out great, slide into the horror show, and often - especially if the victim starts showing signs of leaving - suddenly return to bursts of generosity, extravagant kindness, and promises that this time it'll last, though it never does. But this, too, makes clear the flaws of the idea that the abuser is somehow fundamentally incapable of behaving differently.

In fact, Bancroft says, the abuser generally can behave differently. It's just extremely difficult to create a situation where he feels he has to. Appeals to conscience won't work, because however erratic or out-of-control their behavior may seem, abusers hardly ever do anything that seems wrong *to them*. Bancroft says this was something he noticed nearly immediately:

> *A critical insight seeped into me from working with my first few dozen clients: An abuser almost never does anything that he himself considers morally unacceptable. He may hide what he does because he thinks other people would disagree with it, but he feels justified inside… He invariably has a reason that he considers good enough. In short, an abuser's core problem is that he has a distorted sense of right and wrong.*

Internally, abusers don't think of themselves as having done something wrong; they certainly don't think of themselves as abusers. This belief - "my actions are justified" - becomes something like a trapped prior; all incoming information is filtered

through the lens of “I only did what I had to do”, and no amount of evidence will cause them to consider that they could be in the wrong. Injuries they inflict are downplayed; grievances they suffer are nursed and exaggerated. Their anger is a natural response to the horrendous injustice they’ve endured - which injustice? Don’t worry, they’ll come up with one. More than one, if the first one finds no takers. Meanwhile, other people’s anger at them is irrational, crazy, after all, they’ve done nothing wrong.

The worldview becomes as warped as it has to be to not conflict with “I was in the right all along”; people who demand that the abuser own up to his shortcomings are perceived as holier-than-thous trying to hold a basically good man to a totally unreasonable standard. Friends who the abuser suspects will see their actions as genuinely morally wrong will be lied to, or replaced with more pliable ones. And anyone who describes them as an *abuser* has to be discredited, immediately and decisively. After all, abuse is evil, totally unjustified. But everything they do *is* justified. Ergo, what they are doing is not abuse. This sounds like it should produce too much cognitive dissonance to be maintained, but Bancroft reports that most abusers don’t decide that abuse is OK (in fact, many describe themselves as victims of abuse, past and present). Instead, as mentioned before, they maintain the position that abuse is unacceptable, but define abuse in a way that conveniently doesn’t include them. Even in a program for abusive men, Bancroft saw men who happily tore into the other group members with harsh criticism of their actions, each one confident that the others were exactly the kind of scum this program was for - but each one equally confident that he wasn’t.

And they have a buffet menu of definitions to pick from: Bancroft outlines a number of different archetypes of abuse, and I want to

give him kudos here for clearly and carefully differentiating between the actual abuse and the stereotypes around who can or cannot commit abuse. Not every strong guy is a violent meathead (but some are), not every intelligent person is a condescending manipulator (but some are), and not every emotionally sensitive partner is playing up their easily wounded feelings to elicit pity and avoid accountability (but, yes, some are!).

Going through these archetypes, a reader will soon see why Bancroft earlier declined to offer a behavioral description of abuse: his "Drill Sergeant" who micromanages every aspect of his household has little in common behaviorally with his "Water Torturer" who wears down his family one individually unremarkable, plausibly-deniable verbal jab at a time, or his "Player" who develops steamy relationships with multiple women, then sets them against each other. I'm sure every one of them can come up with a definition of abuse that encircles enough of the others to sound plausible, but just so happens to leave them in the clear. Emotionally, though, all of their partners are being put through the wringer in different ways.

THE RELATIONSHIP

OK, so abusers are convinced of their own innocence. Why does this become so particularly destructive in a long-term romantic partnership, and why do so many abusers end up in one regardless? Bancroft says that most of the abusive men he sees, some knowingly and some unwittingly, picture a relationship where:

> *The woman meets all of his needs, is beautiful and sexy at all times of the day and night, has no needs of her own, and is in awe of his brilliance and charm. He desires a woman*

who will cater to him and never complain about anything he does or darken his day with frustrations or unhappiness about her own life.

When an actual, flesh-and-blood person is compared to these expectations, she's inevitably going to come up short; basically any part of her existence that doesn't serve him is going to register as a disappointment. She probably doesn't realize that this is the standard by which she's being passed or failed; it's possible that even he doesn't.

But now we have a powder keg. The moment there's a discrepancy between the basically-superhuman figure the abuser expects and the standard-issue human being he actually gets, "This is not what I expected from this relationship" runs into "I'm doing everything right and my conscience is clear", and returns the result "This is somebody else's fault". Unfortunately, there's somebody else right there, conspicuously not being perfect, and becoming an increasingly easy target for blame.

At this point, why doesn't he just cut his losses and leave? For that matter, why doesn't she? Well, this started out pretty great, and even though most (though not all) people know better than to expect new-relationship energy to last forever, that strong start is enough for both of them to unconsciously set a high benchmark for the relationship. The victim perceives early warning signs as a deviation from an otherwise satisfactory norm; if her partner has generally been amazing so far, she'll feel silly for thinking about bailing at the first sign of trouble. After all, every relationship has rough patches, right? It will be some time, or never, before she realizes that this is the norm and the good times were the deviation; that she's in for less of a happy

relationship with some rough patches in it, and more of a long rough patch with some moments of relative peace.

The abuser also operates under the assumption that how things started is more-or-less how they'll go on, but he also has his priors singing "You're doing everything right, this is not your fault, you're a great boyfriend and she's lucky to have you" in his ear. But if it can't be him not holding up his end of the bargain, the deteriorating relationship must be her fault, and he tells himself and her that he's just acting to preserve and restore the relationship. He doesn't *like* having to be the bad guy, but he has no choice, and he'll drop it once things go back to "normal". Basically, he grants himself the relationship equivalent of emergency powers.

His goal now is to make the relationship conform to his expectations, but his view of it is increasingly distorted by his convictions that things are supposed to be perfect, and he can't be the reason they're not. He just needs to convince her of it. This is made easier the more central he becomes in her life. Ups and downs get filtered in his memory. The times when he's relatively well-behaved match his "husband of the year" priors and get accentuated; bad times crash into the "did what I had to do" priors and get excused away or forgotten outright. The abuser is helped in this by the fact that his partner *also* doesn't want to view the relationship as abusive; especially if she has the very common misconception that only the gullible or weak-willed can be drawn into a toxic relationship, her own priors are telling her (albeit less intensely) that she'd never "fall for" a partner capable of seriously abusing her.

If the abuser can convincingly act like a model partner in front of others (most can, at least in short stints), soon she's hearing how

lucky she is to have landed such a catch, further reinforcing the message that even if something is wrong, it's not something wrong with *him*. And even if he slips up and someone catches on, they're easily dealt with. Anyone who warns her or confronts him about his behavior is dismissed as a jealous snake in the garden "trying to turn you against me", and he finds reasons to limit their interactions. Whether it's his intention or not, all those unpredictable outside perspectives get gradually banished, starting with the ones most likely to call his actions abusive. Oh, and if they have kids, he's one of the first people to teach them how to think; they may or may not buy his claims of blamelessness, but it's very hard for them not to pick up his increasing disdain for their mother.

Along the way, other things start happening. The touchy subjects that "set him off" magically stop coming up; she's learned that addressing them isn't worth the resulting explosion. She's paying more attention to him than she used to; he doesn't particularly care that it's the same kind of attention that geologists pay to Yellowstone. She stops complaining so much about *her* needs: it never helps, so why would she bother? From his perspective, things are only getting better, and he still hasn't done anything wrong. Any remaining objections to his own actions grow quieter and quieter as long as the perks keep coming in. And now he has yet another justification to throw on the pile: "Hey, this is *working*."

This is why appeals to an abuser's self-interest don't work: his self-interest is to continue the abuse and reap the rewards. You're asking him to give up constant attention to his wants and whims, an infinite-use "I win the argument" button, the ability to act on his impulses with impunity, and a live-in servant to whom he feels as little obligation as a cat feels to a scratching post. In

exchange, what can you offer him? A genuinely close relationship with his partner? He likes the benefits of the sham one just fine. The satisfaction of being a good partner for her? By his evaluation, he already is; she doesn't know how good she has it, the unappreciative bitch. The ability to sleep soundly at night, without the guilt of hurting the people closest to him hanging over his head? That guilt isn't there in the first place; it sounds like you're the one who wants him to feel guilty. He may not be consciously weighing the pros and cons, but on some level he's doing the cost-benefit analysis, and you are on the wrong side of it.

Appeals to conscience are dangerous for another reason: his conscience is still telling him, unswervingly, that he's fine and right and this isn't his fault. But he does probably still feel guilt and shame if someone confronts him with the idea that his grievances against his partner are not enough to justify his actions. The desired message of "my actions weren't justified", though, has been rendered almost literally unthinkable. To balance the emotional equation, he needs to find a different way to square the circle. He may downplay the severity of his actions ("People call every little thing *abuse* these days…") or discredit the accuser's judgment ("Nobody appreciates what I put up with…"), but another option exists: if he can convince himself that the victim is *even worse* than he thought, then he can convince himself that she deserved it. Thus, well-intentioned attempts to put the abuse in perspective can meet with the abuser adopting an expression of wounded disbelief ("Wait, you're really taking *her* side?") as he instead doubles down on the idea that he's single-handedly saving the relationship and she's to blame for it needing to be saved.

The only place Bancroft sees even a slim hope of lasting change on the part of the abuser is if the question is shifted from engaging with his justifications to enforcing unavoidable, non-negotiable consequences. Someone needs to disregard the excuses, see through the deflections and distortions, and keep a laser focus on the abuser's accountability: "You are being abusive, and this is not acceptable; you can stop it, *only* you can stop it, and if you *don't* stop it, the relationship will end." In his program, he and others like him aim to be that person. Abusers make them work for it.

The ones who can successfully get trained therapists to rubber-stamp their opinion that their wives are the crazy ones regularly try the same trick on Bancroft; another reason he insists on talking to both partners separately is that having a second vantage point makes him less vulnerable to this scheme. Abusers try to plea-bargain: he only engages in this or that abusive behavior because she does something that makes him so very, very mad, so if she gives that up he'll stop the corresponding abuse. Bancroft points out that "I'll stop the abuse if you stop pissing me off" was already the dubious bargain they were offering, just less spelled out, and recommends rejecting it outright. Other abusers hope to learn subtler *kinds* of abuse - "I really see now that it's wrong when I hit my wife to get her to do what I want. Can you teach me to use my *words* to get her to do what I want?" - or agree that they'll make the abuse less frequent. Here, an interventionist has to keep the core attitudes *causing* the abuse in the crosshairs, not negotiate whether the guy can have a little emotional sabotage now and then, as a treat. And then there are the ones who claim that they've suddenly seen the light, their hearts have grown three sizes, and they'll never abuse again, no really, no need to follow up on them, just convince their exes to take them back and then leave

them both alone. At that point it's up to the abused person; she'll be the judge of that, and if the program is well run, she'll have learned what to watch for and be much harder to fool.

In the end, many abusers, if they find that the program is too tamper-proof for them to monkey with, will just leave. They stop attending, or wait out their court mandates without putting in the work. Maybe they make a last-ditch effort to talk their partners into giving them one more shot, or maybe they just slink off in search of easier prey. As said, curing the abuser is actually the long shot; he's generally in the program to begin with only because he's facing his partner actually leaving him or a court ordering him to shape up. Concrete consequences like that are the first thing in a long time that's gotten deep enough to jostle his priors of "It's okay to do something as long as I feel okay about it" and "My wife should exist for my sole benefit and be happy about it"; everything he's done has only entrenched them further. It's all too easy for those priors to settle back into position as if nothing ever happened, and anyway most of them are too attached to the perks. But hey, about those priors…

WHERE ARE THESE ATTITUDES COMING FROM?

Bancroft lays it out pretty plain: the attitudes that fester into abuse are planted early in life. What we see in our family is the primary source, especially in the very early years; for a toddler with no other reference pool, "how dad treats mom" generally becomes the assumed normal for "how dads treat moms". That remains formative and powerful throughout our lives, but we also absorb messages from our friends, role models, and media. Bancroft carefully avoids offering one-note "monkey-see-monkey-do" explanations; he points out that abused children can learn that abuse is normal, but they can just

as easily learn that receiving abuse is a terrible experience that they don't want to inflict, though only if they have some other model to compare it against and emulate.

Nevertheless, I think this is a weakish point of the book, but for reasons that have little to do with Bancroft. The discussion of media influences, especially, will feel more than a little dated to a modern reader, and not just because his examples include Eminem winning a Grammy. It's simply going to be hard to ignore the feeling that you've heard this rhetoric before, from someone on Tumblr who's prepared to block you on sight based on which cartoons you watch. To his credit, Bancroft is more nuanced and thoughtful than a lot of those that came after him, and he can scarcely be blamed for the directions that other people took these arguments once he was done with them. His argument is less that watching media featuring abusers will transform innocent viewers into abusers, and more that viewers who already have proto-abusive mindsets will take what they see as further evidence that those mindsets are acceptable and tacitly endorsed in society. Just don't expect, say, Bancroft's take on *Beauty and the Beast* to give you any new information you haven't already rolled your eyes at in a Buzzfeed listicle with the word "problematic" in the title.

(In a twist that I'm sure Bancroft must find especially irritating to deal with, some abusers even learn to take his own explanation of where their attitudes came from, and turn it into yet another excuse for why they can't be held responsible *for* those attitudes: "Oh gosh oh geez, I can't help it, you know, I learned all these bad lessons from the rap music and the Disney movies". It seems like there is nothing they won't at least try to spin in their favor.)

Also, alas, this is the point where I need to talk about the gender thing. Bancroft's abusive men are being blindsided by the fact that their girlfriends have annoying traits like "needs of their own" and "an inner life". Are there also women who harbor unrealistic standards for husbands? Sure! That's hardly gender exclusive; if you want love, lower your expectations a few. But Bancroft isn't seeing women who abuse men at anywhere near the rate he sees men who abuse women. As he describes it, women with unreasonably high relationship goals still tend to think of their hypothetical partner as a person, whereas men get this idea that their partner will essentially be an object. Or a possession, even. There's this system, you see, that has different expectations for men than it does for women. And it encourages men to think that they're entitled to… look, I'll drop the act, it's patriarchy. He's describing patriarchy. He doesn't use the *word* patriarchy, but if you've been on the internet and had a gender in the last decade, you'll recognize his description, and much like his choices of media examples, you're going to have a hard time reading what he says about it without filling in the gaps from your own preconceived opinions.

I did *try* to do that, though, and honestly, I do think it's convincing. In advising women how to navigate a world that includes an abusive partner, Bancroft also provides a detailed overview of the state of women's rights in the 90s, and the cultural expectations they were dealing with. It sounds pretty dismal. At one point, Bancroft has to explain that spouses can in fact refuse to consent to sex. Spousal battery was only sporadically prosecuted until the mid-90s; it seems like it was one of the reasons for the demographic change that led to more physically violent offenders in Bancroft's workshops, as courts decided they were going to start taking it at least somewhat seriously after decades of laxity. Authorities, from churches and

other religious organizations to actual trained therapists, felt completely comfortable telling abuse victims that if they just toughed it out eventually their love would change him. The stigma against divorce was also noticeably stronger; an abuser who could maneuver his victim into a marriage could count on her facing immense social pressure not to leave him, especially if kids entered the picture. You can argue about the state of gender relations now if you really want to (I really don't), but it seems hard to argue that things were already hunky-dory in the 90s.

All this creates one hell of an exploitable mechanic for a male abuser while increasing the pressure on them. "Here kid, have this system that gives you an inherent position of power over your partner, societal expectations of control over your household, and constant reminders that your success or failure is what defines you. Now be sure that your wife doesn't do anything that embarrasses you, or overshadows you, or indicates that she would be fine without you. If that happens, it'll reflect badly on you and people will doubt your masculinity, which, by the way, is the thing that gives you the right to do any of this. Well, have fun!" Every man who already feels like he deserves to be the king of the castle hears that he's right, and any man whose wife turns out *not* to be fine with becoming a vestigial component of his existence hears that the situation is horribly out of hand and he needs to solve it by any means necessary; some men are going to take those lessons to heart.

Some more insight into how Bancroft feels about gender comes from a surprising place, one I was frankly a bit shocked to see handled so evenly in a book of this vintage: Bancroft's thoughts about gay and lesbian couples. Remember that this book came out two full years before any US state legally recognized same-sex marriage. And while Bancroft is skeptical of accounts of

women abusing men, he freely admits that he's already seeing men who abuse men and women who abuse women at sufficient rates to make him take notice. But obviously, patriarchy is harder to use to your advantage when you and your partner both have, or lack, male privilege. What's to be done? Bancroft gives a few examples of the ways he sees gay and lesbian abusers pick up the slack.

First, he says, queer abusers were even more confident than straight ones that they were categorically disqualified from accusations of abuse; men abusing men told themselves that men can't be abused, women abusing women told themselves that women can't be abusive, and both groups told everyone that abuse is purely a straight people problem. Secondly, abusers exploited homophobia. Closeted relationships were (unsurprisingly) more common when the stigma was stronger and the relationship was illegal; threatening to out a partner to their parents, friends, or employers was a threat that packed even more of a punch, and asking other people in queer communities to hush up abuse was easier when those communities were less visible and more vulnerable. Thirdly, abusers exploited the *lack* of a preconception of who the abuser was. While a straight male claiming his wife was an abuser lacked some credibility (whether you think that skepticism was justified or no), same-sex couples didn't come with such easy stereotypes, and it apparently wasn't uncommon for abusers to deflect the allegations of abuse onto their partners, even to the point of getting their victimized significant others enrolled in abuse programs as the perpetrators! Being prevented from wielding the big guns of patriarchy didn't stop would–be abusers; it just made them more creative.

With all this in mind, it's clear that Bancroft isn't so naive as to say "all abuse comes from patriarchy, nuff said". If he thought

“men can’t be abused, and women can’t be abusive” was true, he wouldn’t consider it a sham excuse from gay and lesbian abusers. And he was prepared to consider whether the couple’s account of who was abusing who could be wrong. However, he did view the advantages a straight male abuser has as placing him in a category of his own; there were more of them, they were more culturally secure, and they tended to be more dangerous. Hence, Bancroft chose his priorities, focused his attention on the largest group doing the most obvious damage, and settled on a heuristic that almost always works.

At one point in the book, when talking about the (lack of) overlap between substance abuse and partner abuse, and the people who expect his program to treat both, Bancroft uses the metaphor of asking a doctor to perform both neurosurgery and skeletal reconstruction, and says that while someone could possibly become skilled at both, nobody would reasonably expect that person to operate on a patient’s brain and replace their hip in the same procedure. This, too, appears to be how he feels about counseling male abusers of women and female abusers of men at the same time: two problems with enough distance between them that they should never be handled and treated simultaneously.

And yet, gay and lesbian abusers were admitted into his programs alongside heterosexual ones. It seems he makes a concession for gay and lesbian abuse victims because there are too many to ignore but not enough to comprise their own group; giving them their own group, separate from the straight one, with an eye to handling the specific dynamics that crop up in that context, would be his ideal solution. But when it comes to male victims of women, he doesn’t seem to feel that there are too many to ignore.

(If you're wondering "hey, what about transgender/nonbinary people? Can they be abused? Can they be abusive?" this is as good a place as any to tell you that it never once comes up in the book, which is a really frustrating omission. Partly this is because of how much what Bancroft says about gay and lesbian couples tells us about how he views heterosexual ones. But also, my gut feeling is that the trans experience of domestic abuse, like the trans experience of a lot of things, is "everything is worse and more complicated, for reasons that run the gamut from self-evident to surprising to heartbreaking" and if so, they could really use the advice. That having been said, it does feel somewhat churlish to treat "doesn't cover trans identities" as a genuine mark against a book from 2002, and this definitely seems more like a thing I assume he's encountered in the intervening years and would have some insight on now, than a thing he's deliberately omitting.)

How do I feel about this? In a word, disappointed. I know men whose accounts of abuse by female romantic partners I find absolutely credible; I know that among the difficulties they face coming forward, even now, are the perception that they don't exist, that they must be lying, or that they're covering for abuse of their own. The hardest parts of this book for me to read weren't anything that related to my own experiences, but the bits that I know are all too easily turned into weapons of abuse themselves. Remember, every abuser wants to draw the lines of abuse in a way that places them out of bounds, and it's immensely disheartening to see Bancroft handing any of them a metaphorical piece of chalk; it seems like he of all people should know better. He had all the pieces of information he needed; he even put them together correctly when it came to the needs of queer abuse survivors, in ways that were years ahead of his time.

But this makes his failure to do the same for men abused by women all the more pronounced.

That having been said - I don't think Bancroft is being dishonest, or acting on some misguided chivalry. I think he is accurately presenting his findings drawn from fifteen years of running programs, observing over two thousand real-world examples of abusive relationships, in the North America of the late-80s-to-early-00s. I think he's more familiar with the dark spots of that era, certainly than I am, probably than anyone should need to be. I think he's borne witness to orders of magnitude more pain than I have. Bancroft made the decisions he made, I imagine, with that pain in mind, and the aim of alleviating as much of it as he could. For various reasons, I am glad not to live in a world that thinks as it did in 2002, but we're by no means out of the woods yet. That does, though, bring us to the question:

ARE THINGS DIFFERENT NOW?

One of Bancroft's explicit goals is cultural change; with *Why Does He Do That?*, he aims to create a social context that knows how to spot abusers and denies them the easy pickings he saw them enjoying. Part of what makes his job so difficult is that every abuser feels, deep down, that what they're doing really isn't wrong; a culture that turns a blind eye to their actions reinforces the belief that it's their victims, their accusers, and people like Bancroft, who are out of step with reality. To this end, he recommends more education on the effects of abuse on women and their communities, more open discussion about it and condemnation of it, more and better role models for non-abusive relationships, and more support for the women who face abuse

and choose to do something about it. Has this happened? Some things I noticed:

- As I was writing this, Youtube started recommending me a movie trailer that opens with a man bursting into a support meeting and pleading for help getting out of a "toxic relationship". As the trailer goes on, other group members nod knowingly, saying things like "You can't get him out of your head" and "You feel like he could destroy you with a snap of his fingers", before the group leader encourages him to think through what would happen "if you were to stop focusing on his needs", using terminology nearly identical to Bancroft's. The joke of the movie, of course, is that the abuser he's describing is literally Count Dracula. Which will complicate the matter of standing up to him, y'see! (The final trailer makes this connection even more explicit, with the protagonist telling Dracula to his face that he will "no longer tolerate abuse"; the group's affirmations are repurposed as a battle cry).

- One of last year's biggest budget and best selling video games was God of War: Ragnarok, the latest in a series almost as old as the book being reviewed. The main villain of the game, based on Odin of Norse mythology, is portrayed as about as textbook a narcissistic abuser as can be asked for. He alternates between jokes, put-downs, promises and threats at breakneck speeds; in one scene he stabs someone for talking too much, taunts his estranged wife Freyja, then stalks out of the room while snarling "I am in control here!" Considerable narrative room is devoted to his deeply unhealthy relationship with Freyja, as well as his sons and grandchildren; by the end of the game, most of them have turned on Odin and joined with the game's

protagonist Kratos, despite him having murdered members of their family in both the previous game and this one.

- *Why Does He Do That?* was written two years before the founding of that hip new social media platform, Facebook; in the time since the book was written, the landscape of social media has been basically completely reinvented. Bancroft mentioned the importance of reaching out to someone who can provide you with an outside perspective on your situation, and reassure you that it's reasonable not to hold yourself responsible for your abuser's wrath; well, on Reddit, entire communities exist to offer anonymous relationship advice, with one of the most popular explicitly offering a place to describe a specific personal conflict before asking, "Am I The Asshole?"

Hopeful signs, right? Surely things have gotten better, everyone can spot an abuser a mile away, and they have nowhere left to hide? Ha. Ha. Ha. Even in the book, Bancroft warns that the people who don't know much about abuse can be harmful, but the people who *think* they know a great deal and are wrong can be much worse. Remember that Bancroft doesn't view his starting point as an empty void of ignorance that he simply needs to fill up with the facts, but as a veritable thicket of misconceptions and half-truths that he's obliged to clear away before he has enough conceptual space to get any work done. Remember also that of his list of myths, some have mutated over time, but none of them - not one - has died outright. Pop culture can assume enough audience familiarity with concepts like toxic partners and generational trauma to use them as flavoring in comedy movies and video games, but by no means does that guarantee that those concepts are actually correctly understood.

At one point in the book, I'm pretty sure Bancroft describes gaslighting; he doesn't use the word, because he's avoiding unnecessary jargon and at the time nobody outside of a psychology conference would have heard of it. Using the word gaslighting now is a bad idea because *everyone's* heard of it, but nobody can agree on what it means, and a pretty substantial portion of people just use it as a fancier word for "lying" or a more negatively charged word for "disagreeing with me".

Reddit's relationship advice is notoriously weird: commenters frequently assume the worst, treat isolated incidents as chronic patterns, and voice their shock that the original poster hasn't already fled the relationship (through divorce if necessary). To be fair to these commenters, they often have nothing to go on but a single description of a couple's first stupid fight in an otherwise happy five-year marriage; the same framing effect that tells couples that their whole relationship will feel the way it did at the start now works in reverse as they extrapolate a whole relationship from its most pressing point of contention. These commenters are generally well-meaning, but limited by their context, and by the distancing effects of the internet; they offer advice that feels right to them, based on a snapshot of the situation, and unlike someone like Bancroft, will mostly never have to look at any of the consequences of someone following that advice.

Ubiquitous social media in general is another thing I'm not sure Bancroft could have seen coming. I can think of positives (Tell your story on a platform with worldwide reach! Access information resources of every kind! Every vulnerable woman has access to supportive communities of her choosing on a device she's already carrying in her pocket!), but I can much more easily think of negatives (Brigading! Cyberstalking! Device surveillance!

Fake news! Every teenager now knows how to curate their online profile to emphasize traits they want people to see and hide ones they don't! Every abusive man has access to supportive communities of *his* choosing on a device *he's* already carrying in *his* pocket!). I expect abusers to capitalize on the opportunities new technology affords, stacking the deck even further against their targets. In any case, I can't imagine a situation where the dynamics of abuse *aren't* affected by a massive upheaval in how we communicate and who we communicate with.

It's common to say that our society is increasingly polarizing or even fracturing. Is the kind of abuser Bancroft describes, formerly happy to cash in on his male privilege, now losing his natural habitat (which makes me picture a polar bear looking forlornly at a shrinking ice floe before calling a nearby harp seal a bitch)? I suspect the answer depends a lot on where you look. But it matters less than it would if abusers weren't so teeth-grindingly versatile. I'm not going to single out any specific communities where I think abuse will be able to take root, partly for the sake of not making the comments section any more of a war zone than it already will be, but mostly because I don't think it's productive; practically all of them are up for grabs. Remember, we're talking about people who will weaponize an AA medallion, deliberately expose themselves to 90s-level homophobia, or co-opt a program specifically designed to stymie them. To paraphrase Jeff Goldblum, abuse, uh, finds a way.

The book seems very, very good at helping women who are facing abuse from their male romantic partners. In an environment where patriarchy is the undisputed 800-pound gorilla of ideologies, that's going to cover a pretty wide swath of abuse situations. Regardless of where you think that gorilla weighs in these days, I expect it's going to produce enough "classic style"

abusers (male, heterosexual, and mostly confining their abuse to their wife and kids) to keep Bancroft and his colleagues busy for as long as they can stand to keep at it. But even writing from 2002, Bancroft is already seeing abusers adapt to contexts where they can't reliably use it as a tool, and thrive there. Other cultural shifts - from a world where people are mostly unfamiliar with the concepts Bancroft discusses to a world where everyone incorrectly counts themselves as experts, from a world where physical distance still matters to a world where it is constantly bypassed by the digital - seem to threaten the relevance of this book outside of its specific niche. Is it a relic of its time? Or can it, too, adapt to new contexts?

OTHER KINDS OF ABUSE

Well, this is where I admit to misleading you in the introduction to this review: I've never had an abusive romantic partner. The relationship I recognized staring back at me in the Anger Litany, was a "friend" of mine that had just gotten himself kicked from my online Dungeons & Dragons game, when I got tired of him leaving a multi-page tirade in the chat if I didn't let him roll a saving throw. I was never in any physical danger, and when I realized I'd had enough of the verbal abuse, ending it was as simple as hitting a Block button. I am absolutely not the intended audience for *Why Does He Do That?*, and the use I made of it is decidedly "off-label". It would be thoroughly disingenuous of me to claim that my experiences are equivalent with those of a woman who's had her independence crushed, her children trained to hate her, or her bones broken. The treatment I went through came from the same source, but at only a fraction of the intensity.

And yet… *that was bad enough*. One of my friends in the group once saw me check a chat notification, and correctly guessed who had sent it by how visibly and instantly I deflated. D&D has always been something I found satisfying, and at times in my life, literally the only thing I looked forward to; for the first time, it became something I had to force myself through. I was regularly asking my other players to tell me what I was doing wrong, because I was beginning to believe that only a catastrophic blunder on my part would explain the blowback I was getting; the replies I was getting back told me they were equally baffled. And even after a table ban put an end to the direct problem, it didn't get him out of my head; I was left trying to figure out why things had gotten quite so bad, and whether I was somehow responsible for them getting that way. I was also asking, "Why does he do that?" And the only place I found the explanations I was looking for was in this book. I cannot stress enough how lucky I was to have this remain mostly confined to a hobby where, even if I get quite invested, I could have ultimately walked away from the table and lost next to nothing; again, that experience was bad enough. Having something as pivotal and life-altering as a marriage and a family despoiled in this way would be almost more painful than I can comprehend.

But I don't think I'm being flippant, either, in saying that the dynamics I saw in a fantasy game are a microcosm of the ones present in domestic abuse; I think Bancroft would agree. He points out that abuse shares common dynamics in whatever context it crops up. Abusive households have much in common with abusive workplaces, friend circles, governments, and other social structures. Bancroft compares a husband looking for any excuse to go off at his wife, to a boss aggressively micromanaging his employees, or a man who makes his girlfriend think she'd be helpless without him, to a dictator telling his

people he is the only leader with the strength to protect them. The same poisonous attitudes that lead a married man to view his wife as a mere extension of himself can lead an overbearing parent to demand control over the lives and decisions of her children well into adulthood, or the leader of an online community to insist on ideological lockstep from its members. Bancroft points out that abusers of all stripes are meticulous about public perception because the image matters more to them than the reality. And from a billionaire to a batterer, it all feeds back into the same issue: as long as the benefits of hurting others outweigh the consequences for doing so, it is going to continue.

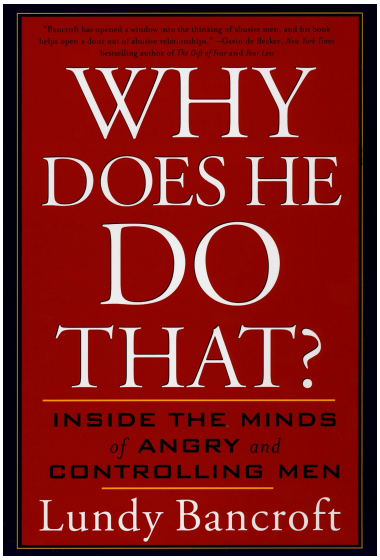
In a weird way, though, this gives me hope. If all these forms of abuse of power are linked together, then the lessons learned from standing up to one will be in some sense applicable to another. And while demanding better from a national government or a billion-dollar company can feel like screaming into a hurricane, maybe we can learn something from starting in our homes, with people who already know who we are and are supposed to care about our well-being at least a *little*. Recognizing the patterns of abuse on a small scale allows us to more easily recognize them on a large one.

Naturally this recognition can go too far the other way into seeing it everywhere - Reddit provides a salient example, along with all the red flag emojis you'll ever need and a ringing endorsement of the most dramatic and bridge-burning course of action available. But I'd be remiss not to point out that I first saw the Anger Litany on a Reddit post, which also directed me to the book itself. I wish I was more sure that people know better than to use social media as a substitute for professional help, but I don't dismiss the ability of social media to point the way to better resources when a situation goes beyond what it can handle. And just because

people aren't answering a question well doesn't mean it wasn't worth asking. People answered "Why does he do that?" with "oh, he's just like that", or "you're not trying hard enough", or "he's a complete monster and you're doomed to suffer", until Bancroft pointed out, "Well, it looks to me like he's getting a lot of your time and attention with minimal effort and next to no cost, of *course* he's going to keep doing whatever keeps that going. Let's find some ways to cut off that easy supply."

CONCLUSION

I'm extremely glad for the existence of *Why Does He Do That?*, and grateful to Bancroft for laying so much groundwork in this area, then leaving us such a meticulous guide to what he found there and how to go forward. For its intended audience at the time of release, this would have been an invaluable and unparalleled resource. Some parts of it have certainly declined in usefulness, or been rendered into cliche, between that time and now. But there is a lot still relevant and worth examining, and a solid set of tools for dealing with a problem that remains as yet rampant. It's worth mentioning that every search I did for this book turned up new people saying it helped them identify their abusers and get their lives back from them; not many books can claim to have done so much good for so many people in such a vulnerable situation. Maybe a genuine and widespread understanding of the principles laid out in it would still have the power to effect notable societal change for the better. In the meantime, I can report outstanding results using it to figure out why pretending to be a gnome for four hours a week was getting less fun.


"Bancroft has opened a window into the thinking of abusive men, and his book helps open a door out of abusive relationships." —Gavin de Becker, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Gift of Fear* and *Fear Less*
WHY DOES HE DO THAT?
INSIDE THE MINDS of ANGRY and CONTROLLING MEN
Lundy Bancroft