

READINGROOM

On the Neil Gaiman sexual assault case

A grooming researcher at the University of Auckland examines a key question in the Neil Gaiman case, 'Why didn't Scarlett get out of the bath?'



by **Paula Gosney**
2 hours ago



Paula Gosney: 'As a grooming researcher at Auckland University, the question that most interests me has everything to do with rape culture.'

Performance artist Amanda Palmer, wife of author Neil Gaiman, recruited 22-year-old Scarlett Pavlovich to babysit their son on Waiheke Island. On her first evening, alone in the house with Gaiman, Scarlett was encouraged to take a

bath beneath a pōhutukawa tree. Not long after she undressed and got into the bath, 61-year-old Gaiman appeared without invitation, naked, carrying candles, and climbed in beside her.

I have combed the digital landscape, digging through pages of journalism and understandable outrage over the sexual assault and sex trafficking allegations that followed their two-month relationship, and have not found a single sentence that revisits the critical question asked of Pavlovich in the original Tortoise podcast that broke this story: *Did you jump out of the bath at any point?* Is this question avoided out of fear of victim blaming, or are we unable to hold two paradoxical ideas in our binary cultural landscape? Those two ideas are: Gaiman is a predator misusing his power, and Pavlovich appears to give consent.

This sexual assault case offers many potential lines of inquiry. The inherent power of male celebrity, the exhaustion of language through overextension of terms like ‘sex trafficking’ or when is trial-by-public-opinion appropriate? However, as a grooming researcher at Auckland University, the question that most interests me has little to do with Gaiman’s desire for genuflection and everything to do with a rape culture that normalises coercive, painful sex acts, teaching women that to be emancipated in the 21st century means being ‘up for it’.

This piece will not litigate Pavlovich’s complex allegations; many sharp journalists are on that case. Nor, as I peel back the layers of Scarlett’s choices and her infatuation with Palmer and Gaiman at the time, do I judge her. I understand Scarlett. I have been Scarlett, and as a result, I spent a large part of my adult life trying to make sense of similar catastrophic choices.

Pavlovich states in episode 1 of the Tortoise podcast, *Master*, that Neil Gaiman groomed her. It’s an accusation at the heart of this entire case because grooming creates victims who look like they consent. The term grooming in the context of sexual assault was first used by a group of law enforcement officers in the US in the 70s. They noticed a pattern of non-violent seduction used by child sex offenders to gain access and control. Grooming starts with the identification of a vulnerable target, and it rarely involves violence. Trust is developed through favouritism and gift-giving, enhancing a child’s feeling of worth, as they slowly work to isolate the relationship.

Retired FBI agent Kenneth Lanning spent 40 years in the field, documenting his understanding of these seduction practices, observing that if these techniques are successful, the resulting compliance can improperly be interpreted as consent. “Just because a target cooperates does not mean they are not victims.”

I am struck by how closely these preconditions mimic Pavlovich’s environment and the initial steps taken by the celebrity couple, Amanda Palmer and Neil Gaiman, to bring her into their world.

The most notorious example of a female groomer is Ghislaine Maxwell, who was imprisoned for recruiting young women into Jeffrey Epstein’s prostitution ring. One of Epstein’s earliest victims, the late Virginia Giuffre, wrote in the unpublished version of her memoir used as court testimony that she would never have met Epstein had a woman not first offered her employment.

Not unlike Giuffre, Pavlovich was homeless, jobless and estranged from her family. She is on record in the *Vulture* article saying that violence was normalised in her household. “One close family member beat her with a belt. Another would strangle Pavlovich when she got upset and slap her across the face until her cheeks were raw.”

It is this environment of neglect and violence that creates the abandonment gap and grooming opportunity that appears in every qualitative example of child sexual abuse that I have researched. The bestselling author of *The Body Keeps the Score* and renowned trauma psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, M.D, writes that women with an early history of abuse are seven times more likely to be raped in adulthood, and those who witness domestic violence as children are significantly more likely to fall victim to intimate partner violence. Criminologist Eric Beauregard lends support to this observation, noting from his interviews with serial rapists that they are exceptionally skilled at detecting physical and psychological vulnerability cues.

If early trauma leaves women vulnerable to revictimisation, then what role does contemporary sex culture play in this statistical overrepresentation? The world's leading sexual violence and anti-porn scholar, Dr Gail Dines, shared an anecdote from a conversation with a group of imprisoned rapists. One man she described as smug, narcissistic and unapologetic, enjoyed recounting the grooming of his stepdaughter, saying, "culture had done a lot of the grooming for me".

For Dines, it was a pivotal moment: she had been grappling with the connection between contemporary hypersexualisation and the shaping of female identity. The rapist articulated an uncomfortable truth: that aspects of popular culture were grooming girls—functioning as a collective predator by framing young women as primarily sexual, often at the expense of a more complex identity. Professor Rosalind Gill examines cultural sexualisation from another angle, with research demonstrating its impact on cognitive function, linking objectification and hypersexualisation with eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.

What remains unexplored is the compound effect of cultural sexualisation on young women already traumatised by childhood sexual abuse or family violence. What happens when celebrity power, overlaid with contemporary sex culture that teaches girls to be 'up for it', collides with a young woman from an abusive home? The case of Scarlett Pavlovich happens.

So the question isn't why Pavlovich didn't get out of the bath, but what led her to get in, naked and alone with no door to lock, in the first place. "I know it sounds crazy but I truly thought nothing of it," she says.

Gaiman defends getting into the bath, claiming he invited her to bathe *with* him. However, autobiographical narration is inherently reconstructive; the moment one invokes the past, it is already being shaped by the perspective of the present teller. Pavlovich's account differs from Gaiman's. While the extensive WhatsApp messages that scaffold their interactions form a digital record that offers limited support to her claims of rape and abuse, what does lend weight to those claims, and to the broader cultural tension around consent that underpins her accusations, is her internal conflict and the evident power imbalance.

Pavlovich's recounting of the bath episode reveals two selves: the shy, elfin figure who remains in the bath, her passivity read as consent, and the fractured, beaten child, unable to speak up or resist. This broken Pavlovich lacks understanding of healthy sexual intimacy, with her sense of normality profoundly distorted. She was a virgin, with her only sexual experience being a teenage assault by a 40-year-old man. She constantly second-guesses her reality—*maybe this is normal*—feeling obliged to explain her lack of confidence as she continues to conceal her body while in the bath.

"It's okay — it's only me," she claims he says. "Just relax. Just have a chat. Don't ruin the moment."

“Then his fingers were in my ass,” she says on the podcast. “I wasn’t really sure what was happening. I didn’t have any choice in the matter. He just did it.” Scarlett then says he’s been having sex with her ever since.

To an untraumatised woman with a coherent sense of identity, these words might seem ludicrous. Just get out of the bath!

But that is not Pavlovich’s story. She began to cut her arms and wrists when she was 11, was bulimic and anorexic by 13, and was eventually hospitalised because she was so thin. At the age of 15, she left home and never returned. Gaiman has confirmed that he chose digital, anal penetration because she was a virgin. How have we got to a place in our society where men are of the opinion that a young virgin wants something stuck up her ass? I am a sex-positive liberal feminist, but anal penetration, especially unprepared for, is predominantly a masculine fantasy that gives very few women pleasure and in most cases, it’s painful and degrading. Nicola Gavey, author of *Just Sex* and professor at Auckland University, has examined coercive and unwanted anal sex and the cultural legitimisation of ‘rough sex’ as modern, benign and egalitarian. She argues that anal sex is increasingly positioned by popular culture as a marker of sexual liberation, yet operates within a gendered power dynamic that prioritises male entitlement over female pleasure. Her research shows that consent is often absent or reduced to a lack of resistance.

According to Lanning, the later stages of grooming involve escalating sexual desensitisation and maintenance of the relationship to prevent disclosure. In the following months, Pavlovich and Gaiman’s relationship became a continual reperformance of the bath scene. His flattery intensified, as did his degrading sex acts and demands for obedience. Unsurprisingly, Pavlovich’s fragile hold on psychological stability eroded.

From the *Vulture* story: “She’d hated herself her whole life, she tells me, ‘When someone comes along and hates you as much as yourself, it is kind of a relief, without it always being consent.’”

Two core ideas anchor my research, which is based on the hypothesis that women raised in sexualised environments or exposed to abuse are more vulnerable to revictimisation, and predators have an innate ability to detect this weakness. The first is that the abandonment gap forged in a dysfunctional home environment persists as a precondition for grooming and exploitation. Secondly, the paradox of female sexuality is a construct that both empowers and confines, reducing women to commodified, sexualised performances that undermine intimacy, agency and authenticity. This conflict has the potential to set vulnerable young women on a hypersexualised path that may lead to OnlyFans or the bath with Neil Gaiman.

Women may appear to choose degrading relationships or make decisions that put them at risk of revictimisation, but do we really believe this is what an individual wants? Structural forces and cultural sexualisation condition women to perform their sexuality, with those previously abused being the most vulnerable. In this context, grooming is not simply the act of an individual predator but a cultural process that potentially conditions at-risk women to reenact their abuse.