

In the Lions' Den – Book Review
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A retired Big Ten athletic coach and founder of a nonprofit for at-risk youth was arrested in November 2011 on 48 charges of child sexual abuse. Six months later, he was found guilty on 45 of the counts, and locked away in prison. The damage from the “Jerry Sandusky scandal” reached far beyond his wandering hands, savaging the careers of a renowned football coach, athletic staff, university administrators, and tarnishing the reputation of Penn State University.

Although subsequent collegiate sex scandals have eclipsed the Penn State affair, anger and misconceptions over Happy Valley’s own Shakespearean drama persist.

A view from center stage of the Sandusky “messy affair” is presented by former PSU President Graham Spanier in his painstakingly detailed 512-page memoir, *In the Lions' Den: The Penn State Scandal and a Rush to Judgment*. Spanier endeavors to set the record straight: he and fellow administrators did NOT neglect their duty to address child abuse, or participate in a covert cover-up of Sandusky’s misbehavior.

Sandusky’s indictment emanated from an alleged sexual assault in a Penn State shower, but the observations of the witness, assistant football coach Mike McQueary, were inconsistent and disputed. Notably, Sandusky was ultimately found not guilty of that specific charge. Despite an absence of conclusive evidence, Penn State officials were portrayed as complicit and the architects of a coverup, even though the crucial charges stemmed from incidents that occurred after Sandusky’s retirement from Penn State and revolved around his non-profit, The Second Mile.

Spanier describes a panicked University Board of Trustees unpracticed in dealing with a major crisis. They rushed to protect the institution, unceremoniously firing Joe Paterno as football coach, and accepting Spanier’s resignation, which he states was the “honorable thing to do,” given his gag order from the Board and a moral panic in full swing.

Indeed, sexual abuse cases often induce “moral panic,” a communal reaction to threatened societal mores, often precipitating a rush to judgment, misinformation and misbehavior. *Lions' Den* provides more than enough detail on the moral panic in State College and the characters leading the frantic charge for Penn State persecution. The cast included Louis Freeh, former FBI director and author of a highly flawed, ultimately contested investigative report that was initially promoted as the truth on the matter.

There were also ambitious, biased prosecutors, unethical attorneys and political influencers, including Tom Corbett, Pennsylvania’s attorney general, running for governor at the time of the scandal. Spanier readily identifies participants as friend or foe, telling the story from his position as a victim with both supporters and adversaries.

A full decade after the Sandusky scandal, Spanier served two months in a county jail for “child endangerment,” a particularly distressing charge for a man who began a distinguished academic career as a family therapist. He documents the experience with candor and insight, revealing how it ignited in him a commitment and advocacy for prison reform.

Based on Spanier’s perspective, and drawn from copious notes and records maintained throughout the ordeal, legal minutiae sometimes weigh down the narrative, but are necessary to correct the sloppy reporting and uninformed opinions that prevailed. Sure to be of interest and value to Penn State fans, alumni, and historians, the book also offers lessons about the collateral damage of sex abuse tragedies. Pedophiles con and damage everyone around them, not just their physical victims. Peripheral bystanders suddenly reinterpret subtle clues that were missed or ignored, and assume a shame not easily resolved, while observers cast themselves as judge and jury with unofficial bullhorns.

Lions' Den may not change the mind of those who remain convinced that “not enough was done,” but provides ample documentation of false accusations and legal maneuvering that deserves an attentive audience.