

# A brave account of abuse

By Mary Popham  
Special to The Courier-Journal

**T**he *Unbreakable Child* is painful to read. Author Kim Michele Richardson writes of her treatment at the hands of The Sisters of Charity at the St. Thomas/

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Unbreakable Child**  
By Kim Michele Richardson  
Kunati Inc.;  
237 pp.; \$24.95

St Vincent Orphanage in Anchorage, Ky., during the '60s. Although the incidents seem unbelievable, one need only read stories of the Holocaust survivors, or the accounts of Jonestown and the Branch Davidians, or the book, *The Boy Called It*, to know the truth of man's inhumanity to man.

The controversial lawsuit against more than a dozen nuns and the resident priest at the orphanage ultimately included the Roman Catholic Church. It was won in the courts and settlement checks were issued. At the onset of the proceedings, the author found it hard to trust anyone, including her lawyer, William F. McMurry. She gradually learned to respect him and be "thankful to God that He'd given [him] to me and to the



others."

When their mother was declared unfit, Richardson, age 3, and her three older sisters were sent to the St. Thomas Orphanage (the side for girls) by the state of Kentucky. Richardson tells of beatings for minor infractions; scornful verbal abuse; of being force-fed rice-mixed gruel or a cold wheat-mix. Once she vomited into her bowl, and the nun backhanded her while still holding an ice pick. They stitched the child's cheek and then made her scrub the bloodied floor.

Like characters in a Dickens novel, the orphans were slapped

and had their hair pulled, slept in rows of metal beds, went barefoot in the winter and were forced to hold rusty well-water in their mouths as a punishment. Over and over Richardson repeats her resolve: "I will not be broken." "Be strong." "I'm Kim. Strong!"

When she was almost eight, the girl was given a thick, bitter medicine and was taken to the quarters of the governing priest, Father Lammers. He gave her a beautiful Holy Card. She could smell the sweet Brylcreem in his hair when he said, "Kim, you are very special."

She remembers the large black mole on his hand and the pain. It was then she began sleeping on her stomach. "I learned later that this was a telltale sign of an abused child."

If some of the text is a bit clichéd, it can be forgiven. Where does one find fresh imagery and scholastic cleverness when describing the horrors of childhood abuse?

The book is dedicated to the author's three sisters and 44 other former orphans "who bravely stepped forward in 2004 to bring to light and expose past injustices."

*Mary Popham is a writer who lives in Louisville.*

## CJ 2009 Unbreakable Child book

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