

Somerville

by Brian Stanford; Bloomington, Indiana, iUniverse Publishing, 2011, 464 pages, \$34.95

Paul J. Rosenfield, M.D.

Just when we thought that pharmaceutical companies were too corrupt, along comes *Somerville*, a fictional thriller involving a pharmaceutical company linked to Nazis and multiple murders. Brian Stanford, an emeritus art history professor, weaves a complex story that has the ingredients to be a good detective tale. It starts with the unexplained death of Dr. Reginald Crawford, one of a group of senior art history professors at Cambridge College secretly engaged in an amateur international investigation to trace art stolen from Jews by the Nazis and resold on the black market. The group has focused its attention on Rockport-Meier, a Swiss pharmaceutical company that appears to have possession of a mysterious chemical that ages, paralyzes, or kills its victims.

After Martin Somerville, a pharmacologist and Rockport-Meier employee, becomes curious about the source of the company director's art collection, he is dismissed from the company and later disappears without a trace. Adam Locke, a young professor and former student of Reggie Crawford, is enlisted to join the professors at his own risk, and he serves as the narrator of the story. Crawford's meticulously recorded diskettes, which explain the background of the group's adventures, are passed on to Locke to bring him (and us, the readers) up to speed. Anticipating that he would be a target, Crawford knew that his tapes would provide those who survived him with the essential information to move toward resolving the mystery.

Although the topic is interesting, the writing turns out to be rather flat, and the characters lack complexity and depth. The professors are good natured and intelligent, if somewhat

naive, and surprisingly collaborative. The villains are evil, greedy, and unsympathetic. Adam Locke's lover and the daughter of the book's namesake Somerville is impressed by a quote from the artist Braque that is an apt epithet for the novel: "Nobility is produced by emotional restraint." The Crawford recordings, which take up nearly half the book, are tedious to read as an extensive narrative and are almost another book within the main book. Locke listens to the diskettes, occasionally interjecting his brief commentary or even a chapter describing his own situation.

The story is complex and spans many decades, and one longs for more opportunities to participate. The reader is given all the details without the excitement of the chase. Even after Adam endures an attempt on his life, the author returns to the Crawford tapes for the next several chapters. The final scene, set in a courtroom and told by Locke, brings together the disparate strands of the case and finally sustains the reader's involvement in the action.

This fictional account explores compelling historical questions, but I would have enjoyed *Somerville* more had it been an exciting thriller in which I could engage more deeply.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

The Pages

by Murray Bail; New York, Other Press, 2010, 208 pages, \$14.95

Drew Bridges, M.D.

Murray Bail's short novel invites the thoughtful reader to consider life's contrasts, including urban life versus rural, psychoanalysis versus philosophy, the contemplative life or one of industry, and the effect of climate on world view.

The story is drawn around the death of Wesley Antill, a self-taught philosopher whose will directs that his life work be published with the proceeds of his estate. Academic philosopher Erica Hazlehurst is assigned her department's assessment of his work and travels to his sheep farm home accompanied by her psychoanalyst friend, Sophie. All manner of psychological intrigue unfolds within the relationship of the two women and with the siblings of the deceased, who are the keepers of "the pages."

The book is not light reading and indeed seems to invite readers to study the issues raised. Yet the story moves well, and I remained fully engaged in the question of whether

Wesley Antill's attempt at crafting a unique philosophy of thought would be judged a work of genius or be easily dismissed by the profession.

The prose might best be described as impressionistic, although clever with compelling imagery, and the narrative often has an unfinished quality, offering suggestion rather than detail. I read much of it as something akin to a projective psychological test, with my own associations running the considerable distance between *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and Sartre's *Nausea*.

I found engaging with the work to be somewhat challenging, primarily because I have become weary of stories where the psychoanalyst is the most deeply flawed of characters, plus I have long found the study of philosophy bewildering—the latter no fault of the author. Yet my barriers were overcome by the

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