

own superstitions finds the reader wanting to shout, "Yes, clean your homes! Exterminate the rats!" You can't help but root for the villagers who look for some solution outside the metaphysical. In a similar vein, our more liberal spiritual age will give most therapists pause as we see each character run full tilt into walls of their own making.

The challenge for a novel—and a novelist—is to carry us on a believable path through the development of a conflict, into the climax, and on through to a resolution. *Year of Wonders* accomplishes the first two tasks admirably. The reader is easily carried into the mid-17th century, and the author's language draws us into the rhythms of the lives of the people. Superstition, belief, and nascent sci-

ence struggle in ways wholly believable to a jaded 21st-century reader.

The more difficult aspect of a novel can be to bring the reader forward into a resolution that encompasses the events of the heroine's life while respecting the preceding struggles. It takes only one too many helpful coincidences to drain some of a story's more emotional aspects of their fullest impact. In this regard I found Ms. Brooks' efforts less satisfying. As Anna Frith moves on to another chapter in her life, the end of the novel takes on the faintest tint of bathos.

In all, this novel was a very enjoyable read and well worth the time it took to contemplate the role of science, medicine, and superstition in all our lives.

through a combination of luck and persistence more than through science, and in some ways brawn still triumphs over brains. But at least the protagonist's ability as a brilliant synthesist ultimately allows him to put the disparate clues together.

The author sets the stage for multiple intellectual speculations in a lively and compelling manner. What is a person anyway? A group of genes, a collection of neurotransmitters, a set of environmental experiences? What do our various cultural histories mean? Is faith meaningful in a world of science and technology? How and why does altruism exist?

Several of the background research papers cited are real, which adds to the sense of credibility that this book conveys. Readers in the fields of psychology and medicine should find this book very interesting, and almost anyone would enjoy some aspects of this work of fiction.

The Babel Effect

by Daniel Hecht; New York, Crown Publishers, 2001, 438 pages, \$23

Alan D. Schmetzer, M.D.

This is Mr. Hecht's second novel. A professional musician, Hecht spent three years, he tells his readers, in research on the basic science that forms the backdrop to this novel. You may find an occasional error if you yourself are an active researcher in one of the scientific or mathematical fields discussed in this book. However, such errors are few and probably will not distract most readers from the story's main themes.

Like any good novel, *The Babel Effect* has multiple layers. It is part mystery, part psychological thriller, part near-future speculative fiction, and part love story. The hero and heroine are husband-and-wife research psychologists. They come from very different backgrounds, and their marriage is interracial, which lends some additional tension to the plot. They lead a multidisciplinary team specializing in the solution of complex technical problems. The background

events are very timely, relating well to recent events.

As the book opens, the team is just completing work on a computer simulation designed to predict the pattern of disease contagion. They are then commissioned to find the cause of human violence. They begin their search by interviewing and testing imprisoned serial killers but soon branch into other areas, such as genetics, the effects of drugs on behavior, and military research. The main story takes off at this point, and the intensity of the book builds nicely, with much plot-related psychological conflict for the main characters.

The title comes, of course, from the story of the tower of Babel. The author ties this reference together with increasing violence somewhat obliquely, although he does show a connection by implication. It would be nice if some of the studies and tests discussed in the book's subplots formed more of a basis for the ultimate denouement, but like many fictional detectives, our hero comes to his conclusions at the last minute

Nelly's Version

by Eva Figes; Normal, Illinois, Dalkey Archive Press, 2002, 218 pages, \$12.50 softcover

Katherine G. Ruiz-Mellott, M.D.

Nelly's Version draws us into the mystery behind a woman's loss of identity. The novel is a fictional first-person account of a woman who awakes as if from a dream to find herself in a hotel lobby living a "pastless present." She signs herself in as Nelly Dean, and so begins her journey in search of an identity.

However, what at first seems like an amnesic disorder is illuminated just enough that we at times glimpse a darker pathology. Nelly's confused and disoriented internal world keeps us unsure of how much of what she experiences is reality and how much is paranoid delusion. A striking aspect of Nelly's character is her total lack of emotional connection to events and

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people that should have significance to her. Nelly recognizes her inappropriate apathy, and her narrative becomes a self-conscious character study. This complete self-alienation is illustrated in her description of her first encounter with the unknown middle-aged figure in the mirror. A reflection who possesses "regular features now partially obscured by skin and tissue which had lost its hold . . . hair streaked with grey, more than a hint of a double chin, a lined and sagging neck, and a thickened waistline."

Taken in a larger context, Nelly's confusion over her identity and sense of self embodies the conflicting roles of women in society. In the story we are acquainted firsthand with the subtle sexism that permeates Nelly's world and defines her identity. Nelly disavows the traditional female roles of wife and mother. While signing her assumed name at the hotel front desk as "Mrs. Dean," Nelly muses, "I ceased being just myself, by myself, I became a married woman in the looming protective shadow of a mythical husband who would shortly arrive to join her."

The sense of foreignness, isolation, and alienation experienced by Nelly is one that British author Eva Figs has personally experienced. Figs was born Eva Unger, a German Jew who narrowly escaped Germany with her family at the age of six after the release of her father from a concentration camp in 1939. She is known not only for her fictional works but also for her feminist writings. In 1970 she wrote the influential *Patriarchal Attitudes*, an examination of gender roles. The foreword to *Nelly's Version*, written by Susan Faludi, further enlightens us and reveals the true origin of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*. I suggest rereading the foreword after you read *Nelly's Version*.

Nelly's Version is a well-written psychological mystery and character study. Although Nelly does not fit a distinct *DSM-IV* diagnosis, she is an excellent study of the subtle pervasiveness of mental illness and its effects on relationships. This is a mesmerizing story that examines gender roles and the fluid nature of identity.

The book is thought-provoking reading for any health care professional or layperson. The novel will have particular resonance for female health care professionals who are continuing to define their own identity and roles in what remains a male-dominated field.

BRIEF REVIEWS

♦ In sonorous prose Edna O'Brien tells the tale of Michen O'Kane's creation and demise. Based on a true story, *In The Forest* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2002) brings us to a predictable series of homicides through the voices of the perpetrator, the victims, and the observant but nonprotective community in a western Irish countryside surrounding the Cloosh Wood. Left behind at a young age by a beloved mother, beaten amidst family violence by a drinking father, and raised by a loving but unprotective sister, Michen is coined at an early age as the *Kinderschreck*, or someone whom young children fear. Prematurely labeled as dangerous, Michen grows to fill this reputation. This powerful, suspenseful, and psychologically sophisticated novel takes us between sanity and the darkness of psychosis with spellbinding ease. The characters struggle with responsibility and the arbitrary redirection of blame. Hope for redemption competes with fixed beliefs in immutable evil, and personal generosity happens alongside filial abuse for the sake of personal gratification. The novel's blurring of time, relationships, and trust parallels the common path of chaos and psychological disorganization that interpersonal violence can wreak on an individual and a community. This novel of desperation and loss amidst people who love but fail to protect is well worth a read.—Paula G. Panzer, M.D., New York, New York

♦ *Second Glance*, by Jodi Picoult (New York, Atria Books, 2003) is a confusing mix of fact and fiction. The scientific themes of the narrative include in vitro fertilization, preimplantation diagnosis and intervention,

DNA typing, serotonin levels in the brain, WP disorder, and the world of eugenics. The story goes in different directions at the same time and is hampered by some stereotypical gender characterizations. The men are generally weak, flawed, and angry, and the women are strong, brave, and rescuing. It is difficult to know whether this is a story about the evils of eugenics in Vermont in the 1930s, an unresolved murder story, or a love story. The book has a Native-American spiritual theme, which underpins the book's title, as the central character, Ross Wakeman, falls in love with the ghost of a murdered woman of mixed race. The book's ending poetic paragraphs in many ways appear to capture the author's honest goals of portraying unrequited love and the light behind the shadow. Ultimately, this difficult-to-read book has all the right ingredients but tastes like an undercooked Irish stew.—Kieran D. O'Malley, M.D., Seattle

♦ *Tilt: Every Family Spins on its Own Axis* (Naperville, Illinois, Sourcebooks, 2003) is the first novel of poet Elizabeth Burns. At 275 pages, the book is "a good read." I read it twice, the first time enthralled and unable to put it down, the second savoring the story and appreciating the author's ability to string together ordinary events to create an extraordinary story. The story is about a woman faced with a series of what we mental health professionals would call psychosocial stressors. Understood from the point of view of the heroine, Bridget Fox, the events are waves of cascading disaster; as her best friend dies, her daughter's development derails into autism, her father dies, and her husband is given a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, she is left juggling the increasingly unmanageable fragments of her life. One of the joys of this book is that it works. Whether Burns is describing the woes of a mother deliberating on how to use a few precious moments before her children wake up or the utter dismay of a wife unable to get help for her acutely psychotic husband, she writes as though she has been there.