

Dancing With Einstein

by Kate Wenner; New York, Scribner Publications, 2004, 223 pages, \$24

Anne C. Bauer, M.D.

Dancing With Einstein, by Kate Wenner, did not grab me at first. The prospect of reading about the psychotherapy of a neurotic, well-educated, and talented young woman who has traveled the world compulsively did not intrigue me, given that I have read other novels that seemed to stake out similar ground. And Wenner, herself a well-traveled woman who was a producer of the television program 20/20, has a writing style that at first seemed overwrought.

However, 15 pages in, I was caught up in Wenner's story of a 30-ish woman who is the daughter of a Jewish scientist whose parents sent him to the United States for his education. He never saw his parents again. He learned that they were killed in the Holocaust. Later, he goes on to become part of the Manhattan Project and to work with the most famous scientists of his time. Indeed, Albert Einstein does become part of

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the family life of the heroine and her parents, whose marriage and relationship suffer from her father's work on the bomb and various and sundry emotional baggage.

I cannot comment on the historical accuracy of the rich background of this story, but Wenner does a good job of making these famous characters present and part of the heroine's story. At the novel's beginning, she has decided to stop traveling the world and put down roots in New York City by getting a job and starting psychotherapy. An element of the story that I think any mental health professional would find intriguing is that the young woman decides to try out four different types of psychotherapy—with a Jungian, a feminist, a young analyst in training, and an older female therapist who has her tell her story. The heroine somehow undergoes all this therapy at the same time, without health insurance or much money to speak of. She ends up sticking with only two of her polytherapies, and she seems to benefit from them both. Go figure. This is an enjoyable story well worth reading.

Wake Up, Sir!

by Jonathan Ames; New York, Scribner Publications, 2004, 334 pages, \$23

Theodore Lawlor, M.D.

In a list of this book's positive attributes, the fact that it is a quick read would stand apart from all others.

It is an improbable tale. A young, alcoholic novelist cast adrift by a father figure receives an injury settlement and purchases the services of a valet. Thus fortified, he proceeds to leave another uncomfortable living situation and seek some measure of independence. Although intellectu-

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ally intact, he is emotionally immature and bereft of common sense. Throughout the tale he casts quasi-psychological observations and explanations about, all the while admitting his superficial familiarity with whatever topic he is discussing. However, he does no harm to a field that in some ways depends on every person's belief that he or she is psychologically minded.

The story certainly has humorous moments—most bordering on the banal. Generally there is a forced quality to the humor, reminding me

of a rapid-fire vaudeville monologue. All the while the protagonist's valet generally functions as his foil, although occasionally he imbues him with some substance. One gets the eerie feeling that the valet is in fact an alcoholic hallucination functioning as a weak alter ego.

The meat of the story is the novelist's effort to pen a memoir about the father figure and his apparent writer's block in doing so. Clearly his tale, as outlined, would be an unflattering representation of this man. His inability to focus on the task at hand perhaps reflects conflicting feelings about this man and his inability to reconcile them.

Well, enough psychobabble in response to this tale. I'm in danger of emulating the author's rhetorical contrivances. One can't help but wonder what a trial of acamprosate, naltrexone, disulfiram, or even topiramate might do for the arch protagonist.

Happy Baby

by Stephen Elliott; San Francisco, MacAdam/Cage Publishing, 2004, 191 pages, \$21

Stephen Thielke, M.D.

This novel's dust jacket reports that the author was "a Ward of the State of Illinois from age thirteen to eighteen." So when exactly the same fate befalls the narrator, one suspects that the book is largely autobiographical. This makes it harder to dismiss as fanciful or vestigial the horrendous abuses described within the juvenile justice and welfare systems: regulations that push a nonoffending, nonviolent child into more punitive and restrictive settings; staff who ignore, abuse, and even kill children; one staff member who repeatedly rapes the protagonist; facilities that are essentially prisons, with just as much violence and drugs, but less safety;

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