

Freud in Fiction

The Interpretation of Murder: A Novel

by Jed Rubenfeld; New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2006, 384 pages, \$26

Mrs. Freud: A Novel

by Nicolle Rosen; New York, Arcade Publishing, 2005, 224 pages, \$24

Seduction: A Novel

by Catherine Gildiner; East Mississauga, Ontario, Vintage Canada, 2005, 496 pages, \$34.95

Jeffrey L. Geller, M.D., M.P.H.

The authors of these three novels, each of which involves Sigmund Freud, all have day jobs in addition to being authors. Jed Rubenfeld, author of *The Interpretation of Murder*, is a professor of law at Yale University. Nicolle Rosen, whose product is *Mrs. Freud*, is a psychiatrist in Paris. Catherine Gildiner, responsible for *Seduction*, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Toronto. Two of the authors brought their long-dormant, earlier academic work to bear on their fiction. Rubenfeld wrote his senior thesis as a Princeton undergraduate on Freud and studied Shakespeare at the Juilliard School of Drama. Gildiner wrote her doctoral thesis on the influence of Darwin on Freud. What the three authors have in common is providing their audience with examples of what an arduous task it is to write an engaging piece of fiction with Freud as a major character.

The come-on for *The Interpretation of Murder*, presented in large font on the back cover, reads, "In 1909, as the world went modern, a great genius paid his only visit to American shores. Little of what happened on this trip is known. Since then, many have wondered what befell him on his journey to turn-of-the-century Manhattan." I was intrigued by the book because the cover also mentions Freud's trip to Worcester, Massachusetts, to accept

an honorary degree at Clark University. I, probably like 99.9 percent of the U.S. population, do not wonder what happened to Freud in turn-of-the-century Manhattan. And unfortunately, the novel ends before Freud gets to Worcester.

It takes a long time to get into *The Interpretation of Murder*, but when you finally do, the reward is only a mildly engaging mystery. The author's tone is hard to follow because it changes from being serious to sometimes sounding like Abbott and Costello doing "Who's on First?" Neither Freud nor any of his contemporaries—including Smith Ely Jelliffe, Abraham Brill, Carl Jung, and Morton Prince—come off terribly well. Freud comes off as a xenophobic, precious little man with urinary incontinence.

Rosen's *Mrs. Freud* is a novel that allows Sigmund Freud's wife to take center stage and remark that her own historical role has always put her in the wings. In this story, Freud comes off as a de facto polygamist, married—at least spiritually—to his wife and to his wife's sister. This novel is about Martha Freud's self-liberation after years during which "so much has been repressed." The reader might note that either the author or Mrs. Freud probably meant "suppressed."

If Freud is somebody you respect, stay away from this book too. The novel is filled with such gems as "Unfortunately, Sigi wasn't able to establish proper boundaries between the couch and family life." You're also advised to skip this novel if Anna Freud is one of your heroes. Jealousy

between a mother and her daughter is as rampant here as it is in *Snow White*. Rosen's novel is also quite repetitious, demonstrating that either Martha Freud or Rosen unsuccessfully resisted the repetition compulsion.

Gildiner's *Seduction* is the most engaging of the three books, but she also cheats the most. In order to make her fiction work, she stretches the lifetimes of both Sigmund and Anna Freud by rooting her book in 1982. The book is replete with pop psychology explanations of Freud and is weighted down with references that will completely pass by anyone who didn't grow up in 1950s America or didn't raise children in that era. References are made to such items and people as Bosco, Rosie Greer, Ed Norton, and Jan Morris. For those not in the know, the first was a chocolate syrup for milk, the second a New York Giants football player, the third Ralph Kramden's neighbor on *The Honeymooners*, and the fourth a British transsexual author. These and many other references are inserted for no apparent useful purpose.

Seduction provides all sorts of interesting perspectives, such as "Prison psychiatrists are the bottom-feeders of an already suspect profession." You also get "Male analysts are usually castrated and the women are sexless neurotics" and "Psychiatric patients are usually the disenfranchised. The schizophrenics who complain are dismissed as fruitcakes and the neurotics rarely get better anyway."

In considering these three novels, it may be worth recalling that Freud once stated, "What progress we have made. In the Middle Ages they would have burned me. Now they are content with burning my books." I would hardly suggest that anyone purchase one of these three novels to burn it, nor would I suggest that anyone purchase one of these three novels to read it. Readers who are informed about psychiatry will be frustrated, and those uninformed about psychiatry will be misled.

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Damaged Goods: Once Molested, Then a Predator

by Lillian Pegues Jennings; Bloomington, Indiana, Authorhouse, 2003, 222 pages, \$17.50 softcover

Fabian M. Saleh, M.D.

Kate Erwin, M.D.

This book comprises 18 chapters that address the life and upbringing of Mr. Dan Grayson, a young man with multiple personality disorder and traumatic stress disorder syndrome. Grayson was the victim of sexual abuse when he was a teenager. He later develops his other persona, Damaged Goods, reportedly unknown to Grayson's conscious self. As an adult he sexually abuses children. Dr. Jennings, author of this novel, seems to have more than a few agendas here.

One important agenda appears to be to exculpate a perpetrator of his responsibility in offending against young children under the notion that "he who was abused becomes an abuser." This must be particularly true if he has multiple personality disorder, wherein the person is not responsible for the actions of his evil alter personality created in response to heinous abuse he suffered as a child.

The book fails mightily in this regard. The offender, amidst tortured rhetoric and grammatically incorrect pseudo-philosophy, manages to undo his case by noting that he is "somewhat" conscious of his misdeeds and, driven by anger, chooses to abuse. He claims dissociation with amnesia, based on a need to deny painful memories of past abuse, as the rationale for his misdeeds. He irritatingly continues to write in the third person well after announcing his understanding of his drives and recognizing his responsibility.

The impression Grayson makes is of a sociopath trying to appear empathic and appealing as he divests himself of responsibility for his behaviors. All the while he claims to have developed a deep appreciation

of his actions and the consequences they have wrought. Like many sociopaths, this particular offender is awash in the consequences that his behavior has visited upon him, namely, incarceration in "the abyss." He has no remorse for the victims or the consequences of his actions on them. This is followed, at the end of the book, by a plea for help for people who are incarcerated. No plea has ever caused me to squeeze my eyes more tightly shut. Those of us not incarcerated are what is holding him down and so on. This is very un-

fortunate, as psychiatric services are desperately needed in prisons and jails.

Furthermore, as studies indicate, dissociative identity disorder does not begin in adulthood. Grayson's abuse at the hands of teenage peers while attending boarding school does not translate into the development of an alter persona when Mr. Grayson becomes an adult. He doesn't claim that Damaged Goods existed before his multiple sex offenses.

The pseudo-intellectualism oozing from every page, the poor grammar, the non sequiturs, and the blatantly self-serving tone—not to mention the focus on a disorder as exculpatory, a disorder that this individual is most unlikely to have—make for excruciating reading.

Becoming Strangers

by Louise Dean; Orlando, Florida, Harcourt Trade Publishers, 2006, 307 pages, \$23

Suzane Renaud, M.D.

On the long list for the Man Booker Prize, *Becoming Strangers* is the first novel by Louise Dean. The story portrays the lives of two couples who meet during a holiday in the sun. Belgian and middle-aged, Jan is pugnaciously fighting a losing battle against cancer. This resistance of death is exasperating for his dutiful but impatient wife, Annemieke, who longs to be freed from him. Englishman George, still vivacious and looking younger than his eighties, is slowed down by his wife, Dorothy, who is inexorably sinking into the forgetfulness of Alzheimer's disease. These two couples socialize during a dream vacation at a Caribbean deluxe hotel, and each couple has been given this trip by their respective families.

Funny situations, in surprising and well-structured theatrical developments, should make this book easy and enjoyable to read, which it doesn't quite turn out to be. This may be because the theme is grave and sad, the tone sweet and sour and a bit

cynical, while the focus is on marital relationships that have run out of love. Dean writes about older adults confronted by the passage of time, the failure of their marriage, and the necessity of choices about how to spend the rest of their lives. She also brings her readers to reflect on aging, the end of lust, the loss of capacities, the inability to fall in love again, the choice not to fall in love again, and finally, illness and dying.

This British author gives European flair to her characters, even though the setting is in the Caribbean where Americans are seen from a disdainful distance. The locals on this fictional island are the only ones who seem to live with grace. Their values and ways of life, despite their poverty, set up the principal characters, the existential despair caused by these characters' lack of sincerity, and their economic ambitions and their compromises.

Getting through this novel was in-

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deed a bit like wishing to end a nightmarish holiday in order to return home to rain and routine. Dean must have succeeded in creating the perspective she wanted to achieve. She does so through her sharp writing

skills, the realistic tone of the couples' private moments in the intimacy of their hotel rooms, the characters' soliloquies, and the depiction of complex and not-so-obvious secondary characters.

The Catastrophist

by Lawrence Douglas; New York, Other Press, 2006, 276 pages, \$24.95

Thomas A. Simpatico, M.D.

In *The Catastrophist*, first-time novelist Lawrence Douglas reminds us that "the world is a hostile place for most life forms." In a manner reminiscent of David Lodge's *Changing Places*, *The Catastrophist* is set in the world of academia and spins a comic tale with serious and foreboding undercurrents.

Protagonist Daniel Wellington is a respected art historian, recently tenured professor, and rising academic celebrity with a beautiful, intelligent wife. Although he has known nothing but success, he responds to his wife's joyfully announcing her pregnancy and his impending fatherhood with a full-blown existential crisis. He confesses to an artist-ex-wife-turned-mother-of-three "how much easier it would be to have a sweet little child with Down's syndrome who would grow up to bag groceries at Stop & Shop, and would be spared learning what a fraudulent and mentally ill loser his father is." What then follows is an inexorable self-inflicted chain of events that results in the mother of all self-fulfilling prophecies. Our hero, tragically and comically burdened "by imagination, introspection, and disorder," repeatedly provokes the very catastrophes he fears most. As he perceives the chaos he creates as being perpetrated by others, he then wonders, "is

humiliation necessarily a crime of intent?"

Douglas, a professor of law, jurisprudence, and social thought at Amherst College, can truly turn a phrase. Although I initially experienced some of his language as pedantic, I soon found myself jotting down many of his playful and evocative descriptions in order to read them again. His creative use of language has an artistic efficiency reminiscent of the way a great musician economically uses just the right notes to create a mood or evoke a memory. His talent is evident in the pithy manner in which he describes Daniel's wife, R., whose image and persona are made all the more powerful in the same way an expertly laconic hypnotic induction allows the subject to provide vivid and personal details.

Daniel Wellington's tragic flaws have to do with the fact that he envies people who can fully participate in their own lives. The more he envies, the more he becomes isolated and lonely and the more he panics. This leads to the humorously deranged behavior that threatens to alienate him from all that is truly important.

Although the book is technically a comedy by virtue of its brilliant academic satire and relatively happy thematic resolution, *The Catastrophist* is rife with serious and challenging moments. As I read, I thought what a great movie this could be. I then remembered director Garry Marshall's interpretation of *Exit to Eden* and how it was played for laughs, focusing on base

humor at the expense of the essence and tension of Anne Rice's novel. I hope *The Catastrophist* would not be similarly misrepresented.

The Catastrophist is a winner and too witty and haunting a tale to be thought of as summer reading. As I approached the end of the story, I wondered about two things: would Daniel Wellington fall victim to the foreshadowed German aphorism "Better Abel than Cain, but better Cain than zero," and when would the next piece of Lawrence Douglas' fiction become available.

The Cadaver's Ball

by Charles Atkins; New York, St. Martin's Press, 2005, 342 pages, \$24.95

Roger Peele, M.D.

Maryam Razavi, M.D.

Hannibal Lecter, please give some space to Ed Tyson, so he can join you on the stage of evil psychiatrists! Tyson's personality is filled with antisocial traits, fanaticism with attaining a Nobel in medicine, and obsession with revenge for being spurned by a woman at a medical school party, called the Cadaver's Ball. All this makes Dr. Tyson very lethal. Mystery abounds in this thriller, because people have been given an amnesic agent that leaves the reader bewildered as to who did the killings until late in the book.

The Cadaver's Ball is the third novel of Charles Atkins, a psychiatrist in Connecticut and also a writer of short stories, essays, and editorials. In *The Cadaver's Ball*, Atkins gives readers clinical descriptions of people with borderline personality disorders, schizophrenia, posttraumatic stress disorder, and alcoholism, and he pro-

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vides descriptions of psychiatric emergency room work, psychiatric wards, and residency training.

The book has a fast pace, and characters often make their conversational point in a single sentence. Even though the story is set in New York City, one or two degrees of separation, not six, gives the key characters

interpersonal motives that don't require the author to slow his pace to take time to describe why the three dozen people we meet in this book act the way they do.

The Cadaver's Ball should thrill readers who have a psychiatric background or who expect good to overcome evil.

The Truth of the Matter: A Novel

by Robb Forman Dew; Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 2005, 336 pages, \$24.95

Nada L. Stotland, M.D., M.P.H.

Agnes Scofield's husband Warren died and left her with little money and four young children in the Scofield family compound with the circular driveway. With some help from the family, a teaching job, and careful scrimping, she maintained the house and raised the children. The action of *The Truth of the Matter* begins many years later, when Agnes is in her fifties but still preoccupied with memories of her dead husband. She carries out her parental duties, loves her children, and has occasional sex with a male friend but without internal psychological animation.

As such a life story might unfold in psychotherapy, it is only at the end of the book that we understand why. In the meanwhile, we learn about four or five generations of the blond, blue-eyed Scofield clan, whose look is recognizable to everyone in their small community.

Before Warren's death, he and Agnes became the guardians of an infant nephew while they were expecting their own first child. The complex dynamics of the relationship between these two boys—and their relationships with Agnes—receive more attention from the author than do Agnes's relationships with her other children, which leaves the reader wondering whether they are neglected by Agnes as well. Psychodynamically oriented readers will appreciate a description of

Agnes' adoption of a dog and her sons' reactions when they come home and encounter the new pet.

Robb Forman Dew won the National Book Award for a previous novel, *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*. Although I haven't read that, this book is a reasonably good read. Unfortunately, I felt somewhat dragged down into Agnes' muted, probably chronically depressed, state of living day to day in the quiet atmosphere of a small town and a limited social circle, which is typified by potato salad, ham, and turkey for the Fourth of July celebration, errands, and evenings with friends and relatives.

Agnes doesn't care much about anything, and that makes it difficult for the reader to care about her. It is not clear that her husband's death was a mysterious one until we learn what happened near the end of the book. Therefore, no mystery is there to pull the reader in. The story of Agnes's childhood and that of the Scofields of her generation is interesting, as is the impact of World War II, during and after which the action takes place, on each family member. As they drift back to town to live or visit, we learn about their marital choices and the relationships among the in-laws. The advent of grandchildren wakes Agnes from her torpor to some degree, as does her shock when her daughter falls in love with the man Agnes slept with but refused to marry. By the end of the book, Agnes gets a bit of perspective, and the reader does as well.

Get a Life: A Novel

by Nadine Gordimer; New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, 208 pages, \$21

Richard Balon, M.D.

This slight novel by the 1991 Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer starts with the son of the family, Paul, being diagnosed as having invasive thyroid cancer. After surgery and treatment with radioactive iodine, he needs to be isolated for several days because the radioactivity is dangerous to others. For practical reasons, he stays at his parents' house. He spends the long days of isolation in the garden, contemplating his life and his work as an ecologist. He becomes preoccupied by the plans to build a nuclear reactor nearby and to drain wetlands, plans he opposes.

Issues involving other members of this South African family are set in motion, maybe as a consequence of his life-threatening illness. Paul's father Adrian, a businessman who sacrificed his passion for archeology to support his family, wonders what has happened to his relationship with his wife. "Why did it have to be like this for him, so we could talk?" Adrian asks. "Why not before? What are we doing? Waited for this. What happened to us?" Paul's mother Lyn, a prominent civil rights lawyer, starts facing her past after talking with her son. Years ago she had an extramarital affair and feels guilty. Benni, Paul's wife and an ad agency executive, wants to have another child, to which Paul responds, "If you want another child you'll have to find another man."

After the end of Paul's isolation, his parents leave for Mexico to pursue Adrian's dreams of archeology. Lyn comes back after a while, and Adrian decides to stay in Mexico for a little longer. However, Adrian never comes back, because he falls in love with a Norwegian guide and moves to Norway with her. Lyn thinks, "All his life

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he had worked not grudgingly or unhappily, it appeared, with the satisfaction of doing what he had to do, conscientiously, in activity he wouldn't have chosen. The only culmination: retirement. The experience close to if not exactly fulfillment of his avocation, wasn't that enhanced by the realization that there is another avocation, to love again? They go together. The woman and the archeology. The lovemaking and the digs."

Yet things stay in motion: Lyn is in the process of adopting an HIV-positive child, dates a retired judge, and is appointed a judge herself. Benni becomes pregnant. A letter announcing Adrian's death arrives from Norway. And finally, Paul's second son is born.

In the final part of her novel, Gordimer draws a parallel between a new life in Paul's family and the re-

peated renewal of the famous Okavango Delta in Botswana, one of the ecological issues Paul and his coworkers are obsessed with. Paul's son is a new, healthy life, in spite of Paul's illness. "The sperm of the radiant progenitor-survivor has achieved no distorting or crippling of the creation." Life continues, gets renewed.

Get a Life is a story of human passions influenced by the past and seemingly set in motion by Paul's illness. But were the family affairs predetermined to happen? Is it just life being replaced by another cycle of life, like the Okavango Delta renewal? Gordimer cites W. H. Auden at the beginning of her book, "O what authority gives Existence its surprise?" It seems that Gordimer has given us another poetic opus, a stimulus to contemplate our lives.

His Lovely Wife

by Elizabeth Dewberry;

San Diego, Harcourt Trade

Publishers, 2006, 288 pages, \$24

Mary E. Barber, M.D.

As mental health professionals, we are always striving to put ourselves in the place of our patients. What if we could actually hear someone else's thoughts? And what if those thoughts perfectly resonated with a life-stage issue that we ourselves were going through? Elizabeth Dewberry has crafted these what-ifs into a deliciously fascinating study in this novel.

In *His Lovely Wife*, we enter the world of Ellen Baxter, the attractive 30-something wife of an older, Nobel prize-winning physicist. Ellen is a trophy wife and is not too secure in her role or identity. In the few days depicted in the novel, Ellen accompanies her husband to a physics meeting in Paris. Arriving at the Ritz Hotel, she is mistaken by the paparazzi for Princess Diana on the day before Diana's death. Following the well-known tunnel car crash, Ellen finds herself drawn to the site of the tragic accident and begins to hear the voice of the recently deceased Diana in her head. Listening to Diana's internal musings about the meaning of her life and her relationships with men and with her mother helps crystallize Ellen's own doubts about her identity, role, and marriage.

Ellen's existential crisis takes her on a journey in the short period covered by the novel, and her internal dialogue with Diana guides her transformation. The author weaves details about Princess Diana's life and death and her ruminations on love, mothers, wives, women, beauty, and superstring theory all into the narrative. Dewberry also manages to address these big topics without seeming superficial, stereotypical, or trite.

In a conversation with a man she has just met, Ellen's musings on what it would be like to look at a photon

The Virgin of Small Plains: A Novel of Suspense

by Nancy Pickard; New York, Ballantine Books, 2006, 288 pages, \$23.95

Nina Staples, Ed.D.

This work should categorize Nancy Pickard as a master storyteller. *The Virgin of Small Plains* is the intriguing story of how the lives of many people are changed because of the lies and secrets of one family from a small community in Kansas. It is also the story of how faith and trust are based on things not known or seen. The mystery of this novel is not in the circumstances that result in the death of a young woman, but in the fact that several prominent members of the community—such as, the chief of police and the physician—participate in the cover-up. The mystery is also in strangers who place their hopes and beliefs in miracles on the premise that the grave of an unidentified person can cure their diseases, in a mother and father who sacrifice the lives of their sons by alienation and neglect, and in the love of youth that survives time and estrangement.

Ms. Pinkard exposes the character of Judge Newquist as a sexual predator. This man destroys the dreams of young woman from a dysfunctional family who had plans of having a different life than those of her family members. Judge Newquist uses his position and power to maintain a stronghold on his family and the community. In contrast, the judge's exiled son, Mitch, is exalted and united with his first love and a brother he never knew.

My favorite character in this story is Sarah, the virgin. Sarah helps a young cancer sufferer, Catie, see that in some way we have storms in our lives but that we are also blessed. Catie is able to pass this lesson on to many other hopeful people. The miracle that is being sought at the grave of the unidentified person is the miracle of life, a gift that we have already been blessed with.

The Virgin of Small Plains is a great read for family therapists, sex abuse counselors, and individuals from dysfunctional families who are working through the secrets and lies of their own families.

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become more personal. "You would have to know something about photons . . . you could see the aspect of the photon that you wanted to see—its wave function or its particle function—and that would be all that you saw. And I think most people go through their whole lives that way, not able to take in the whole picture. . . . So a lot of women go through life with the sense that all they are, in most people's minds, is the husband's wife, or sometimes their children's mother . . . I mean, even Diana . . . imagine being the most photo-

graphed woman in the world and being frustrated because nobody ever sees the whole picture of you." Although I didn't find myself identifying with much about Ellen's life story, or Diana's for that matter, I was nonetheless drawn into their world and wholly taken by their concerns.

The novel does not present a neat resolution to Ellen's crisis, and this in itself is a satisfying thing. On all counts, this is a delightful and engrossing book about mothers, memory, ideals of female beauty, and life-stage crises.

The Tree-Sitter

by Suzanne Matson; New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 2005, 224 pages, \$23.95

Maggie Bennington-Davis, M.D.

The novel *The Tree-Sitter* is, as much as anything else, the story of a young woman who is coming of age. The protagonist, Julie Prince, is familiarly engaged in a triad of her first obsessive love, disentanglement from her very involved single mother, and passion for a cause that is related to the obsessive love. The book is written in Julie's voice, from a post-September 11, 2001, vantage point.

Suzanne Matson, the author, has successfully woven aspects of her own life into the book. She was educated at Portland State University, then received a Ph.D. from the University of Washington. She now teaches poetry and fiction writing at Boston College. She is the author of books of poetry and fiction—*Sea Level*, *Durable Goods*, *The Hunger Moon*, and *A Trick of Nature*. Her writing in *The Tree-Sitter* is rhythmic, sometimes funny, and always elegant.

The passionate cause could have been anything that Julie's lover—a radical environmental activist graduate student named Neil—chose, but in this case it is a growing and appalled awareness of a 1999 assault on Oregon's old growth forests. Julie—the product of a Wellesley-educated mother, an attorney from Boston whose orchestrated life included choosing the right donor characteristics from the local sperm bank (such as reasonable height, high IQ, and no known mental illness)—leaves her privileged East Coast college life in order to accompany Neil for the summer to protest deforestation by tree-sitting in Oregon. The venture takes an ecoterrorist turn at nearly the same time that Julie realizes that Neil's passion ends with the environment.

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Halfway House

by Katharine Noel; New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006, 384 pages, \$23

Anne C. Bauer M.D.

The novel *Halfway House* belongs to the tradition of novels about the psychotic breakdown of a young person and her long road to recovery. This is a first novel for author Katharine Noel, whose prose is often compelling in capturing human intimate moments. The flow of Noel's storytelling and her interesting characters carry the reader easily through the book.

The main character is a young woman named Angie, a star swimmer for her high school team, whose psychotic mania has her believing that she doesn't need to breathe while swimming underwater. Her promising young life is derailed by her hospitalization and subsequent stay in a farmlike halfway house. The novel covers the next six or so years of her life as she comes to terms with her illness, her treatment, and her life.

The larger story weaving in and out of Angie's is that of her family—her brother, parents, assorted lovers, and friends. The book's message is that each member of the family is isolated and strangely troubled and can't get out of his or her own way. Only the

brother, Luke, remains somewhat likeable as someone who has a capacity to care for another person. Initially estranged from Angie, because she sucked up so much of her parents' attention, Luke persists through his older sister's prickly dismissive nature to become her best friend. Luke is the only one who has a sense of family that goes beyond guilt, obligation, and neediness. The parents wander away from each other without ever really knowing why they do it, and Angie moves across the country to live by herself.

In spite of *Halfway House* being well written, the book and its characters fail to be memorable. It covers well-trodden ground without adding to our understanding of how or why people survive such tragedies. Certainly, not much is here to inspire or enlighten, which in fairness is probably not the point of Noel's novel. The author seems to be reaching for capturing the ordinary in the extraordinary, and this may be enough for some readers. As a psychiatrist who treats adolescents, I could not help but think of a number of interesting things I would like to know about a family traveling over such difficult terrain that were not present in this novel.

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The reader is an intimate observer of Julie's maturing, from her first day in the forest, imagining romantic interludes with Neil and renaming herself "Emerald," to her growing absorption in the environment. We also see her from her infatuation with Neil to her realization of, and involvement in, his zealotry and militancy, and from her determination to break away from her mother to needing and embracing her love.

An Oregonian myself, I was intrigued by the description of the old-growth forests, the city of Eugene, and the act of tree-sitting. But the novel is not, after all, a political or environmental statement. It is, simply, a story of a young woman growing up. One does not always like Julie, always dislike her, or always agree with her, but the moral dilemmas she faces are familiar to anyone glancing backward at their twenties.

Fireworks

by Elizabeth Hartley Winthrop; New York, Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 2006, 304 pages, \$23.95

Catherine A. Fullerton, M.D., M.P.H

In *Fireworks*, protagonist Hollis Clayton introduces a central theme when he writes to his wife, "Don't non-stories become stories in the telling?" In her debut novel, Elizabeth Hartley Winthrop provides a nonstory by rejecting a traditional plotline in favor of a character sketch of a summer in the life of Hollis Clayton. In doing so, she vividly portrays the desolate and contradictory world of a burgeoning alcoholic.

Through flashbacks, Hollis describes a sympathetic yet revealing past. His mother left him and his father for a commune when he was eight. His childhood was filled with fantasy but also with a father who clearly loved and supported Hollis while missing his wife deeply. Hollis shows early signs of his avoidance when he reveals the story of his grandfather's funeral. "When my grandfather died, I told everyone he'd been killed by Aborigines while he was berry-picking in Africa." During the funeral itself, he kills his grandmother's dog by leaving it locked in a car, an act for which he never admits his guilt and allows blame to fall on his demented grandmother.

Hollis meets his wife when he is pretending to be a paramedic. The romanticism of their ritual "nickel drives" on rainy days is belied by Hollis's disappointment when he discovers it was his wife's childhood tradition with her father. Finally, he reveals the tragic death of his four-year-old son who was killed by a car when Hollis left him unattended on a tricycle.

These flashbacks are interspersed with Hollis's accounts of his isolated, alcohol-laden present, where he reveals a self-indulgent and irresponsible

The Girls: A Novel

by Lori Lansens; New York, Little, Brown, and Company, 2006, 352 pages, \$23.95

Sharon S. Perry

Rose and Ruby Darlen are known in the medical community as the oldest surviving conjoined twins. At 29 years of age, Rose decides to write an autobiography to chronicle her life when it becomes threatened by a brain aneurysm. Rose and Ruby have never bathed alone, had a private conversation, or looked into each other's eyes. From birth and throughout their short lives, their experiences are ordinary, and yet at the same time, extraordinary, because their unique bodies are joined at the head. Once Rose begins her story, Ruby decides to include her memoirs in the book to ensure her experiences are told in her own distinctively different voice.

From the beginning, Rose portrays a simple life in rural Baldoon County in Canada. She and Ruby are abandoned at birth by a teenage mother and are taken in by Aunt Lovey, a hospital nurse who attends the birth, and her Slovak husband, Uncle Stash. Rose's, and later Ruby's, words explore in effective detail their feelings and emotions as they experience pain, fear, abandonment, rejection, anger, joy, love, isolation, empathy, and sexuality both together and separately. The collection of neighbors, families, and friends around them serve as a colorful

influence in their development from their infancy to when they become young adults.

The book focuses on people who have disabilities and are certainly and definitely more alike than different from people without disabilities. Except for the inclusion of references that Rose and Ruby make to the challenges and complications their conjoined state introduces to their eclectic life, their story could be told by any 29-year-old sisters living in rural Canada.

Any mental health professional would benefit from reading this poignant story, but people who have had limited interaction with people whom we generically call clients, consumers, patients, cases, or residents may find a special lesson here.

Inevitably, our view of a person in need of our services begins with an introduction to their diagnosis and treatment plan. Rose and Ruby's story as told in *The Girls* takes us past the clinical description of their existence to the personal side of their life as they wrestle with the angst and passion of their everyday life. This novel drives home the need for us to recognize that all of us are people in our own right first, and then people with therapeutic needs.

Ruby Darlen says it best in the closing words of *The Girls* when she writes, "I have never looked into my sister's eyes, but I have seen inside her soul."

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ble life. His mistress leaves him after a drunken escapade with fireworks. His wife has decamped to her sister's to reevaluate their marriage. He spends his aimless days spying on his neighbors' children, obsessing about the whereabouts of a missing person on a billboard, writing letters to his wife that he never sends, befriending a dog, and visiting his local bar. He sabotages his writing career by failing to meet his prospective publishers for dinner, driving instead to his "special" beach where he hopes his

wife will come for their anniversary.

Winthrop portrays Hollis's life deftly and with compassion. In her writing, his frank irresponsibility appears mildly endearing while slowly costing him his friends and livelihood. The one-dimensional supporting characters accurately portray his self-absorption, and the ruthless constancy of his denial and avoidance leaves one yearning for some miniscule growth. With *Fireworks*, Winthrop has provided us with a well-written character portrayal of an emotionally lost man.

There Will Never Be Another You: A Novel

by Carolyn See; New York, Random House, 2006, 256 pages, \$24.95

Alexandra Pinkerson, M.D.

This is the most recent of both fiction and nonfiction books by acclaimed writer Carolyn See. See does not miss a beat in keeping the emotional experience of her characters present as the motivating force behind their choices, and she does this in an unsentimental way, using visual images to evoke effect.

The novel opens with Edith, a new widow, filling bags with garbage—Depends, Chux, lotions, catheters, swabs, a visual survey of the paraphernalia of the end of life. Edith recalls her husband's struggle against infirmity just briefly in the litany of stuff, while the phone rings in the background. When the phone is finally answered, it is Phil, her son. He tells her to turn on the television. It is September 11, 2001, and Edith's response is, "Excuse me, God, but you're going to have to do better than that if you want to impress me!" This sets the stage and tone, maintained for the rest of the book, which is about the pain and anxiety of personal loss, the threat of loneliness, and love, all set against the shared public anxiety of the threat of terrorism.

The story is filled with caricatures, or archetypes: the doctors are self-im-

portant and don't communicate, and the women are all identified with their relationships. But this starting point lets the reader in on where the various narrators are coming from, as they struggle to be who they think they should be. The setting is Los Angeles, 2007, and the characters' lives intersect at a hospital. Although the main character is a doctor and people are dying in the hospital, the truest images are in the waiting room, the grounds, and the wider community. The subplots are artfully woven together, so that the book flows easily. The suspense of pending terrorism remains present without drowning out the personal narratives.

The central character, Phil, is a dermatologist who has found a way to practice medicine that avoids any significant contact with illness and is trained to see only the surface of things. He is married to a woman with whom he cannot communicate—nor does he wish to. He visits his mistress for reasons he cannot fathom, and he does not question himself. He is recruited to be part of a top-secret team preparing for a bioterrorism crisis, and the official command not to communicate mirrors his status quo. But Phil's life is in crisis, his marriage is tenuous, his son is failing out of elementary school, and children are dying at the hospital.

See weaves Phil's story in with the stories of multiple families, generations, and lives in crisis—relationships get off to false starts or ends, fathers are absent or facing death, and terrorism looms or is happening. Everything is at a crisis and seems about to end, and in the meantime everything continues. Babies are born, people age, some escape death, and others die.

About midway through the book, a man who cares to protest the loss of personal liberty is told by an inebriated security officer that "Patriotism trumps the personal." This novel is a reminder that the personal is what always remains. The contemporary threats of the post-September 11 world make the message resonate true.

Psychiatric Services readers may be particularly drawn to questions this novel raises about behavior and illness, and the roots of anxiety and anger in the person, the family, and a society that uses fear to maintain power. *There Will Never Be Another You* also addresses the ability to change and to stop being complicit in one's own, and everyone else's, anguish.

Before Elvis There Was Nothing

by Laurie Foos; Minneapolis, Coffee House Press, 2005, 204 pages, \$14 softcover

Ann L. Hackman, M.D.

Before the review, it is important that I disclose something about myself. Three years ago I completed chemotherapy for breast cancer. My husband shaved his head in sympathy, and we were both as bald as grapes. Family obligations took us to Las Vegas. There, we renewed our wedding vows. With an Elvis impersonator. And it was perfect.

So, based on the title alone, I expected that I would like Laurie Foos's *Before Elvis There Was Nothing*. I

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was not disappointed. If Anne Tyler had married Tom Robbins in my Elvis ceremony, they might have produced a novel something like this. Cass—the lovely heroine, who has an Ionesco-inspired horn growing in the middle of her forehead—works as a hair-replacement specialist, helping women with varying degrees of hair loss. Cass also takes care of her sister Lena, who is unable to leave the house because of agoraphobia.

Eighteen years before the start of the novel, Cass and Lena's parents left them for Elvis. Well, sort of. The parents were obsessed with Elvis. They raised their daughters in the midst of Elvis music, memorabilia, and trivia, and they have not been heard from since they departed on the tenth anniversary of Elvis's death. Still awaiting word from their parents, Cass and Lena remain quite focused on Elvis, as do other people in their lives: Vance, Cass's podiatrist boyfriend; Ernie, the mailman; and "Psyking," Lena's Internet psychiatrist who observes that "Elvis is everywhere." Cass pursues treatment for the horn growing on her head. This takes her to a bizarre rehabilitation facility where the other patients are developing various animal characteristics, such as zebra stripes. Then things really get interesting.

Obviously, the world of the book is quite surreal and very compelling. The characters in this well-written novel are beautifully drawn, and they have wonderfully real relationships and insights. At one point, Cass reflects, "It's difficult to decide what's true about our parents and what we've made up. I've come to think, finally that it doesn't matter. It's what we believe that counts." The plot is wild, funny, poignant, and imaginative. The social commentary is incisive, and the Elvis trivia is amazing. And although Lena's "Internet shrink" is hardly a role model for mental health professionals, Lena's panic disorder with agoraphobia is clearly and accurately described.

The appeal of *Before Elvis There Was Nothing* is not limited to people who have had hair loss issues or who are fascinated with Mr. Presley. Foos's delightful book is a novel for people who enjoy unusual and creative fiction.

Talk Talk

by T. C. Boyle; New York, Viking Press, 2006, 352 pages, \$25.95

Caroline Fisher, M.D., Ph.D.

I always admire an author who can write a convincing personality disorder, and T. C. Boyle is one who can. In *Talk Talk*, Boyle tells two interwoven stories: the story of a woman whose identity is stolen and the story of the man who steals it. Chapter by chapter, the reader's perspective flips from one character to the other, and at times they identify with each other. Identity theft is a real and present worry. It's in the news and before Congress, and the idea itself holds a morbid fascination. For those of us in the mental health field, however, identity takes on additional meaning. Each character in T. C. Boyle's novel experiences and reveals a different aspect of identity.

Dana Halter, the victim in this story, is a young, professional, deaf woman. When her identity is stolen, she struggles with the need to clear

her good name and with communicating with the hearing world that gets in her way. Her story is told from her perspective and from the perspective of her hearing boyfriend. Together they elaborate for the reader the intricate dance between the deaf and the hearing communities.

Peck Wilson, the identity thief in the story, struggles throughout the book to grasp his own identity. He dances an equally intricate step between who he is and who he would like to be. Here, the reader experiences the grief and longing of having a personality disorder, yet the reader still gets the frisson of horror as Peck's emptiness becomes manifest.

The combination of these two stories makes for a novel that is both entertaining and edifying, as circumstances foreign to many of us are made real in an empathic and insightful way. *Talk Talk* is interesting enough to pass the time on a long flight and insightful enough to keep thinking about long after landing.

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The Tenth Circle: A Novel

by Jodi Picoult; New York, Atria Books, 2006, 400 pages, \$26

Maureen Kaplan, L.I.C.S.W.

An awful lot goes on in this 13th novel by best-selling author Jodi Picoult. *The Tenth Circle* has a little something for everyone: date rape, suicide, Dante, comic book superheroes, homicide, promiscuous sexual games by 14-year-olds, infidelity by mothers, assault by fathers, and dead childhood friends. It is a story of transmutations: from adolescent to adult, from man to superhero, and from self-deceit to self awareness. As if that's not enough, Picoult does all she can to metaphorically tie these story elements together, but the result is more like a bad puppet show where you can see the strings as well as the hands of the puppeteer.

Daniel Stone—a father and a cartoonist by trade—grew up as an outcast, the sole white child in an Eskimo village to which he has never returned. The book actually includes comic book pages at the end of each chapter, which demonstrate Daniel's working out of his inner demons, and it reads like a comic strip as the action moves quickly back and forth through episodic bits of dialogue connecting the myriad strands of the plot.

Laura, Daniel's wife, is a college professor who specializes in Dante, from which comes the book's title and

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overarching themes of hell and damnation. She is having an affair with one of her students. Their only child is Trixie, 14 years old and struggling with adolescent tribulations such as sexuality, separation from her parents, and peer pressure. Some of Picoult's best insights are in Trixie's descriptions of growing up, when "you didn't get to be pretty or smart or popular just because you wanted it. You didn't control your own destiny; you were too busy trying to fit in." It is out of the nexus of relationships within this closed family system—there is no mention of friends, extended family, even a neighbor—that the plot emerges.

The events that make the solutions to the Stone family's problems seem to spring more out of fantasy than fictional storytelling. A detective who lost his daughter to drugs now shares his life with a potbellied pig. During a cross-country running away, Trixie

flees from Bethel, Maine, to Bethel, Alaska, by airplane, with her parents following in close pursuit. Laura confesses her infidelity, and Daniel and Trixie get angry, but not that angry. Trixie attempts suicide, but there is no real adolescent attitude and no therapy or aftercare at all.

Yet everything works out in the end, which perhaps suggests that families functioned better before we understood family systems, tried to nose into why kids cut themselves, and provided psychiatric support after both a rape and a suicide attempt. Without any psychiatric interventions, the Stone family is reunited, the homicide is solved, and everyone is closer than ever before. In a final note from the author, we learn that letters embedded in the comic book drawings spell out a quotation that expresses the theme of the book when they are put together.

folds against a background of now-discredited etiological theories and their effects on a mother crazed with the stressors of incomprehensible behaviors, controversial professional advice, minimal support, and irrational guilt. She rages against child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim and charges him with "a humanitarian crime" in his accusations of maternal rejection. Here is a devoted, loving mother who yearns to interact with a child incapable of interacting. Her agonized attempts to cope with his frantic insistence on sameness of objects and rituals, his perseverating behaviors, and his frustrated head banging are graphically portrayed. Melanie desperately tries to understand Daniel's inexpressible needs, to please him, to stop his uncontrollable tantrums, and at the same time not to shortchange the normal sibling vying for her attention.

Considering all this, the author cleverly depicts the parents as the classic duo of overinvolved mother and distant father, who have dual family histories of human losses and clinical depression. Reflective of too many case histories, we are offered rich but irrelevant psychodynamic material with no evident specificity for the diagnosis in question. This is real-life stuff.

After multiple assessments and trials, Melanie finally discovers a firmly dedicated behavioral therapist. Daniel learns how to speak and even play with others, and the mother's choice is vindicated. We have seen this mother in the clinic and the academic literature. She refuses to accept guarded prognoses, pesters professionals for reassurances they cannot give, reads widely, tries every conceivable traditional and nontraditional therapy, and essentially devotes her life to seeking an elusive cure. She is an annoyance, a royal pain to staff. Treasure her. In her obsessive commitment and zealous search, she just might find the resources that open a life for her child.

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Daniel Isn't Talking: A Novel

by Marti Leimbach; New York, Doubleday,

Nan A. Talese Books, 2006, 288 pages, \$22.95

Harriet P. Lefley, Ph.D.

An elegant, insightful novel, *Daniel Isn't Talking* is about raising an autistic child. The experience is one of inordinate pressures, conflicting treatment approaches, disturbed households, and family conflict. The protagonist, Melanie, an American in London, marries an Englishman who is the man of her dreams. The birth of their children, Daniel and Emily, fulfills their dreams. But soon the mother knows something is wrong with Daniel, while the husband persists in denial. The couple fights. The husband withdraws. The marriage sours. A fashionable, carefree young woman becomes a frumpy, obsessive caregiver.

This is not a new story. In fact, it is fairly typical when there is mental ill-

ness in the family, especially when it involves the unfathomable behavioral disorder of a child. Autism is particularly trying for parents. It is difficult to treat and yields little of the human reciprocity that people expect and need from those they love. And it offers an unpromising future for too many children who, with appropriate resources, may actually be capable of leading productive lives.

Not too long ago, "refrigerator parents" and hostile mothers were blamed for causing this condition in their children. The existential wounds were painfully salted by our putative helping professions. Clara Park, mother of an autistic child, once described, "a kind of pain that only those can understand who have lived it, an assault on the most fundamental of animal instincts, the desire to benefit the young creatures one has brought into the world" (1).

This book expresses that pain. It un-

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Twilight of the Superheroes: Stories

by Deborah Eisenberg; New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006, 240 pages, \$23

Sherry Muterspaugh Walling, M.A.
Timothy A. Kelly, Ph.D.

Deborah Eisenberg's most recent book, *Twilight of the Superheroes*, is a set of six thought-provoking, masterfully woven short stories that make for perfect coffeehouse reading. The unrelated stories recount the tales of disheveled characters floundering through various aspects of life, usually on the brink of chaos. Whether the breakdown is on the intrapsychic, interpersonal, or social level, each character faces his or her uncertainty with an emotionally blunted, philosophical pondering reminiscent of postmodern icon Douglas Coupland. This is a psychologically minded, if somewhat jaded, book that beautifully explores the subtle interaction of one's deep feelings and candid thoughts in managing a world gone mad.

The first story, which shares the book's title, features a twenty-something who is searching for direction and authors a comic about Passivity-man, an uncommon superhero charged with saving the world from the evil Captain Corporation. He and his uncle, a member of New York City's upper social echelon, struggle through the grief and disappointment that flow from their difficult and complicated lives. The story, which is really a series of scene snippets, taps into New York's struggle after September 11, 2001, to regain or redefine normalcy. The psychologically savvy reader will recognize a dissociative foggy that plagues the characters' attempts to gain their footing on social terrain that is constantly shifting. Their personal crises are exacerbated by the loss of safety and security characteristic of the world after September 11.

Two other stories, "A Flaw in the Design" and "Some Other Better

Otto," dive into maddening family dynamics that threaten the character's sanity and sense of personal goodness. Most readers will find threads of personal experience in the missed communication and frustration that the characters experience. These stories are an exercise in depth rather than breadth. Not a lot happens, yet the reader gains an intimate perspective on the characters' inner workings. In so doing, the reader experiences in part the anguish of toxic family dynamics.

Eisenberg's characters are relatable and engaging, although at times they

are somewhat flat affectwise. The latter reflects a world-weary mentality from facing too many absurdities to believe that with good effort all will be well. The book is intellectually provocative and abounds with discussion potential because it raises numerous current issues and social critiques without drifting into either prescription or proscription. The author's wry, ironic humor saves the reader from drifting into despair that otherwise could be induced by the mire of unsolvable problems portrayed. The nonlinear, punchy writing easily captures the reader and holds one's intrigue.

So stop by your favorite coffeehouse, pick up a cappuccino, and settle yourself in for a journey with superheroes. If you're not careful, you may recognize your own life in surprising twists and turns along the way.

The Good Life

by Jay McInerney; New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, 368 pages, \$25

Jaak Rakfeldt, Ph.D.

In his latest novel, Jay McInerney details the impact of September 11, 2001, by portraying the overwhelming tragedy while showing its effects upon people who survived and must in some way get on with their lives. *The Good Life* focuses on two couples: Corrine and Russell, and Luke and Sasha, who are wealthy, privileged members of the Manhattan demographic, whom McInerney has described in other novels.

As the story begins, both marriages are emotionally empty and strained by past affairs, mistrust, and indifference. Corrine and Russell lead distant lives. She focuses on the children and he on his work as a literary editor. Luke's feelings for his exmodel, socialite wife have devolved into viewing her as a vapid courtesan. But the tragic events of September 11, 2001, move these couples toward reassessing their situations and seeking more meaning in their lives. For Corrine and Luke, this means volunteering in

a soup kitchen for rescue workers at Ground Zero, where they slowly come together in a torrid adulterous affair.

The Good Life provides horrific descriptions of the events of September 11 itself, particularly about the people who jumped from the World Trade Center. It also captures the atmosphere of New York following the attacks, describing the sidewalk picture galleries and the firefighters working at Ground Zero.

The book is not, however, about the terrorist attacks. It is about yearning for intimacy and finding life-affirming human contact, even in the midst of such a horrific calamity. While making love to Luke, Cor-

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rine relinquishes herself: "She thought she had lost this desire—no, it was more that she'd never even found it until now. She'd never felt such craving, such desire to be possessed and filled, never known she had so much desire inside of her, so urgent a need."

Corrine and Luke aren't just looking for emotional and physical catharses but seek deep, almost spiritual, communion in their lovemaking. And although much has undoubtedly

changed because of the attacks, their lives return to normal. Ultimately, Corrine and Luke are drawn back into their commitments to their families, particularly to their children, and to the routines of their largely empty domestic lives.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud described our core conflict as one between our innate yearnings and our desire for pleasure with the demands of society and our responsibilities toward others. This is the cen-

tral theme of Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*.

Because the book peels back the multilayered ambiguities, lays bare the contradictions and complexities of intimate human relationships, and serves as a compelling case study for Freud's assertion that civilization itself leads to our discontents, it would be of interest to the readers of *Psychiatric Services*. It also thwarts our deepest, most intimate, aspirations for joy and fulfillment.

Additional Book Reviews Available Online

Reviews of eight additional books are available as an online supplement to this month's book review section on the journal's Web site at ps.psychiatryonline.org:

- ◆ Sala S. N. Webb, M.D., reviews *A Mouth Like Yours: A Novel* by Daniel Duane
- ◆ Kathleen Mogul, M.D., reviews *In Case We're Separated: Connected Stories* by Alice Mattison
- ◆ Andrea Stone, M.D., reviews *The Doctor's Daughter* by Hilma Wolitzer
- ◆ Lorrie Garces, M.D., reviews *A Family Daughter* by Maile Meloy
- ◆ Dorothy Packer-Fletcher, M.F.A., reviews *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova
- ◆ David S. Heath, F.R.C.P.C., reviews *The Every Boy* by Dana Adam Shapiro
- ◆ Wesley Sowers, M.D., reviews *If You Want Me to Stay: A Novel* by Michael Parker
- ◆ Richard E. Kellog reviews *It's Superman! A Novel* by Tom De Haven