

Secrets and Lies: Bettelheim's Misuses of Enchantment.

Book Review of The Creation of Dr. B by Richard Pollak

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Melville, Einstein, Bruno Bettelheim — one by one these icons of American greatness are collapsing under the weight of revelations about their private lives. Herman Melville threw Lizzie Melville down the back stairs. Einstein demanded virtual servitude from his first wife. And now Bruno Bettelheim. Since his suicide in 1990, more and more students from Bettelheim's famed home for mentally troubled children, the Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago, have come forward with bitter stories of abuse and tyranny. If the disclosures are to be believed, Bettelheim abused his patients, and his writings about the Orthogenic school's compassionate care and therapeutic successes are at least partially built on lies.

Journalist Richard Pollak, the author of *The Construction of Dr. B: A Biography of Bruno Bettelheim*, is no stranger to the Orthogenic School. Between 1943 and 1948, Pollak's younger brother, Stephen, was a student there. Their parents, unable to manage him, turned to Dr. Bettelheim for help. He insisted that the boy move into the school and that he not visit at home. Pollak remembers how his mother cried after her meetings with Bettelheim, believing that he hated her. The Pollaks opposed Bettelheim's wishes by taking Stephen out for visits. On one of those occasions, while playing hide-and-seek in the barn loft of family friends, Stephen slipped into the hay chute, fell 35 feet to the concrete floor below, and died. He was 11 years old.

Twenty-one years later, Pollak made a pilgrimage to the Orthogenic School to learn more about his brother. He listened in amazement as Bettelheim, by now a famous man, pronounced his brother's death a suicide in "a carefully contrived accident." (P. 10) Bettelheim went on to contrive a diagnostic demonology in which Pollak's father was dismissed as a simpleminded "schlemiel" unable to protect Stephen from a malignant mother whose hatred of Stephen caused his illness and death. Pollak's biography of Bettelheim stems, albeit belatedly, from this incident, when he approached a famed healer for help and received instead a blast of vengeance and lies.

As Pollak's carefully documented biography unfolds, so does the realization that Bettelheim, while proclaiming himself a saint, was professionally dishonest, and cruelly exploitive of vulnerable individuals he had an obligation to protect. Although Pollak treats seriously the trauma of Bettelheim's early experiences in Vienna and in the concentration camps, as well as his enduring depression, these do not explain the ruthless character that emerges in these pages. Bettelheim's own prolific writings and the media's adoration of him maintained a series of fictions that Pollak calls "As ifs." Bettelheim created his life "as if" these inventions were true. The fabrications included claims that he treated autistic children in Vienna, was analyzed by Freud, and earned doctorates *summa cum laude* in psychology, philosophy, and art history (he did earn a single doctorate, without honors, in art history). These lies bought him a berth in academic psychology once he emigrated to Chicago. (His academic standing was not hurt by his falsely claiming himself as a resistance hero, and asserting that Eleanor Roosevelt personally intervened to free him from Buchenwald.) In his writings, he habitually misrepresented the number of interviews conducted or data gathered. He claimed therapeutic successes on the basis of studies he

hadn't performed, and he plagiarized a doctoral dissertation for his most famous book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, for which he won the National Book Award.

Perhaps more ominously, even while erecting his own edifice of infallibility, Bettelheim was tearing other people down. He blamed mothers for their children's pathology, characterized Jews as collaborators in anti-Semitism through "an interlocking of pathological interpersonal strivings," (p. 82) described concentration camp prisoners as infantile and regressed, and routinely humiliated his students. While claiming to rescue children from toxic homes, he sealed the Orthogenic School off to outsiders, and within its walls controlled and frequently terrorized its occupants. The children's counselors were usually young women, sometimes scarcely older than their patients. Counselors lived at the school and were "analyzed" on Bettelheim's couch, a practice he called "dynamic supervision." According to many sources, the patients were routinely struck, and several recalled sexualized violence such as this account from a woman who was 20 years old at the time: "He would take my panties down and take his belt and wear my backside out. I remember having to slip into the stalls in the girls' dorm, or keep my back to the wall, so nobody would see the bruises." (P. 200)

Pollak was not able to document Bettelheim's home life as thoroughly as his professional life. His eldest daughter, Ruth, refused to be interviewed, but his son, Eric, and younger daughter, Naomi, described a home life from which he was mostly absent, but that revolved totally around him when he was present. Naomi described his behavior toward her mother, Trude, as "inexcusable," stating that "When his own needs came first he could be blind to other people's needs, totally blind, and would do or say things that nobody in a normal state of mind would say or do." (P. 397) At the end of his life, a Lear-like Bettelheim rejected Ruth, who had taken him in after Trude's death and her divorce. Their falling-out had to do with his selling the home he had purchased for them to live in with Ruth's children. Bettelheim's cruel last act was to address a litany of love and gratitude to his other children, but not to Ruth, in his suicide note.

According to Pollak, Bettelheim had only one idea that approached the level of psychological theory, that "parents should work to comprehend why their sons and daughters behaved as they did, try to draw on their sons' and daughters' turmoil by drawing on their own inner experience." (P. 403) Although this idea is useful in much psychological work today, it is clear that Bettelheim — whether or not he understood children's turmoil — failed to protect them from his own raging impulses.

How could Bettelheim have seduced us? Perhaps he spoke to our need for icons, for authorities to provide explanations for things we don't understand, and for heroes with whom we can identify. Bettelheim satisfied both needs. He chose scapegoats to promulgate simplistic truths, while disarming his enemies with pseudo-psychoanalytic blather. He was a Jewish hero who rose to renown from the ashes of Europe, and his wartime suffering conferred an extra mantle of authority.

This book fundamentally changes how we view Bruno Bettelheim. His brilliance, it is now clear, lay not in his professional accomplishments but in his extraordinary use of manipulation and control — of his patients, his intimates, his colleagues, his data, and his credulous public. Bettelheim sought and used fame as an instrument of power, and his public image as a wise and compassionate healer protected him from responsibility for his misdeeds. Would the children he abused even have been believed if they had disclosed Bettelheim's treatment of them while he was still alive? What suffering mother of an autistic child could have stood up to his blame? And worse, how many of his victims, faced with Bettelheim's authority, believed that *they* were to blame, or that they were not being

abused at all? This is a story that warns us that the most dangerous icons are the ones that portray themselves as benevolent.

In psychology we do not have all the answers. Just as we will never fully understand the terrible forces within and outside Bettelheim that propelled him toward such destructiveness, we should be skeptical of every messiah who claims to have decoded the human soul. Although Melville and Einstein's behavior was reprehensible, their work will endure, but a psychologist's behavior *is* his work. In *The Informed Heart* (1960), Bettelheim states that "a man's work must be permeated by his personality." If the Bettelheim this superb biography reveals permeates his work, then Bettelheim the psychologist is destroyed.