

## REVIEW ESSAY

*Sex and the Psyche: The Untold Story of Our Most Secret Fantasies Taken from the Largest Ever Survey of Its Kind.* Brett Kahr. London: Allen Lane, 2007. xxvii + 623 pp. £ 25.

One of the most enduring misconceptions about psychoanalysis is that it is sex-obsessed. While inaccurate, this view is also not entirely without substance. Starting in the mid-1890s, Freud began to pour out a cornucopia of views on human nature absolutely drenched in sexuality: Oedipus, Dora, transference love, polymorphous perversity, penis envy, childhood urges and fantasies, and, of course, that pugnacious seduction theory.

To this day, popular mythology has it, psychoanalysts continue to niggle and nit over every slip, pause, tic, or dream, forever on the hunt for all things sexual. This misguided and simplistic view (though it is equally a verdant and telling social fantasy holding fascinating insights about the mores and anxieties of our time) has settled into a festering mound of compost, incessantly thrown up as the *Ur*-book-jacket-image for all things psychoanalytic.

Perhaps you have your own version of what I semi-affectionately call the “cocktail-party reaction” to being asked what I do. The torrent of associations commonly produced when I respond that I am a psychoanalyst, were I working rather than trying to enjoy crudités and a goblet of Pinot Noir, would be material enough for the entire first phase of a treatment: You’re examining everything I’m saying and doing right now like with x-ray glasses, and thinking I want to sleep with my mother and kill my father, right? You probably think everybody’s gay or some sort of pervert and just in denial about it, right? All you ever think about is sex, right?

As a professional group, psychoanalysts have not worked very effectively to redress these (and other) misperceptions. The brief episodes when psychoanalysis enjoyed some measure of relatively wide social acceptability, even caché, notwithstanding, it is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as embattled,

misunderstood, and underutilized as ever, at least in the United States. That this should be so is, consistent with such cornerstone psychoanalytic concepts as overdetermination and multiple function, both utterly sensical *and* deeply confounding.

None of this, of course, will be news to the readers of *American Imago*. Nor is it controversial to recall that over the past 100 years many theorists have contributed to, elaborated, and clarified Freud's original raw and dazzlingly innovative ideas about sex and sexuality. But outside of our profession, Freud and subsequent generations of psychoanalysts are usually not the sources of choice for information about these topics. Rather, most people might first think of Kinsey (and even so, probably not from his actual research but by way of Hollywood's cinematic portrayal of him). There are even people glancingly aware of Krafft-Ebing or Masters and Johnson. But to a populace more familiar with media-hyped personages such as Dr. Ruth, Dr. Phil, Dr. Drew, and the legion of ersatz sexperts whose how-to-guides glut the real and virtual shelves of mass market book stores, serious contemporary psychoanalytic writers such as Robert Stoller (1985), Martin Bergmann (1991), and Ethel Person (1988) (to specify only a few) are likely to yield no more than a vacant stare.

To all of this comes an unlikely champion. Who is the new Wotan of psychoanalysis? An American expatriate in London, and regular contributor to this journal, named Brett Kahr. If he is not a superhero in the classic leaping-tall-buildings or thwarting-demented-archvillains mold, upon reading his smart and tremendously engaging (though Viagra-titled) book, *Sex and the Psyche: The Untold Story of Our Most Secret Fantasies Taken from the Largest Ever Survey of Its Kind*, I am convinced he brings to bear another, altogether important skill-set. He is, not least, eminently capable of bridging the false but well-established divide between serious research-based scholarship and comprehensible, accessible writing about a difficult and complex subject.

That subject, the topic of Kahr's book, is sex—or, as Kahr delineates his particular focus, sexual fantasy. By way of drawing a preliminary distinction between *ordinary* fantasies and *sexual* fantasies, Kahr defines the latter as “first and foremost, a conscious thought or set of thoughts which contain a depiction of a sexual act or acts, a sexual scene or scenes, sexual imagery

and often sexual language, which will in many instances produce pleasurable sensations ranging from mental enjoyment to physical stimulation in the genitalia" (18).

But Kahr immediately departs from the herd of popular writers on sex such as Nancy Friday (1973), Candice Bushnell (author of the work [1997] that birthed the astonishingly successful *Sex and the City* franchise and that seems to be playfully echoed in Kahr's title), and, most recently, Mary Roach, who has explored (2008) the field of sex research itself. Where many sexologists almost fetishistically valorize the phantasmagorical rainbow of sexual behaviors, Kahr focuses more on the unconscious dimension of the sexual imagination, the intra- (as opposed to extra-) marital affair (32). He thus preserves a direct line with Freud's early understanding of sexual fantasy's dual functioning: as a form of fulfillment of primitive, generally untenable wishes and affects, or as a protective device against radically impermissible ideation. In this respect, Kahr is especially interested in how unconscious processes give rise to a paradox of mental life: in sexual fantasies we can simultaneously experience both arousal and distress, pleasure and unpleasure. Kahr calls this the "masturbatory paradox," wherein we feel pleasure in our bodies and genitals but also "disquiet in our minds" (11).

*Sex and the Psyche* is rationally constructed in five connected parts: "The Research"; "A Sexual Profile of Great Britain"; "The Fantasies" (including 13 subcategories of variegated sexual predilections); "The Origins of Sexual Fantasy" (including sections discussing sadism, shame and humiliation, and trauma); and "Sexual Fantasies and the Outside World." The book also includes an interesting Postscript as well as a pair of Appendices providing a thematic index of sexual fantasy preferences and a reproduction of the research questionnaire.

With *Sex and the Psyche* clocking in at more than 600 pages, I cannot possibly do justice to the breadth of Kahr's research in this review. Among the book's abundant offerings, I would only underscore here two vital ingredients that, taken together, distinguish this work from other topically related books. These are, (1) the rigor and scope of the survey, coupled with the psychological intelligence and thoughtfulness with which the data are harvested and subsequently interpreted; and (2) the array of narrative illustrations culled from the more than 18,000 respondent-subjects whose sexual fantasies Kahr cataloged.

The section titled “The British Sexual Fantasy Research Project” (commencing on page 39) is the point at which Kahr’s book begins in earnest. Here he explains in crisp detail the evolution of his research study. He reached an important insight into the nature of and problems attendant to a wide-scale, deeply probing, and nonpartisan exploration of sexual fantasy when he recognized that the patients he saw in his private practice could not suffice as the sole source of data. Particularly illuminating is his explanation of his unfolding understanding of the range of issues involved—from the simple paucity of subjects, a problem that could only be overcome by farming the populace outside his patient roster, to transference dynamics and clinical principles of defense and resistance. He astutely observes that, with regard to the sharing of sexual fantasies, clinicians are frequently placed in the same position as spouses and partners; they are “often the last to know” (40). Equally valuable is Kahr’s description of all that was involved in engineering and perfecting the research methodology and instrument—the questionnaire designed to capture the salient contours of each interviewee’s “sexual biography” (49)—as well as foraging for the funding and refining the logistics with which to implement it.

The scope and rigor of the survey suffice to distinguish Kahr’s book from the preponderance of other books devoted to the psychology of sexuality (even psychoanalytically oriented ones). Where the majority of scholarly writers typically utilize only a handful of cases, usually taken from the author-clinician’s practice, with which to illustrate or animate their discussion of ideas and theoretic principles, Kahr has at his disposal a vast compendium, a rich and broad (albeit still self-selected) cross-section of an entire country. While, of course, time and space limit how intricately Kahr can recount his interviewees’ fantasies (or their ontogenetic derivations), he provides copious narrative examples. The book’s architecture consists primarily of a wide variety of verbatim responses, people’s sexual stories, urges, and fantasies, from which a schematic portrait of polymorphous sexual psychology emerges. This effectively inverts the format used most often in academic works, where conceptual and expository material is briefly illuminated by a clinical vignette; Kahr’s book makes a strong case for rethinking that traditional approach.

While there is much to praise in what Kahr has produced, my endorsement is not unequivocal. I cannot say with certainty how, were I in his seat, I would have designed and deployed such a wealth of ideas and exemplary data. But I would have wanted an excellent, proactive editor on my team. Even the best writers can use help parsing and structuring material. For instance, while the introductory chapters serve (as they should) to present the subject, and establish a relationship between reader and author, this opening section nearly collapses under its own super-detailed weight. It is not until page 43 that Kahr finally points to his motivation for undertaking such a wide-scale study. That essential information could helpfully have been positioned earlier, perhaps by condensing and streamlining all that precedes it, and thus have served to usher the reader more fluidly to the core of what Kahr has to contribute.

I also disagree with the decision (which may well have been imposed by the publisher) not to include a bibliography. Especially in a book such as this, where the supporting case material is per force anonymous and unavailable, scholars and lay readers alike deserve ready access to the author's other sources.

Still, these are minor criticisms. Kahr has a vibrant, engaging authorial voice, and is clearly talented at cogently articulating all manner of sophisticated psychoanalytic theories and concepts in ways easily digested by curious amateurs but also sufficiently substantial to interest professionals. This is no small feat. I hope his book reaches the broad readership it deserves.

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