

In the Case of Bruno Bettelheim

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The Creation of Dr. B: A Biography of Bruno Bettelheim. By Richard Pollak. *Simon & Schuster*. 478 pp. \$28.

Bettelheim: A Life and a Legacy. By Nina Sutton. *Basic Books*. 606 pp. \$35.

When Bruno Bettelheim committed suicide in 1990 at the age of 86 he had a towering and broadly based reputation: as a wise and humane child psychiatrist in whose Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago hundreds of severely disturbed children had been restored to normal life, as an expert on child-rearing in the Israeli kibbutzim, as a survivor of Buchenwald and Dachau whose writings had established him as an authority on life in the concentration camps, and as a specialist in the treatment of autistic children. Within weeks of his death, however, this reputation appeared to be in danger. Former students accused him in print of having created an atmosphere of terror in the famous school. Scholars accused him of plagiarism, and stories of falsified credentials and shoddy research emerged from several sources. The rise and decline of this remarkable reputation is now the subject of two major studies.

In a frank and moving prologue to his splendid biography, Richard Pollak gives an account of his one meeting with Bruno Bettelheim. In 1969 Pollak sought an interview with Bettelheim because he wanted to learn more about his brother Stephen, who had been a student at Bettelheim's famous home for emotionally troubled children. Stephen lived at the school from 1943 until his death in an accident in 1948.

During his encounter with Bettelheim, Pollak heard his father dismissed as a crude schlemiel, his mother vilified "with astonishing anger," described as the cause of all his brother's problems and scorned as a "Jewish mother." He endured Bettelheim's categorical insistence that Stephen had committed suicide despite Pollak's assertion that he had been present and knew the death to have been an accident. He was stunned by the ferocity of Bettelheim's anger and antagonism and understood for the first time why his mother had complained that Bettelheim hated parents. He had always thought his mother's complaints hyperbolic; now he saw that she had understated Bettelheim's hostility. As a ground rule, Bettelheim demanded a promise that Pollak would not discuss the session with his parents, ensuring that Pollak could not compare notes with them or seek to verify or disprove any of his claims. Thus, in the course of this brief conversation, Pollak was confronted with several aspects of Bettelheim's character and personality that he would later learn much more about: secrecy and concealment, angry and cruel accusation, anti-Semitism, and lying.

Pollak went home from this interview and wrote a detailed account he has used almost thirty years later as an introduction to *The Creation of Dr. B.*, the biography he undertook shortly before Bettelheim's death when he began reading and rereading Bettelheim's books and discovered that Stephen's suicide was not the only thing about which Bettelheim had lied. Shortly after Pollak began his research, Bettelheim committed suicide. The storm of accusations following his death convinced Pollak that that there was an interesting story beneath the surface, and before long he was embarked on a project of discovery that ultimately led to this definitive exposure of Bettelheim as a charlatan whose life was based on falsehood and self-aggrandizement.

Pollak says he hopes to keep his personal experience with Bettelheim "from unfairly darkening my portrait." I think his experience has, in fact, illuminated his perception and provides a sharp reminder that we must hold ourselves—and each other—accountable for our acts. My own experience provides, I hope, similar illumination. I am the mother of an autistic daughter and have considered Bettelheim a charlatan since *The Empty Fortress*, his celebrated study of autism, came out in 1967. I have nothing personal against Bettelheim, if it is not personal to resent being compared to a devouring witch, an infanticidal king, and an SS guard in a concentration camp, or to wonder what could be the basis of Bettelheim's statement that

"the precipitating factor in infantile autism is the parent's wish that his child should not exist." Like most parents of autistic children, I cherish my daughter. Later in his life, in one of the last pieces he wrote on Nazism, Bettelheim was to make an even more extreme judgment. He quotes *Todesfuge*, Paul Celan's poem about the death camps, with its famous description of "black milk."

Black milk of dawn we drink it at dusk
we drink it at noon and at daybreak we drink it
at night
Black milk of dawn we drink you at night
We drink you at noon death is a master from
Germany.

Most critics have interpreted "black milk" as clouds of smoke issuing from the crematoria. But Bettelheim declares: "When one is forced to drink black milk from dawn to dusk, whether in the death camps of Nazi Germany or while lying in a possibly luxurious crib, but there subjected to the unconscious death wishes of what overtly may be a conscientious mother—in either situation a living soul has death for a master."

It was not hard for me to tell that the claims of success in treating autism that Bettelheim made for himself in *The Empty Fortress* were ludicrous. Almost any parent of an autistic child could tell that most of the "autistic" children he claimed to have treated were not autistic. Autistic children have highly recognizable characteristics, even though they may not always be easy to describe. Infantile autism was first recognized as a syndrome and named by Leo Kanner, a child psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins, in 1943. The main features identified in Kanner's description are a social impairment characterized by aloofness, lack of reciprocity, and absence of eye contact; an inability to use language effectively to communicate, including muteness, echolalia, odd intonations, reversal of pronouns, and inappropriate repetition of meaningless words; repetitious, stereotyped behavior such as rocking, hand flapping, or preoccupation with train schedules; an insistence on sameness, with strong resistance to changes in environment or routines.

Very few of the children Bettelheim treated displayed this syndrome. Indeed, the kind of metaphorical use of language he attributes to the children he described grows out of precisely the kind of symbolic thinking autistic children are not capable of. Furthermore, he had no research design or trained observers and allowed no outsiders into the school. This did not prevent the Ford Foundation from making a large grant supporting Bettelheim's work over five years, nor did they question any of the false claims he made in the annual progress reports they required of him. *The Empty Fortress* was his final report. By the time it came out, Bernard Rimland, in his carefully researched and documented *Infantile Autism*, had begun to establish what has long been accepted in the medical and therapeutic communities: autism is a developmental disorder originating in genetic fault, brain injury, or brain disease. There is no evidence to support Bettelheim's claims that parental handling is ever a factor in the disorder.

Once you know that a person has lied, concealed information, and made false and malicious accusations about any important subject, it is hard not to allow that knowledge to influence any further acquaintance with him. This knowledge informed my reading of *The Creation of Dr. B* and also of *Bettelheim*, a biography by Nina Sutton published a few months earlier. Nina Sutton is not a disinterested party either. She is a fervent Freudian and an accomplished practitioner of the "it seemed," "it is easy to imagine," "appeared to be," "must have thought" school of biography. Like many who have defended Bettelheim over the years, she is so "understanding" that the question of truth becomes almost irrelevant.

Bettelheim repeatedly claimed that his unique insight into autism had its origin in his treatment of Patsy, an American child who lived with the Bettelheims in Vienna. In Pollak's words, Bettelheim later "multiplied her by two and diagnosed her as autistic," claiming to have lived with two autistic children as part of their treatment; later still he lived and worked with "some autistic children," creating an elaborate tale of therapeutic techniques he had used, the success of which led him to develop his theories about autism.

Some undisputed facts are clearly laid out by both biographers: Patsy lived in the Bettelheim household for seven years. She was not autistic. She was cared for exclusively by Bettelheim's wife Gina. Interviews with Patsy herself and many people who knew the Bettelheims and Patsy corroborate these facts. Pollak carefully investigates all the claims made about Patsy and allows them to contribute their weight to his developing case against Bettelheim's veracity. After outlining the same facts and allowing that they are based on the recollections of seven people, Sutton turns to speculation about the relationship Bettelheim "must have" had with Patsy, a child who "must have" intrigued him, and who "must have reminded him of the hours he himself had spent lying in his darkened room, his mind a blank." "The tapestry Bettelheim wove around the story of Patsy became richer

over time. . . . Bettelheim loved telling stories, and was unable to resist the temptation whenever he had an appreciative audience."

Bettelheim usually had an appreciative audience after he arrived in the United States in 1939, and he immediately took advantage of a unique opportunity to leave behind the failures and frustrations of his early life and construct an elaborate set of false credentials. He invented accomplishments, academic degrees, connections with people in high places, and professional training and experience that either had no basis in reality or else were gross exaggerations.

Nina Sutton's comment on this: "On May 11, 1939 . . . Bettelheim was forced to create a whole new life for himself. . . . It is worth reflecting on exactly why Bruno Bettelheim felt the need to rearrange his past." "His success appeared to be based," she writes, "not only on his talent and hard work but also on the revised version of his past *that he had allowed to take root* in the minds of his employers." (Emphasis added.)

Do all refugees, I wonder, have the right to indulge a "propensity for embroidering the truth," to "weave rich tapestries," "spin fine yarns," tell "fancy tales," make "poetic interpretations"? Sutton has written a very long, often tedious book, imbued with psychoanalytic "insights" that she uses to explain—or, more often, to explain away—Bettelheim's behavior. When she is not rushing to his defense, she is speculating about what goes on inside his head, or inside the heads of people who differ with him. She displays so little regard for the truth that her book is not worthy of serious consideration.

Pollak presents Bettelheim's false claims alongside a well-documented record of the facts of his background and training. Bettelheim did not mention the twelve years he spent working in the family lumber business. The fourteen years he claimed he spent at the University of Vienna, supposedly resulting in three Ph.D.'s *summa cum laude* were actually six years and a Ph.D. without honors in philosophical aesthetics. Further claims included studies with Arnold Schoenberg (no evidence), acquaintance with Sigmund Freud, and Freud's personal blessing on Bettelheim's analytic training (no evidence he ever met Freud), psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic training (a truncated analysis, no training), two books published (no books published), membership in an organization that studied the emotional problems of children and adolescents (no evidence).

His experiences in Buchenwald and Dachau, horrible though they no doubt were, also provided Bettelheim with grounds for further inventions, distortions, and exaggerations that formed the basis of his wide acceptance as an authority on the Holocaust and on the Jews' role in their own destruction. He boasted of having been imprisoned because he was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance in Austria (no evidence). For all his claims of superiority to what he described as the general run of Jews who meekly submitted to being incarcerated by the Nazis, evidence shows that he offered no resistance when he was pushed into the railroad car. As anyone as well-connected as Bettelheim might have done, he managed to get money to bribe the guards and secure himself relatively safe and sheltered job assignments; a prominently placed American woman used her influence and ultimately got him released from the camps (he was later to claim that it was none other than Eleanor Roosevelt who secured his release).

In 1943 Bettelheim published "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations," a psychological study of concentration camp inmate behavior and attitudes that shocked a world that knew little about the camps and was not likely to question Bettelheim's methods, theories, or conclusions. His claim to have lived in five barracks in ten and a half months and to have known personally fifteen hundred inmates, implausible as it may sound now, evidently convinced a stunned public that his evaluation was definitive. This article was reprinted in several of Bettelheim's books and served as the basis of his lifelong reputation as an expert on the camps. In Pollak's judgment, it is "full of questionable generalities, invented research, glib psychology, and a good deal of fiction."

Bettelheim never acknowledged or referred to the work of other survivors whose observations and conclusions differed from his own, and as the years went by he increasingly revealed himself as an angry anti-Semite. In a speech to Jewish students, Bettelheim posed the question "Anti-Semitism, whose fault is it?" and answered it himself. Pointing a finger at the audience, he shouted "Yours! . . . Because you don't assimilate, it is your fault. If you assimilated, there would be no anti-Semitism. Why don't you assimilate?" On a more theoretical level, Bettelheim wrote that to comprehend anti-Semitism "one must concentrate as much on the study of the Jew as on the study of the anti-Semite. The complementary character of their respective roles makes it apparent that the phenomenon is an interlocking of pathological interpersonal strivings."

As director of the Orthogenic School, Bettelheim apparently succeeded in creating a very appealing environment in which to care for the children entrusted to him. He took pains to fill the school building with works of art and to furnish the children's rooms comfortably and colorfully; they sat on well-designed chairs, ate from handsome china, and were given free run of what was, often for many years, their home. He enjoyed a worldwide reputation as a wise and gifted child psychiatrist who had unmatched success in treating and "restoring to full functioning" children with the most severe and intractable emotional

disorders. Pollak's research reveals that although some of the children were severely disturbed, many were not. A former teacher recalled Bettelheim telling one of his successors to make sure to admit children he knew were not too disturbed. "You need to develop some credibility in the community, and the way to do it is to show some success." Another associate said, "Bruno was always loose with his diagnoses; that's how he could make great success claims."

The staff was largely untrained and very young—a one-time counselor recalled, "I didn't know a thing about emotionally disturbed children. I think he hired us because he didn't want a staff with its own ideas, people who had been trained by someone else"—and Bettelheim terrorized them. Former staff members talked about his "instruction through terror" and his "Nazi-Socratic method."

Soon after Bettelheim's death, there was a stream of accusations by former students of emotional and physical brutality and sexual abuse. Pollak produces ample evidence for these accusations, many of them in the chilling words of the students who spent their childhoods "in terror of his footsteps in the dorms." Jacquelyn Sanders, an associate for many years and one of his successors as director of the school, told Pollak that Bettelheim "had indeed raised his hand against the children and sometimes had brought it down with frightening effect." Of the accusations of physical abuse that have created such a stir, Sanders wrote in the *Chicago Sun-Times*: "The people who are so surprised are the popular media and people who believe in fairy tales. People who knew him knew he could be a bastard. He could be charming, scintillating, extraordinarily [empathic], but also a goddamned bastard who could say horrible things." (There is, it should be noted, no consensus among former students and staff members, many of whom have said that their years in the school were helpful and that while Bettelheim could be demanding and harsh, his influence on them was more positive than not.)

Additional examples of Bettelheim's fraud and deceit abound. His "study" of child-rearing in the Israeli kibbutzim is no more rigorously researched and reported than his works on autism and the concentration camps. Significant portions of *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) were plagiarized—although, again, one adds in fairness that it is an interesting and stimulating study that provides a window into how some of the insights of psychoanalysis can inform our thinking and imagination.

Pollak set himself the task of showing beyond a doubt that Bettelheim's towering stature was undeserved and that academics, educators, cultural critics, and a gullible press had suspended their critical faculties and allowed themselves to be duped by this gifted liar. To reduce Bettelheim's image to its proper dimensions demands a thoroughgoing, responsible, meticulously researched account of his life and work. Pollak has brilliantly succeeded in providing just such an account.

There has been much speculation on how Bettelheim's stories could have been believed by so many people. Evidently he was a clever, persuasive, and charming man. He had the advantage of emerging from a nightmarish background, a fact that almost in itself made him a hero, to be protected and not challenged. It is ironic thatchutzpah, a quality Bettelheim's anti-Semitism surely would not have encouraged him to admire, is the quality in the man that is most responsible for his success in promoting himself and for his acceptance as an authority in several important fields.

This is surely not the first time audacity has propelled someone into a place or profession for which he is not qualified. But I cannot think of another case in which so many prominent people connived in the deception. Nowhere along the way did anyone publicly question, much less expose, Bettelheim's self-promoting claims. Had these claims served only to massage his ego or accelerate the development of his career, they would have done little harm. But Bettelheim used his growing reputation and authority to strike out at large groups of people, causing serious harm and anguish. He accused Jews of "ghetto thinking" that led them to submit passively to their own destruction in the Holocaust, painting himself at the same time as "a Jew who understood his adversary, who, unencumbered by ghetto thinking, had been able to stand up to and outsmart his keepers." His famous attacks on mothers, especially mothers of disturbed children and most particularly those with autistic children, were nourished by a culture pervaded by blind faith in a simplistic Freudianism and a wish to find easy answers.

It remains to hold those who sustained and promoted Bettelheim's reputation accountable for their carelessness and irresponsibility. There was an almost universal failure to look behind the facade, to ask even the simplest and most obvious questions that would uncover the shoddiness of the structure Bettelheim created. It is possible to believe that soon after the war the University of Chicago might have had some difficulty in readily verifying the information Bettelheim presented in his falsified curriculum vitae. But it is deplorable that the institution supported Bettelheim's work without ever setting up the oversight committee or board of visitors it usually appointed. The University of Chicago never held Bettelheim accountable for anything he did or claimed to do.

Similarly, the Ford Foundation never checked Bettelheim's credentials when he applied for a grant in 1955 to finance a research project on autistic children. They did send to the school two members of their advisory group on mental health, who reported

that Bettelheim was a "charming and sagacious individual with a great capacity of human understanding which must make him an outstanding therapist." The author of the report said he took Bettelheim's word that without intervention such as Bettelheim's, autistic children either died or ended up in mental institutions, though he stated one misgiving: he wished "there were a greater amount of scientific sophistication and rigor" among a staff he suspected was too subjective and influenced by Bettelheim to objectively test their own hypotheses. Nevertheless, the foundation gave Bettelheim more than half the grant he requested, amounting to \$1.3 million in 1996 dollars, for a school with forty children. The foundation accepted Bettelheim's progress reports, which became increasingly sketchy over the five years of the grant and should have revealed to any careful reader the shoddiness of his research.

And finally, newspaper, magazine, and television commentators seemingly inspired each other to ever greater and more extravagant praise in their effort to turn Bettelheim into a hero or a star. Robert Coles, who surely should, and could, have known better, reviewed *The Empty Fortress* for *The New Republic*, praising Bettelheim's "quiet heroism," describing the "intelligence, compassion, and above all, candor" illuminating his deeds. The review is wrapped in a romantic glow of admiration—one could almost say "adoration," certainly credulity. As a child psychiatrist who prides himself on his compassion, Coles owed himself and his audience a hard, cool look at the radiant package Bettelheim set before him. Because he did not take that look, Coles did a serious disservice to autistic children, their parents, and a general public that needed to be informed.

Peter Gay, reviewing *The Empty Fortress* for the *New Yorker*, referred to Bettelheim's "spectacular successes" and claimed that "Bettelheim's own theory of infantile autism is in all respects much superior to its rivals." How did Peter Gay know this? Because Bettelheim told him so. Not surprisingly, Gay went on to say that "It is, I think, perfectly proper to call Bettelheim and his associates heroes" and that Bettelheim "is remarkably free of egocentricity or aggression." As a leading disciple of Freud, Peter Gay was accepted as an expert on Bettelheim and autism.

A piece in *Commonweal* was entitled "The Holy Work of Bruno Bettelheim." Not satisfied with praising the successes Bettelheim claimed to have had in his work, psychologist William Ryan said of *The Empty Fortress*, "It is a brilliant piece of work. But it is far more than a psychiatric monograph; it is at the same time a kind of textbook on the subject of humanness that everyone can read with great profit." And then Ryan expanded the message: "Bettelheim's lessons are useful for anyone concerned with humanity; they are absolutely essential for all concerned about the present crisis of poverty and inequality in America."

Reviewing *Surviving* in the *New York Review of Books*, Rosemary Dinnage singled out the essays dealing with the concentration camps: "Here Bettelheim speaks with absolute authority." Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times*, who had favorably reviewed *The Empty Fortress* when it came out, referred to *The Children of the Dream*, Bettelheim's book on child-rearing in the kibbutzim, as a "painstaking examination," and in the *Chicago Tribune* Hugh Nissenson called the book "a brilliant contribution." Paul Roazan, in the *New York Times Book Review*, called Bettelheim "one of Freud's genuine heirs of our time." Perhaps no one, he wrote, was more equipped to assess the effects of kibbutz society on personality formation than Bruno Bettelheim. These people accepted Bettelheim's claim to be an authority; generalists all, they clearly felt themselves qualified to judge material that might better have been examined by specialists.

As each of Bettelheim's books was published it met with similar adulation. While one scholarly community or another might raise serious questions about his work in specialized journals, the popular media continued to praise him in extravagant terms. Pollak convincingly documents a habit of hero worship that allowed the perpetuation of the Bettelheim myth.

Bettelheim's life came to a miserable end. With skill and sympathy, Pollak portrays the isolation and bitterness that engulfed him in his final years. Beset with numerous unpleasant and debilitating ailments, widowed, estranged from one of his children, and moving from one uncongenial dwelling to another, Bettelheim spoke constantly of suicide before finally killing himself. It is hard not to speculate about Bettelheim's thoughts as he reviewed his life. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, drawing the moral of a fairy tale, he wrote: "A voice used to tell lies leads us only to perdition. . . . But a voice used to repent, to admit our failures and state the truth, redeems us." Let us hope that, in the end, Bettelheim repented.

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• Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. tags: fairy-tales, psychology. 26 likes. Like. "Since there are thousands of fairy tales, one may safely guess that there are probably equal numbers where the courage and determination of females rescue males, and vice versa." • Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. tags: fairy-tales. 16 likes. Like. "If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find m In 1960 Bettelheim returned to this text in *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*, the first book in which he made a connection between his experiences in the camps and the Freudian-inspired "milieu therapy" he established at the University of Chicago's Orthogenic School, of which he became director in 1944. (1997). *The creation of Dr. B.: A biography of Bruno Bettelheim*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Raines, Theron. (2002). *Rising to the light: A portrait of Bruno Bettelheim*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Sutton, Nina. (1995). *Bruno Bettelheim: The other side of madness* (David Sharp, Trans.). London: Duckworth. *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* Sutton, Nina. Bruno Bettelheim (August 28, 1903 " March 13, 1990) was an Austrian-born psychologist, scholar, public intellectual and author who spent most of his academic and clinical career in the United States. An early writer on autism, Bettelheim's work focused on the education of emotionally disturbed children, as well as Freudian psychology more generally. In the U.S., he later gained a position as professor at the University of Chicago and director of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School for Disturbed