

The Wizardry of Freud

A review of *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*
by Frederick Crews

REVIEWED BY MARGRET SCHAEFER

“Clear evidence of falsification of data should now close the door on this damaging claim.”

THE ABOVE QUOTE IS FROM A 2011 *British Medical Journal* article about Andrew Wakefield, the British physician whose “discovery” of a link between vaccination and autism fueled a world wide anti-vaccination movement. Since its publication in 1998, the paper’s results were contradicted by many reputable scientific studies, and in 2011 Wakefield’s work was in addition proved to be not only bad science but a fraud as well: a British court found him guilty of dishonestly misrepresenting his data, removed him from the roster of the British Medical Society, and disbarred him from practice.

In his new book, *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*, Frederick Crews presents a Freud who was just such a fraud and who deserves the same fate. This is not the first time that Crews, a bona fide skeptic whose last book, *Follies of the Wise: Dissenting Essays* (2007), was reviewed in the pages of this journal, has written critically about Freud. Crews had been drawn to psychoanalysis himself (disclosure: this reviewer was too) in the 1960s and early 1970s when, along with the late Norman Holland, he pretty much created the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism. But a prestigious fellowship to the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (he was a professor of English at UC Berkeley at the time), which gave him time to delve deeper into Freud, convinced him instead that psychoanalysis was unscientific and untenable. Since then he has contributed to the growing skeptical scholarly and historical scholarship on Freud.

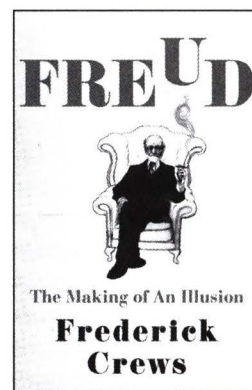
Philosophers of science have indicted key concepts of Freud’s psychoanalysis like “free association” and “repression” as circular and fatally flawed by confirmation bias. Historians have tracked down the actual patients whose treatment supposedly served Freud as evidence for his theories and have sought to place Freud and his theories in the historical and cultural context of his time. Crews—to his own surprise—became well known as a major, if not the major, critic of Freud in the public eye because of a series of articles he published in the *New York Review of Books* in the 1990s. For Crews is that now all too rare and rapidly disappearing creature—the public intellectual—who is able to explain and make accessible an otherwise unwieldy amount of erudite scholarship in clear, elegant, and jargon free prose. Defenders of Freud have sought to discredit him as a “Freud basher,” thereby continuing the (not so honorable) tradition that Freud began of questioning the motives of a skeptic and attributing those to “unconscious resistance” rather than answering his objections.

This is precisely one of the reasons that in previous books Crews has said that psychoanalysis is not only a pseudoscience (as all philosophers of science agree), but “the queen of pseudosciences.” That is because it is the only one that incorporates within its theory an explanation of why some people refuse to believe it, i.e., “unconscious resistance” which needs to be explained by Freud’s own ideas and methods—a most brilliant and masterful way of disarming criticism.

His new book, a biography of Freud from 1880 to around 1900, examines the crucial years in which Freud was creat-

ing the “science of psychoanalysis.” It culminated in his first important book, *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1895 and his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1900. This time in Freud’s life has been somewhat neglected by Freud’s biographers for many reasons, including lack of sufficient available biographical information, but also because in these years Freud developed a theory of neurosis that he later said he abandoned. Crews, however, argues that all the principal concepts on which psychoanalysis rests were constructed at this early time despite later changes and additions. His logic is that if the roots of a tree are not sound, then the crown, no matter how beautiful and different from the roots, cannot be healthy. And recently a treasure trove of new data about the Freud of this period has come to light: the complete correspondence between the young Sigmund Freud and his fiancée Martha Bernays during the long four and a half years of their engagement, 1882-1886.

This correspondence, which consists of an astounding 1,539 letters in all, had been concealed from public view for some 60 years. Only a very small portion—97 letters, or 6.3% of them—had been previously published, and those in expurgated form. Their importance is attested to by the fact that Freud’s daughter Anna kept them private at her house in London instead of depositing them in the Freud Archive, U.S. Library of Congress, along with the rest of Freud’s papers after her father’s death in 1939. It



Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt
and Co., 2017. 769 pp. \$40.
ISBN-13: 978-1627797177

was not until her own death in 1982 that her heirs finally did deposit them in the Freud Archives—but even then it was with the stipulation that access to them be restricted until the year 2000. Why was this correspondence hidden for so long? Their content makes it clear: they don't paint a flattering portrait of Freud. A reading of these letters after they became available on the Library of Congress website spurred Crews to write this book. They confirmed all his suspicions about Freud's motives and manner of working that he and others had raised before but could not document: the fraudulent and pseudo-scientific evidential base on which psychoanalysis rests.

Despite its nearly 700-page length and 22 pages of footnotes, Crews' book is divided into sections with witty titles such as "Sigmund the Unready," "Tending to Goldfish," and "Girl Trouble" and is thoroughly absorbing and highly readable. He begins with an examination of Freud's family history and early education, detailing the reasons why Freud was "unready" to undertake the study of medicine, and then focuses on Freud's "First Temptation": cocaine. Freud's enthusiastic endorsement—and use of—cocaine, Crews contends, had a much greater consequence for the theory of psychoanalysis than is officially recognized. It was not a soon-to-be-discarded "youthful indiscretion," as Ernest Jones called it in his official 1957 biography of Freud, for Freud continued to use cocaine regularly, almost daily, for more than 15 years. Crews details Freud's early experiments with the substance, and documents his disastrous attempt to cure his best friend Fleischl's morphine addiction with injections of cocaine. Meant as a kindness, it became the opposite, as Freud ignored every sign that the "cure" was not working and was instead obviously harming his friend. Later, Freud dishonestly claimed to have cured Fleischl, when in fact his friend tragically deteriorated while undergoing Freud's treatment, and finally dying in great pain with two addictions instead of one: morphine and cocaine. The details of what happened to Fleischl

are gruesome to read. Crews sees Freud's tenacious clinging to a pet theory and ignoring any evidence to the contrary, no matter how devastating, as characteristic of him throughout his life from then on.

As Freud wrote Martha while recommending cocaine to her, he used it to alleviate his many physical and emotional symptoms, which ranged from headaches, stomach aches, and sciatica, to recurring depressions and intermittent "bad moods" punctuated by periods of elation. It consoled him for his loneliness in Paris while studying with Charcot, and gave him the self-confidence that he mostly lacked at this time. Most importantly for the creation of his psychoanalysis, he used the drug to overcome writer's block. Hence Freud was "under the influence" while he was thinking, writing, and creating the theories. Crews develops the intriguing notion that Freud had a "cocaine self" that permitted him to misrepresent and exaggerate the flimsy evidence he did have for his theories—and to manufacture evidence when none existed. Freud as a student had been a "studious, ambitious, and philosophically reflective young man, trained in rigorous intuitivism by distinguished researchers," as Crews acknowledges. But in the early 1880s he changed into someone so arrogant and overweeningly ambitious and grandiose, so absolutely and unaccountably convinced of his theory of the sexual etiology of hysteria, that he didn't hesitate to stoop to dishonesty and fraud to try to prove it.

Cocaine is well known to induce feelings of supreme self-confidence, elation, and grandiosity in the user, to the point that facts and reality no longer matter. It also heightens sexual feelings and fantasies and is often used as an aphrodisiac for that reason, as Freud was well aware, using it for that purpose himself. (More than once in his letters we find Freud telling Martha that he feels like a "sexual giant," teasingly warning her to watch out for a "big hairy beast" when he meets her again.) And Crews argues

that Freud's cocaine use also explains Freud's focus on sexuality alone as the cause of all neuroses.

Freud's theory at the time, in brief, was that sexual seduction (molestation) in childhood, usually by fathers, which was "repressed," (i.e., not consciously remembered), was the "invariable," "only" and "exclusive" cause of all hysteria and, in fact, of "all the neuroses"—as he explicitly said in a paper he gave to a group of his peers in 1896. In that paper he presented 13 cases he claimed he had successfully cured as evidence. The group's chairman, Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, called Freud's theory "a scientific fairy tale"—a judgment Freud rejected, calling Krafft-Ebbing an "ass" [Esel] and a conventional prude afraid of sex. That's hard to believe about someone like Kraft-Ebbing, the foremost expert in pedophilia in the world at that time, and a man from whom Freud actually took a number of ideas (without giving him credit). Even more shockingly, Freud later admitted to his friend, confidant, and collaborator Wilhelm Fliess, that these 13 cases didn't exist at all—he had just made them all up.

Freud believed in what has come to be called his "seduction theory of hysteria" for over 15 years until he famously "changed his mind" about what it was that his patients had "repressed." Ostensibly he did this, as he wrote to Fliess, because he had suddenly realized (only a few months after the above mentioned paper) that he had been wrong all these years. He had, he told Fliess, not actually been able to "conclude a single case" of analysis in all these years; i.e., his treatments had not produced a single cure, nor had he been able to induce any patient to "remember" such abuse, even though he had exercised extreme pressure to get them to do so, including hypnosis, massage, "head pressure," and drugs to put them in a more suggestible mood when verbal suggestion didn't work. His change of mind consisted of locating the cause of his patients hysteria in their own minds instead of in the external world, in their own "repressed" childhood sexual fantasies and desires that they had unconsciously projected

onto their fathers—a change usually celebrated as the beginning of “true” psychoanalysis. But Crews shows that Freud had no more evidence for his second theory (in fact, less, as it was empirically not even potentially verifiable) than he did for his first. In any case, Freud continued to use all the (invented) concepts with which he had tried to “prove” the first theory, e.g., such self-confirming notions as “repression” and “free association,” all of which existed only in Freud’s own system.

If his new theory was no more empirically based than his first, how did Freud actually come up with his ideas of the etiology of hysteria? Crews takes his clue from the fact that Freud saw himself (and other family members, especially one of his sisters) as suffering from an hysteria exactly like the ones his patients did, and that what he represented as his “science of psychoanalysis” were actually his own—real or imagined—childhood sexual experiences. Crews’ exposition of which memories and fantasies in Freud’s own life led him to his theories makes for interesting reading indeed. In the end, Crews demonstrates that Wilhelm Fliess, who at their last meeting in 1900 accused Freud of merely “imposing his own thoughts on the mind of his patients,” was right. This means that psychoanalysis is based on a case of one—Freud himself. That is, Freud took himself as representative of all people at all times and in all cultures—surely a supremely narcissistic, grandiose—and preposterous—idea.

This is just a thin slice of what else about Freud’s clinical practices there is in this riveting book. There is a chapter on Freud’s rather unsuccessful year of study in Paris in 1882 observing Charcot’s treatment of hysterics at Paris’ famous Salpêtrière. Freud idealized Charcot, and never questioned the obvious artificiality of Charcot’s “theater of hysteria” that entertained the aristocratic audiences he invited to watch it, although contemporaries of Freud saw through the charade. Instead, he took over Charcot’s theory of the traumatic sexual origin of hysteria wholesale.

Charcot’s theory of hysteria died with Charcot in 1893, since by then it had become obvious that he had gone astray in his use of Mesmerism. But Freud took no notice and elaborated this method to treat patients after he returned to Vienna—with no success, as Crews details in sometimes hair-raising detail. The case of Bertha Pappenheim, considered to be the foundational case of psychoanalysis, is paradigmatic of the gulf between the reality of her treatment and its later reporting. This “successful cure” showing how hysterical symptoms could be cured by “talking” was a complete failure. After two years and a thousand hours of therapy (!) by Breuer, Pappenheim was worse instead of better. And all the while she was supposedly curing her symptoms by talking freely until she found their point of origin (the famous “chimney sweeping” technique that Freud took over from her and later called “free association”), Bertha was simultaneously being given large quantities of mind-altering drugs such as chloral hydrate (a “hypnotic” chemical that today is often used as a “date rape” drug), morphine, and cocaine—drugs whose side effects and withdrawal symptoms Breuer and Freud willfully misinterpreted as more of the very “hysterical symptoms” she needed to have cured (thus giving new meaning to Karl Kraus’ assessment of psychoanalysis as “the disease it purports to cure”). The quantities used on her were such that five weeks after her discharge as “cured” she had to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital, still symptomatic, and needing to be detoxed—a truth that Freud failed to mention when he wrote up the case 13 years later with Breuer.

And so it went with many other patients. Crews’ book takes us up through Freud’s life and ideas until his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. The idea that dreams have significant meaning is an old folk belief to which Freud gives a pseudoscientific gloss, inventing a “science of interpretation” that attributed extraordinary intellectual and linguistic abilities to a supposed “dream censor” in our minds. It

is pseudoscientific because—to give just one obvious reason—Freud’s interpretive scheme allowed for a symbol to mean either itself, its opposite (“You say it’s not your mother? Aha! It is your mother”) or anything else at all (displacement), with no way to determine which interpretation is correct, or even likely. In the process, Crews also takes up the matter of Freud’s relationship with his sister-in-law Minna, the younger sister of Martha, who came to live with the Freuds in Vienna after the death of her fiancée in the mid-1890s.

Crews finds the admittedly circumstantial evidence uncovered by Peter Swales and Henri Ellenberger that Minna and Freud had a long-term affair too strong to ignore. (And what evidence can there be in something of this sort but circumstantial?) He does not find this matter merely titillating, however. Crews argues that Freud’s closeness to Minna had an influence on his construction of psychoanalysis. She supplanted Wilhelm Fliess as his confidant after that relationship ended in bitterness. Unlike Martha, Minna took an interest in his work and was creative and intellectually and sexually more free. She helped turn Freud away from whatever scientific and empirical values he still ostensibly held towards extremes of speculation such as spiritualism and telepathy—leading Freud at one point to claim that what passed between the analyst’s and his patient’s “unconscious” happened by means of telepathy. Crews also argues convincingly that certain of what Freud claimed were case histories in his *Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* were in fact disguised incidents from his relationship with her.

If Freud constructed psychoanalysis on an fraudulent evidential foundation, how did he convince so many people of the correctness and the profundity of his theories? Not just the inner circle of his followers (a group he ruled like a cult leader) but also so many of us over many subsequent decades? One reason among others, Crews suggests, is Freud’s ability as an eloquent writer. Crews, after all originally a

literary critic, notes that the narrative structure of Freud's case histories and his *Interpretation of Dreams* was that of the spellbinding detective story in the manner of Arthur Conan Doyle. (Freud himself admitted—in supposed surprise—that his case histories read more like short stories). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, Freud induces his reader to identify with him and join him in a quest he structured as an adventurous and difficult journey leading to the dark source of all dreams —“the Unconscious.” Crews sees Freud as comparable to James Joyce in the brilliance of his style and in taking the reader into formerly taboo realms. Not for nothing was Freud awarded the Goethe Prize in Germany in 1930. So he was creating “literature,” as some who still idealize the founder today claim, arguing that psychoanalysis is therefore a “hermeneutic science.” But while literature does not have to be true, a “science,” especially one applied to the (costly) treatment of suffering patients in the real world, does.

I can't help but add that one reason Crews' book succeeds so convincingly is that he, like Freud, is an eloquent and passionate writer who has in this book constructed as enthralling and compelling a detective story as any of Freud's. He, too, is a Sherlock Holmes, an erudite sleuth who relentlessly tracks down hidden clue after hidden clue—all leading inexorably to only one possible verdict: Freud is guilty of fraud as charged. Except—and this is major—Crews provides ample documentation and evidence for his claims, whereas Freud only pretended to do so.

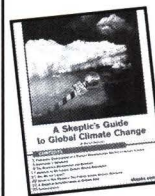
Is any of this still important today, when psychoanalysis has effectively been banished from mainstream psychiatry and psychology for its lack of efficacy? Today even basic Freudian terms such as “hysteria” and “neurosis” have been completely excised from the DSM, the bible of psychiatric practice. Crews argues that psychoanalysis still remains culturally pervasive and that his ideas, though proven pseudoscientific many times, persist and are still capable of exerting harmful influence in the real

world. A recent example was the widespread “recovered memory” movement of 1980s and 1990s that Crews detailed in his eye-opening book written at its height in 1990, *The Memory Wars*. In this revival of Freud's original theory of hysteria, therapists (joined by a fair number of analysts) convinced women that the cause of their adult troubles was their sexual molestation at the hands of their fathers, resulting in many daughters accusing their fathers of sexual crimes against them on the basis only of the “repressed memories” that they had “unearthed” during therapy. This destroyed not only their fathers, who were sometimes jailed, but also their families and the women themselves. As was clearly demonstrated in later lawsuits, it was the therapists' subtle or not so subtle “suggestions” as to what they “knew” to be the cause of their patients' troubles that caused this malignant episode—just as Freud had done earlier.

Crews hopes that by proving that Freud's creation of psychoanalysis was based on fraud he will finally help “close the door” on this “damaging claim.” Will it? Alas, exposure as a fraud does not seem to deter belief: in the U.S. a large fraction of the population still believes in Wakefield's vaccination-autism theory, and in 2015, anti-vaccination groups in California actually recruited the discredited Wakefield himself to come and head their campaign against the state legislature's effort to pass a pro-vaccination law protecting school children.

Hopefully “the still small voice of reason”—to quote Freud himself in another context—will prevail in the long run. Anyone who reads Crews' new book with an open mind will come away thinking that while Freud was indeed a highly imaginative thinker and an accomplished writer, he was also a fraud and a huckster, a narcissistic con-man of overwhelming ambition, equally hungry for fame and fortune, who succeeded by means of deceptive propaganda and rhetoric to be the “conquistador” he confessed to wanting to be. But at end of the royal road to Freud's Unconscious one finds only the Wizard of Oz. **S**

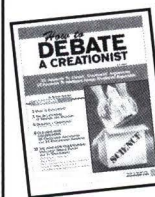
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