Title of Paper: Review of Barry G Gale's Belle Vue
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Section: Book Reviews
Date of Publication: November 2013
Issue: Volume 1, Number 2

Information: Belle Vue by Barry G. Gale. ISBN-10: 1481756808. The price is $31.40. The Amazon page is:


Keywords: Sigmund Freud, Minna Bernays, psychiatry, Belle Vue, Vienna, psychoanalysis

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Throughout my time at college and university, I never once met a person who particularly liked Sigmund Freud, regardless of department. When studying his theories revolving around dream theory and sexuality, I always heard words like “impersonal” and “whiny.” So when I first picked up former Cambridge Fellow and Johns Hopkins professor Barry Gale’s novel, Belle Vue, I began reading it with the mindset that this would be just another boring, rambling novel from which I would discover nothing new and exciting about Freud. To my delight, however, I found the novel charming and Freud humanized.

The novel begins quite abruptly, throwing the reader immediately into the action, at a dinner party with the Freud and Bernays families, as well as some of their closest friends. The date is July 24th, 1895 – the day that Freud successfully examines one of his dreams and thus cracks open the field of psychoanalysis to wide and varied, inexhaustible interpretations. Entirely set over the course of this one afternoon, although littered with previous encounters that the central characters have experienced, the novel engages Freud and his companions in dialogue that gives the reader a greater appreciation not only for Freud’s tireless efforts to please his family, patients, and colleagues, but also for the intrigue that struck the Freud and Bernays families.

One of the main aspects of Gale’s novel, indeed perhaps the central focus, is the relationship between Freud and his younger sister-in-law, Minna Bernays. Described by Gale (through Freud) as “vivacious and alluring”, the reader at once finds her energetic, beautiful, and captivating. As the novel progresses, she becomes well-rounded, if a bit naïve, and her obsession with Freud shines a different, more compelling light on Freud, the man, as opposed to the scientist that many see him as. It is true that Freud was not well-liked, nor was he well-respected, either in his time period or our own. Many of his more esteemed colleagues found his methods and theories questionable and unsubstantiated, a point that Gale frequently points out, usually through the complaints of Freud’s mother-in-law.

Although Gale writes in an almost stream-of-consciousness type of flow, where action, thought, and dialogue become intertwined (and sometimes indistinguishable), the novel reads almost like a dream itself, wherein the reader will find many layers. The story is like a dance, where the reader is constantly changing partners, sometimes at such a breakneck pace that it can seem daunting to keep up. In one moment, you are sitting on a scorching terrace, listening to Minna whine about how Freud doesn’t show her enough attention, and in the next, you’re swept back several months or years to witness how Freud has changed and developed his theory to perfect it in the novel’s present day.

Perhaps what is most striking (and pleasing!) about the novel, however, is not the unique way that Gale chooses to develop his characters through these frequent visitations to the past, but rather the way that he develops and explains Freud’s dream theory, culminating in Freud’s analysis of one of Minna’s recurring dreams. Gale chooses to break down Freud’s dream theory rather simply and exquisitely, by having Freud analyze the dream of someone who is as naïve, perhaps, as the reader may be as well. In this sense, no prior background
of Freud or his theories is needed, for Gale gives a step-by-step breakdown of the dream interpretation process.

Furthermore, Gale addresses the late-Victorian struggle with feminism, embodied in Minna, who desires to be a more “Modern Woman”. Minna operates as a strong-willed young woman who yearns for opportunity, an opportunity that she covets from Freud and his male colleagues. Both Freud and Minna envy the other’s perceived freedoms; while Minna claims that men have such wasted opportunity, Freud proclaims to a friend, “She’s as free as a bird, without a care in the world, able to dabble in philosophy or poetry or whatever she might find interesting.” It is clear from Gale’s writing that Freud finds the pressures of money and family, as well as the race for discovery, overwhelming to the point that he feels haggard and irritable.

Despite the frequent allusions to Freud’s malcontent in the psychological community, Gale depicts Freud in an almost regal light (through Minna’s eyes) with his “solid, well-proportioned body” and his “resolute, sober face, with its prominent cheekbones, forehead and jaw and his penetrating dark brown eyes”. Reminiscent of a strong Victorian male character, like Brontë’s Rochester or Gaskell’s Mr. Thornton, Freud typifies the brooding, yet attractive, intellectual type. He is serious, and yet in his seriousness, he is all the more intelligent and commanding. His intermittent use of German enforces this image even more.

Gale’s descriptions of Freud and Minna are rivaled only by his vivid descriptions of Belle Vue and Vienna. Perhaps Gale’s own time spent in Vienna studying Freud, as well as his lengthy study of fin-de-siècle Austria, lend to these descriptions, as they are rich and detailed. The colors are vibrant, the sun is scorching, and Gale even goes so far as to describe minute details, right down to the “slats of sandalwood covered by a sheer blue cloth and adorned with painted canaries” which compose the fan that Mrs. Bernays cools herself with throughout the novel. Inundated with sensual overload, the reader can easily place him or herself within the story and perhaps better understand the world of Freud.

Although a work perhaps best classified as historical fiction, for little is really known about Freud’s relationship with his sister-in-law, Minna, Gale’s frequent references to real-world relationships, such as that between Helene von Druskowitz and Therese Malten, lend the novel greater credibility. Slow-moving at first, the reader may come to have a better appreciation for the minute details and explanations that Gale provides. While readers searching for a purely academic description and sophisticated writing style should look elsewhere, the novel is probably best appreciated by those who are looking to come to a better appreciation of Freud’s “fun” side or for those who wish to simply wet their feet in psychoanalysis and dream theory. A story packed with intrigue, seduction, and overwhelming amounts of emotion, the novel is like a relaxing day off for those who wish to immerse themselves in a rich depiction of Austria and gain a bit of knowledge about the psyche of the man who developed the prominent dream theory along the way.