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[Winnicott: Life and Work, by F. Robert Rodman, Perseus, Cambridge, MA, 461 pp., \\$30.00.](#)

Review by:

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Why read the biography of a psychoanalyst? Theoretical innovators generally like to present their new ideas as having arisen purely out of clinical necessity, out of the need to improvise new ways of understanding and treating patients who seemed unanalyzable under the existing paradigm. But biography can illuminate other sides of what fuels creative innovation, putting the work into its historical, cultural, and personal context. In this unusually clear and well-written biography of D.W. Winnicott, F. Robert Rodman presents a compelling example of how an analyst's ongoing struggle with his own unresolved issues fueled both his theoretical innovations and his capacity to empathize with a broad variety of difficult patients. At the same time, the author masterfully recreates the cultural milieu of mid-century British psychoanalysis in which Winnicott lived and his ideas were formed.

Although Winnicott was raised in a superficially happy and intact family, Rodman suggests that happiness was founded on severe strictures on any disruptive

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behavior. His father was a successful and civic-minded businessman, a model of upright—and we would probably say, uptight—proper behavior. Winnicott seems to have had a lifelong struggle against accommodating himself to his father's constricting version of goodness and to his mother's underlying depression. An autobiographical poem he wrote in 1963 contains the lines:

Mother below is weeping

weeping

weeping

....

I learned to make her smile

to stem her tears

to undo her guilt

to cure her inward death

To enliven her was my living.

Clare Winnicott (his second wife) recounted how Winnicott told her that at the age of 9, he had looked into the mirror and decided he was “too nice.” There followed a period of bad behavior and low grades culminating in his father's sending him off to boarding school at age 14. Rodman writes that in a 1967 description of his childhood, Winnicott said that with his mother and two sisters and a nanny, he probably had “too much mothering” and that his father sending him away was the only way he could counter their influence. One gets the impression that for the young Winnicott, like many adolescents, bad behavior became a locus of self-definition. But in Winnicott's case, it took on an extraordinary significance. Noncompliance, whether expressed via hate or play, would become for him the crux of self-assertion and self-delineation

Winnicott's first marriage, however, reveals the extent to which his tendencies toward dependency, caretaking of a depressed mother figure, and self-sacrificing pathological accommodation remained unresolved. At the age of 28, he married Alice Taylor. Alice has been described by those who knew her as "dotty," which seems like a polite understatement to describe a woman who thought that Lawrence of Arabia was sending her secret messages via her parrot. Rodman concludes that she was either emotionally disturbed, neurologically impaired—as a result of a head injury at work—or some combination of both. Others recall her as often in a dreamlike state and none too "keen on hygiene." According to Winnicott's confidantes, the marriage was never consummated, but continued for more than 20 years until Winnicott secretly began an affair with a wartime coworker, Clare Britton. He left Alice to marry Clare only after his father's death and his own heart attack in 1948.

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Winnicott began analysis with James Strachey soon after his marriage to Alice. Strachey had begun his own analysis only 4 years previously, and was himself suffering from depression and sexual conflicts. Rodman quotes Paul Roazen as commenting, "I couldn't understand how Winnicott had lain on Strachey's couch so many years." Winnicott later said of Strachey that "In 10 years' analysis [he] made practically no mistakes and he adhered to a classical technique in a cold-blooded way for which I have always been grateful. He did, however, say two or three things that were not interpretations at a time when interpretations were needed" (p. 172). Strachey was also supervising Winnicott's training cases in the later part of the analysis. Part of Winnicott's ambivalence toward Strachey seems to reflect the excitement in his emerging identity as an analyst in his own right, contrasted with Strachey's failure to do anything that helped him untangle his marital difficulties, along with Strachey's inability to appreciate Winnicott's own innovative thinking. One comes away with the impression that the long analysis recapitulated his tendency to stay stuck in masochistically dependent relationships.

Winnicott graduated as an analyst in 1935, two years after terminating with Strachey. He had begun supervision in child analysis with Melanie Klein and approached her for a second reanalysis. However, Klein wanted him to analyze her son Eric (who had been her own first patient as well) and so instead referred him to Joan Riviere, an exceedingly awkward and frustrating arrangement to which Winnicott nonetheless acquiesced. Winnicott considered Klein the most original analyst since Freud and would struggle throughout the remainder of his career to assimilate what he so enormously valued in her work, all the while trying to cope with her and Riviere's refusal to acknowledge the value of his own contributions. Even though he treated Klein's own son, he later said he never qualified to be one of her "chosen Kleinians." And like Strachey before her, Riviere never was able to offer any of the acknowledgment that Winnicott craved for his own innovations, what he called his own "gestures." Winnicott's emphasis on the role of the real behavior of the mother toward the infant and other so-called environmental factors was the source of his ongoing estrangement from Klein and her "chosen Kleinians," who focused their attention on the inevitable unfolding of aggressive wishes and fantasies. Years later, when Clare Winnicott was herself in analysis with Klein, she was told, "It's no use our talking about your mother. We can't do anything about it now" (p. 258).

Winnicott was stranded between two camps; his support of Klein's theories of primitive aggression alienated him from Anna Freud and her supporters, while his emphasis on the real mother-child relationship alienated him from Klein. Late in life, he reminded a correspondent about the reality of his situation in the British Psycho-Analytic Society: "For a long time, as you know, I was not asked to do any teaching of psycho-analysis because neither

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Miss Freud nor Mrs. Klein would use me or allow their students to come to me for regular teaching even in child analysis" (p. 321).

Winnicott ended his analysis with Riviere in 1941. In the same year, he met Clare Britton, a social worker, while consulting in Oxfordshire with difficult children during the wartime evacuation. She seems to have served as the admiring, mirroring sounding board that he needed but never received in either of his analyses. The relationship deepened through the war years and they became lovers by 1944, although Winnicott did not manage to separate from Alice for another 5 years. One cannot help but conclude that the affair with Clare did as much for Winnicott as all his years in analysis—certainly it was what restored him to an active sexual life and heralded the onset of his most productive and original writing. However, there was another side to his newfound freedom. Rodman says, "after a lifetime of propriety, of adhering to acceptable behavior, a life that didn't even allow for sexual intercourse, [Winnicott] began in 1943 to cross boundaries in a reckless fashion, finding his freedom in the process, but making mistakes as well" (p. 136). An example of his willingness to cross boundaries in those years is exemplified by his relationship to Marian Milner. In 1943 Winnicott (as his own marriage was breaking up) took a very disturbed 23-year old woman named Susan into his home after her discharge from the hospital. Susan began treatment with Milner who shortly thereafter herself entered analysis with Winnicott, who had previously analyzed her late husband. To Milner, Winnicott was a friend, colleague, supervisor of her work with Susan (who naturally discussed the state of the Winnicott household in her sessions), fee payer for Susan, and analyst, whom she paid. To add to the confusion, Milner's analysis took place in her office, where Winnicott would stop off on the way from home to his own office.

Winnicott's theory of the True and False Self, first mentioned in a paper in 1949, certainly seems to resonate with his own struggles against compliance and resignation. Winnicott located the beginnings of the False Self at the moment the not-good-enough mother fails to respond to the infant's spontaneous gesture, but instead substitutes her own, and with which the infant complies. Evidently Winnicott spent many years with both Strachey and Riviere, coping with a repetition of just such a scenario. His gradual unwillingness to be a "good," that is, compliant, disciple of either Anna Freud or Melanie Klein reflected his emergent capacity to shake off his own False Self. His instinctive affinity for treating delinquent children seems to have arisen from his identification with their struggles against compliance and inauthenticity.

However, Winnicott's most notorious "delinquent" case was not a child but his protégé Masud Khan. Khan's outrageous and unprofessional behavior (most recently described in the *London Review of Books* in excruciating detail

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by his former analyst Wynne Godley [2001]) has retrospectively tarnished, for some, Winnicott's own reputation. Perhaps an understanding of how deep Winnicott's own need "not to be good" ran can explain, if not excuse, the extent to which he shielded and supported Khan despite everything he knew about his conduct.

Jonathan Lear (2003) has suggested that if we consider "the articles published in major psychoanalytic journals between 1930 and 1960 many of them display stunning insight and depth. The overall intellectual quality is very high, and some of them are beautifully written. Yet, looking back it seems that at the same time these articles are being published, there emerged a generation of analysts who, overall, were too rigid, too stiff, too cut off from their patients." (p. 10) Winnicott stands out as one of the great exceptions to this generalization. In both his writing and his personal style, there was an authenticity, liveliness, creativity, and willingness to be personally risk taking and undogmatic that set him off from so many of his generation, regardless of their theoretical orientation. The "good-enough mother," the "transitional object" and the "True and False Self" have a secure place in our thought and literature. Even those of us who disagree about the role of aggression and who doubt the wisdom of enactments in the name of regression to dependency can be grateful to Rodman for his re-creation of Winnicott's presence, a legacy of originality and independence that takes precedence over the limitations of those conceptual formulations that now seem dated or the therapeutic experiments that went awry.

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