

Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau, Editor. *The Analyst as Storyteller/El Analista Como Narrador*.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Berman

In what may be the first of its kind, Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau, a training and supervising analyst at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute and the chair of the International Psychoanalytic Association's Cultural Committee, decided in 2020 to invite members and associates to participate in a short story contest with the goal of publishing the 30 best stories. The result is *The Analyst as Storyteller/El Analista Como Narrador* (2021), a compilation of these tales appearing in both English and Spanish. Many analysts are drawn to fiction, she observes in the foreword, because it “fosters their capacity to immerse themselves in still inarticulate experience, some of which may seem of minor importance yet already carry the heart of the matter at stake” (p. ix). Interestingly, the “heart of the matter,” as Sander Gilman (1994) observes in *Reading Freud's Reading*, is the “line which Sigmund Freud scribbled in the margin of a number of his books when he found what seemed to him the essence of a text and its author” (p. xiii). It is no surprise that Schmidt-Hellerau has edited a volume of fiction, for she herself is a creative writer, the author of *Memory's Eyes: A New York Oedipus Novel* (1920).

The response to the invitation, Schmidt-Hellerau remarks, exceeded her expectations. She and the ten judges, all psychoanalysts, received stories from 252 analysts from the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and India. The analysts range in age from young, still involved in psychoanalytic training, to elderly, in retirement. Ten of the authors are male, the remaining female. The stories are indeed short, ranging in length from under three pages to seven. Narrowing the selection to the best 30 must have been daunting, but the result is a treasure trove. I found the stories intriguing, and it was difficult to limit myself to discussing a handful.

Tellingly, few of the stories are about psychoanalysis. An unhappy character in the Brazilian analyst Vera Lamanno-Adamo's story "The Woman on the Second Floor," living in "eternal grief and bitterness," is asked whether she has been to therapy. "No way. I know myself better than anybody else" (p. 216). All she wants to do is obliterate consciousness. Her only delight is the little bag of poison, "the messenger of revenge," that she keeps near her, recalling Nietzsche's wry observation that the thought of suicide is a great consolation; it helps one get through many a bad night. In "The Underside," written by the Brazilian analyst Carolina Scoz, a man has spent years in analysis, but the experience, as we shall see, has only made him more judgmental. The Chilean analyst Nicolás Correa Hidalgo's story "The Keys" focuses on a teacher of psychoanalysis who is on his way to speak to his students about Freud, but we don't hear what he will say. Apart from these brief references, there is nothing about the talking cure.

Why? We can only speculate. Perhaps the analyst-authors do not want to write about what they do for a living. Perhaps they believe it is unethical to write about psychoanalytic patients, real or fictional. Perhaps they seek an escape from their work and wish to write about experiences that occur outside of their office. Or perhaps they believe that writing fiction enables them to express truths that are otherwise inexpressible. Ironically, many creative writers—novelists, playwrights, poets, and memoirists—have written about psychoanalysis, as I discussed in *The Talking Cure* (1985), but psychoanalytic authors rarely use fiction to write about their own profession.

Upon closer analysis, however, the stories mix memory and desire, the domain of psychoanalysis. Nearly all the stories probe characters' inner lives, the world unseen by others, and they juxtapose past and present, demonstrating that our imagination is seldom limited by time or space. Some of the stories are phantasmagorical, revealing a character's dreams, which represent a royal road not only to the unconscious, as Freud maintained, but to the netherworld

that constitutes the stuff of literature. The best of the stories affirm both the value and risk of self-analysis, evoking Robert Penn Warren's ambiguity in his 1946 novel *All the King's Men*: "The end of man is knowledge" (p. 9), where *end* can mean either "goal" or "death."

Most of the stories are narrated in third person, but a few are first person, where the reader's task is to identify the author's attitude toward the speaker. The stories range from realism, magical realism, to science fiction. Some of the stories are dark while others are playful and whimsical. Two of the stories are about the coronavirus pandemic. Some stories take place in the middle of the twentieth century, during or immediately following the Second World War, while others are set in the distant future.

According to the biographical notes, several of the authors share a passion for psychoanalysis and literature, a love that animates their stories. Writing about herself in third person, Scoz believes that fictional writing "has a dual power: to approximate the author to their unconscious experiences, and to approximate the reader—by spontaneous identification with the characters—to the emotional diversity that pulses in everyone" (p. 31). The motto of the Indian psychoanalyst Jhelum Podder is triumphant: "The world of imagination can never fail us" (p. 129). The Columbian analyst Bertha Gamarra Morgenstern writes fiction to "give a voice to the multiple stories, her own and others, that inhabit her internal world" (p. 224). I broke into a smile when I learned the three passions of the Mexican analyst Ana Georgina Lopez Zepeda: "psychoanalysis, literature, and coffee" (p. 300). Exactly!

Only five pages long, Scoz's "The Underside" is a masterpiece of complexity and compression. The plot is simple. A woman watches her lover, a highly respected surgeon who would rather be an anonymous sculptor, interrogate an Arab craftsman about whether a Persian rug is authentic. The surgeon does not wish to purchase a rug in Dubai and transport it home

thousands of miles only to discover it is a fake. Remaining silent, the craftsman unrolls the rug, with the underside facing up, lights a match, and moves the flame close to the woolen weave. Why would a man attempt to set a rug on fire? “As in a magic show, the orange flame insists on trying to burn an object that resists and defies its incendiary powers” (p. 31). An authentic handmade rug, it turns out, will not burn, while the glue on a counterfeit rug will ignite. The story is not only about authenticity but also about trust, a quality lacking in the surgeon. By contrast, the woman would have bought the rug and appreciated its beauty, but the man leaves, telling the craftsman that he might return. We then learn that the surgeon, despite his counteridentification with his arrogant father, is more like him than he admits. “Instead of expressing how much the sight of that fabulous rug had touched him, his mouth rushed in to imply that something was suspect, suggesting an imminent fraud” (p. 33). Suddenly the man has become his own father, a sadistic ghost. The narrator then enters the surgeon’s mind, telling us about a statement his psychoanalyst made to him at the beginning of treatment: “‘I am a harvester of remnants,’ quoting the Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros” (p. 34).

A harvester of remnants is also a harvester of revenants, and the quote in “The Underside” may remind us of Hans W. Loewald’s illuminating 1960 essay, “On the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis,” where he distinguishes between ghosts and ancestors to show how trauma, like depression, evokes the image of haunting. “The Underside” then moves to a hotel in the Persian Gulf where the man and woman each muse over the cautionary tale about mass-produced rugs that “burn like breathless thieves with no need to confess” (p. 34). The underside of a rug or person reveals much about identity. “Still immersed in his own thoughts he didn’t even notice that she was staring at him from behind, in that subtle joy of discovery” (p. 35)—an epiphany no less sublime for the reader.

“The Underside” has much in common with the Turkish analyst Ilksen Unman’s “The Loom.” Both stories are about weaving, a traditional female craft. Both stories represent the role of connection in women’s lives, an aspect of female psychology that Judith Jordan (1991) and her colleagues articulate in *Women’s Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center*. Maintaining intergenerational connection is vital in the two stories. And they both show how weaving involves the painstaking creation of patterns that reveal the continuities in life and art, an insight that fascinates psychoanalysts and creative writers. The story opens with a man gazing at a loom in the middle of his home, given to him by his grandmother who has died two weeks earlier. He has been alone in his home for almost a month, waiting for his wife to return from helping their son adjust to college. He is a sociologist, completing a book about the bonds that connect people. As he stares at the loom, he recalls his early childhood when his grandparents explained to him the mystery of weaving. The story shows how his memory works through free association, central to psychoanalysis. He recalls his grandfather telling him, “As your drawings tell a story, so do the patterns woven into a carpet” (p. 50). The patterns of his life lead inevitably to his distant past, and he begins sobbing when he receives a package containing an unfinished rug he and his grandmother created decades earlier. Unman never refers to what the University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1990) calls a “flow experience,” in which we lose all sense of time when we are engaged in something that interests us, but that is what happens to the man when he concentrates intensely on his work: “he was creating loneliness in which he was not truly alone” (p. 49). Despite his work and family, the man has long felt that his life is a “cursed reproduction of the rug,” unfinished, but as the story moves toward its surprising conclusion, he vows to learn how to weave to complete the rug, in effect, trying to repair his childhood, damaged

by his parents' divorce. The story ends with the man, asked by his wife if he is okay, responding, "I'm better than I've ever been" (p. 54).

Sarit Kreutzer's "Holes" also investigates the past, in her case, moving to a country from which her grandparents had been forced to flee in terror during the Second World War. Shaul Greenberg hates living in the Israeli desert because it's too hot and dusty. The high school student longs to move to Germany, where he can have schnitzel and strudel, but his grandmother screams that the country no longer exists: "the Nazi pigs took it away, don't ever let me hear you say that damn name again" (p. 105). Shaul fails his geography class because he is not allowed to say the name of the hated country that exists to his parents and grandparents only as a black hole. "They could take Germany out of the atlas but not out of him. He would go there some day and then he would find out the truth" (p. 106). One can appreciate "Holes" without knowing anything about the author's life, but the biographical note informs us that Kreutzer studied clinical psychology and English literature in Tel-Aviv and then moved to Germany, where she currently lives—an indication that she has found her truth in the country that proved murderous to her forebears.

Two stories focus on the challenges of growing old, a topic that will be of interest to everyone in the American Psychoanalytic Association, in which the average age of its members is 70. "Eskimo," a story by the British analyst Valerie Sinason, contains a married couple, Tom and Geraldine, celebrating their diamond anniversary. Both struggle with the indignities of old age. The couple remain devoted to each other despite Tom's growing dementia. Tom becomes increasingly agitated when he cannot remember the word for something he wants to eat, referring to "Sweet Eskimo." Geraldine suddenly fathoms the meaning of the unintentional word play: "Icing." She is a "language detective," he exclaims in delight, and then he bursts into song: "I sing, icing, I scream Ice Cream" (p. 280). The joyful moment passes, however, and he fades before her

eyes. Free of sentimentality, “The Eskimo” is a story about love, loss, and caregiving: every word rings true.

As a late septuagenarian with six beloved grandchildren, I took special delight in “Grandmother Station” by the Argentinian analyst Adela Vinocur. Approaching her seventieth birthday, Adah loses herself in reverie as she reflects on the 1950s, the beginning of her journey. She arrives at Grandmothers Station, where she sees her son holding his baby. She is true to her name, which means “light and courteousness” in Hebrew. Both her grandmothers perished in the Second World War, and her parents became refugees in Argentina. Her father withdrew into silence, and after his death, her mother told her stories about her early life in Romania. Just as her grandmothers recounted stories to Adah, so does she narrate these stories to her own grandchildren. The story takes place in the present, and although the world is not at war, a new viral threat has created isolation and danger. Adah clings to her memories, and the last sentence conveys her legacy for her family. “As my grandmothers used to say: life must go on” (p. 314).

I would not claim that only a woman could have written “Grandmother Station,” but it’s noteworthy that women have a greater capacity for empathy and relational thinking than men. If the ten male analysts in *The Analyst as Storyteller* are representative of their gender, then it’s significant that they write more about the world of ambition, achievement, and individualism than the attachment bonds of family and friendship. To give a few examples, “A Warm Winter Evening,” by the French analyst Georges Gachnochi, is about transmuting a blank sheet of paper into a short story. In “Revelation,” the Swedish analyst Christopher Gibson creates a first person narrator who, beaten repeatedly by his teachers, discovers that survival depends upon the acquisition of knowledge. The character in “Persona: A Tale from Rio,” by the Brazilian analyst Roberto Santoro Almeida, struggles to free himself from a terrifying nightmare. “Ice-Rock,” by

the Italian analyst Fabio Castrioto, highlights “Prisoner 3H-9201, who escapes from a frozen precipice where he has been imprisoned for decades. In “The Dinner,” by the Brazilian analyst Rafael P. Tinelli, Ligia has recently earned a doctorate in immunology, but her satisfaction is spoiled by her envy of her sister and brother-in-law, both of whom are physicians. “The Last Weekend of Summer,” by the Chilean analyst Demian Leighton Bou, focuses on two boys who steal emblems on automobile hoods and trunks. And in “How I Got a Superstar Agent,” the American analyst Richard P. Kluft pays tribute to the man instrumental in his literary success. The stories by the male analysts strike me as different in characterization, theme, and imagery from those written by the female analysts. Will other readers feel the same way?

The Analyst as Storyteller succeeds in bringing to life the contributors’ passion for literature and psychoanalysis. The volume is a cornucopia of tales celebrating creativity in its diverse forms. Weaving together the pleasure principle and the reality principle, the stories convey the heart of the matter, fulfilling the claim that the world of imagination never fails us.

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