

Why gossip is good for you

Book review

Masson, J (1991) **Final analysis: The making and unmaking of a psychoanalyst**. London: Harper Collins, ISBN 000215 7187, pp202 (Addison Wesley, 1990).

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A recent edition of **New Scientist** contains an article entitled "Why gossip is good for you". Gossiping, the author argues, serves the purpose of providing a sense of social cohesion to human relationships. It is a sophisticated form of the nit-picking that goes by the name of grooming in primate groups. Jeffrey Masson has assigned himself just such a task in his book **Final analysis**. He aims to expose the lice-infested body of psychoanalysis to the world, through an extended gossip about his "making and unmaking as a psychoanalyst".

The first chapter opens with a conversation between Masson, a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed Professor of Sanskrit at Toronto University, and a training and supervising analyst at the Toronto Psychoanalytic Institute, Dr Bergman*. (* Masson offers his hosts the discretion of a pseudonym indicated by an asterisk above their names. It would appear that this small tribute to anonymity is all that he is prepared to offer.) The event described is Masson's initial interview for a position as an analyst-in-training at the Institute.

"Have you ever been unfaithful to your wife?" asks Dr. Bergman as his opening gambit. Why is the authorial tone so enticing, the mood so irresistible?

Simply because it's so familiar from the back pages of the Sunday newspapers and the glossy covers of popular magazines. It's a cosy invitation to take a voyeuristic peep into the seamy side of life we nice folk don't usually get to see. Masson's studied ingenuousness in relating the shock the question aroused in him, sets the tone of his ongoing revelations about his experiences at the hands of the psychoanalytic establishment and it makes for easy reading.

On the basis of this and other interviews Masson was accepted and began his training analysis in 1971. He was placed with a training analyst by the name of Schiffer and from his account, the training analysis which took place daily for fifty minutes and lasted for five years, was extremely unorthodox. Schiffer was invariably late, he took personal calls during sessions, he passed offensive opinions about his other patients (fellow students of Masson's), and he gossiped.

Masson writes: "I was a gossip. I still am. I got pleasure from it then, I get pleasure from it now. I provided Schiffer with a great deal of amusement when I recounted the foibles of my colleagues and mentors ... so when I would provide him some good gossip about another ridiculous remark by one of his colleagues, he would howl with laughter and then proceed to tell me his own favourite story" (p64).

Schiffer's failings were legion and while he did not heal his patient he informed him about the clinical practice of analysis. When the analysis concluded five years after it had begun, Schiffer promised Masson that he would tell the analytic committee that it had been a good analysis and that he was fit to graduate. However, some time later while Masson was concluding other sections of his training, he and Schiffer met. Masson presented Schiffer with a summary of a psychoanalytic paper he and his wife were preparing. At this, Schiffer fell into a blind rage, accused Masson of stealing his work and threatened to revoke his decision about Masson's training analysis unless Masson acknowledged him as co-author. After some hesitation Masson informed him that he would (in fact he never did) and thus did not have to return to analysis.

Masson concludes his reflections on his own training analysis by suggesting that Schiffer was no better or worse than any of the other training analysts. All suffer from the fatal flaw of being human.

The other aspects of training - the supervised cases and the seminars - proved as imperfect as the training analysis. The patients Masson acquired were problematic; the supervisors inadequate. The seminars were boring and the only interest they held for him was to reveal the various schisms in the Institute between analysts who held different theoretical positions.

Masson intricately interweaves his personal account of his experiences with information about the psychoanalytic process. He is well versed in both psychoanalytic theory and technique, having worked his way through all the available literature in English that he could lay his hands on. However the weave is not as loose as one would wish it. The personal, gossipy tone of not-quite-invective that runs through the book contaminates many of his observations and makes it difficult to treat his comments with the seriousness that some of them deserve.

His story culminates with the now often-told tale of his dramatic rise through the psychoanalytic hierarchy to Project Director of the Freud Archives, and his equally rapid fall.

From early in his training Masson made a concerted effort to cultivate friendships with analytic luminaries. His most dazzling success was with Kurt Eissler, the keeper of the psychoanalytic ark. The two men became friendly in 1973 and continued a passionately intellectual contact which was crowned by Eissler's invitation to Masson to replace him as Director of the Freud Archives in 1980.

Masson had already decided that the clinical practice of psychoanalysis was not for him. He found it boring. However he was enthralled by the idea of historical research and was particularly interested in pursuing a line of thought that he had in the back of his mind for some years. He was convinced that contrary to the analytic position, neurosis is caused by the experience of actual trauma rather than repressed sexual fantasy. The chance to gain access to the various documents that Eissler had collected over many years and to which other scholars were denied access, was thrilling. In addition, he was promised residence in Freud's house in Maresfield Gardens, London, once Anna Freud no longer required it.

Masson's tenure as Projects Director of the Archives proved brief. In the August of 1981, nine months after beginning his new job, Masson's views on Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory of neurosis were published for all to read in the **New York Times**. However, he did not content himself with a presentation of his argument. He went further and impugned Freud, calling him a coward and blaming him for the sterility of psychoanalysis. Shortly

after this, he was called before the Board of Directors of the Archives, and informed that his contract would not be renewed.

Masson filed a law suit against Eissler, Muriel Gardener and her son-in-law, as representatives of the Archives for 13 million dollars on a number of charges, one of which was wrongful dismissal. The case was settled out of court and Masson was paid 150 000 dollars on condition that he return Dr. Eissler's tapes and documents to Anna Freud. The law suit, the settlement and Masson's theft of Eissler's tapes are not mentioned in **Final analysis**. One has to read Janet Malcolm's book **In the Freud Archives** (1984) to find the conclusion to this part of the story.

Soon after the settlement of this case, his membership of the International Psychoanalytic Association was terminated, because Masson had not paid his dues. Masson tells this part of the tale with a naivete that is hard to believe. He claims that he had no idea that the analytic community would respond in such a way to his revelations and presents himself as a helpless victim of the monolithic cult of the members, all of whom are vindictive and vengeful in their desire to protect their wealth and power. Yet in an interview with Janet Malcolm some months later he says: "I'm writing a book called **The assault on truth: Freud's suppression of the seduction theory**. And when my book comes out there is not a patient in analysis who will not go to his analyst with the book in hand and say, 'Why didn't you tell me all this? What the hell is going on? I want an explanation. This man is telling me that there is something wrong at the core of psychoanalysis. Jesus Christ! If this is really true, what am I doing here?'" (p14).

Later he says, "There is no possible refutation of this book. It's going to cause a revolution in psychoanalysis. Analysis stands or falls with me now". The book is an expansion of the thesis he offered to the public in the **New York Times** newspaper articles and there can be no doubt that his intentions were as explicit then as he expresses them later.

Masson points many fingers during the course of the book. He criticises analysts for personal failures of integrity, including sex with patients, backbiting, nepotism, gossiping and small-mindedness. While there are undoubtedly individuals within various psychoanalytic institutes who are guilty of these faults, Masson's attempt to discredit the entire analytic enterprise based on the argument that the individuals who practice it are mere mortals, is spurious. There is a mistaken belief at the heart of this book, that if Masson can vilify enough people associated with psychoanalysis, especially Freud himself, he will create enough doubt in peoples' minds about its efficacy.

While gossip may facilitate sociability, slander does not. **Final analysis** is a book that tempts the reader with its casual, quasi-intimate tone of secret revelation but at its core it is profoundly dishonest. Masson's presentation of himself is extremely questionable. One wonders why someone with such belief in his powers of insight took such a long time to see through to the heart of the psychoanalytic myth. He writes that at the conclusion of his initial interview in 1970 his doubts were strong and growing. Why did it take so belligerent a person a further ten years to act on these doubts?

Masson claims to be intent on setting the world right about psychoanalysis. One would have thought his two previous books would have been sufficient for that task. It's difficult not to believe that this text, **Final analysis**, is simply getting even with the individuals who had the misfortune to know him during those years. Thinly disguised by asterisks, individual identities must be glaringly obvious to those who recognise either themselves or others.

Should you read this book? It's an easy read. One's eyes fly across the pages. Its gossipy tone is enticing. But the substance is vexed. While there are moments of insight and revealing criticism of psychoanalysis, the spiteful, vengeful pitch is overwhelming.

Read it with a careful eye on the not-so-hidden agenda.