

# Book Reviews

**CORRUPTING THE YOUNG AND OTHER STORIES OF A FAMILY THERAPIST:** Tesse and Moshe Lang. Published by Rene Gordon Pty Ltd, 29 Ferdinand Ave, Nth Balwyn 3104. paperback. Price \$8.95.

When the prophet Nathan wanted King David to understand the sin of stealing another man's wife, he told him a story — a story of a rich man's theft of a poor man's lamb. Six centuries later in Athens, the sophist Protagoras offered his audience a choice. He could make his point either in reasoned argument (*logos*) or by telling a story (*mythos*). In Plato's dialogue which bears Protagoras' name, the audience chose to hear the story. Five centuries later, this time in Galilee, a revolutionary religious teacher from Nazareth inspired his own and subsequent generations by telling stories — the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and many others. This was in the tradition of the wise teachers of Judaism — their stories delight and instruct, and often draw on a deep vein of humour.

Tesse and Moshe Lang's *Corrupting the Young and other stories of a Family Therapist* belongs to a time-honoured genre. No doubt the authors could have made a technical and analytical presentation of the same material. Like Protagoras' audience, we prefer the story. It calls upon the imagination as well as the intellect and leads to deeper insight.

Although the book is slight — 169 pages and some of them blank — it is probably better as a bedside book for dipping into at random rather than for continuous reading. The longest story runs for 10 pages, but most occupy only a page or two and sometimes less. Each deserves to be savoured on its own, rather than with many others. The shortest, of only 70 words, can be quoted here in full:

#### *Cleaning Up*

My relationship with Mrs Wilson, our cleaning lady, has given me some useful metaphors. The simplest is my favourite.

In the first interview, families often comment with some surprise that since making the appointment, they have sorted out some of their problems. I tell them that I am glad my waiting list is so therapeutic. Perhaps it parallels what happens at home.

We always tidy up before Mrs Wilson comes.

At the risk of killing the butterfly by pinning it to the wall, a reviewer will perhaps be excused for using this example to list features which are characteristic of many of the Lang stories. First, they are written in economical English of great freshness and clarity. Second, they often contain wry and engaging remarks such as 'I am glad my waiting list is so therapeutic'. Third, we smile at the punch-line with the pleasure of recognising a paradoxical truth from everyday experiences.

The book has four sections, labelled with gnomic subtitles (samples: *'The problem is not with the dancers but with the dance'* and *'Seeing isn't believing'*). I remain intrigued as to the basis of these divisions. Because the opening stories relate incidents from Moshe's time as a student and then his first job working with children, I thought the arrangement might be roughly autobiographical. This hypothesis failed when I discovered that some of the stories were not in chronological sequence and that others were not from Moshe's own direct experience (for instance the delightful account on page 98 of how large posters showing the life-cycle of the malarial parasite were misunderstood in New Guinea and therefore ineffective: 'We don't have your problem; our mosquitoes are very small, nothing like those big ones you showed us on the posters.')

Perhaps, instead, there are themes which hold each of the parts together. If Part I deals mainly with children, Part IV deals mainly with relationships between parents and children. Examples of both can, however, be found in other sections. The ostensible theme

of Part II, 'He didn't tell us anything we didn't know already', could be taken as the theme for most of the book.

Over and over again the role of the effective therapist is revealed as enabling the family to sort itself out. A good example is *'The Sunday Drive'* (pp. 28-29). The family ended up 'all amazed that they had continued to go on the Sunday drive, keeping their dislike of this activity to themselves, so as not to hurt or upset the others'. Sometimes the sorting out is done so effectively (as in *'Memories'*, pp. 136-141) that the family members all forget the dramatic problems which took them to the therapist in the first place. At other times the lay reader marvels at the profound effect of a chance remark, of an instinctive reaction (which may be contrary to the accepted 'rules'), or of an imaginative lateral move which most of us could never have thought of.

Not all the stories end in success. The longest story *Ilene* ends with a fifteen year old's letter revealing the causes of her deep sadness and confusion, her parents failure to make the next crucial appointment, and, a few months later, her admission to a mental hospital.

Another apparent failure (*No Time for Change*, pp. 55-56) concerns a hard-working and deeply caring GP who had neglected his wife. She had finally left him and he desperately wanted her back. Their one session of therapy was the first time husband and wife had talked seriously in twenty years. She promised to return but only if her husband would change from a life of total commitment to his patients. But he was unable to find the time for even one more session. 'I never heard from them again' is the poignant ending. This book, then, is far from a catalogue of therapeutic triumphs.

Although I am married to a family therapist, my knowledge of this area is small and second-hand. I know just enough to recognise in the stories examples of 'relabelling', 'paradoxical instructions', 'bad' (but effective) therapy' and so on. I can also recognise the importance of a therapist's being able to identify, and if necessary challenge, the motives that bring a patient or family to enlist the therapist's help.

Such considerations are not, however, the main reason for my pleasure in this book. This is simply that I find here a deep understanding of the richness, and the quirkiness, of human life and the power of the human spirit to transcend the errors of the past and so find happiness and even joy. Enjoying these stories is life-enhancing.

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*This book can be ordered through the Journal, which receives a commission for each sale.*

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