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BOOK REVIEW

On a Sliding Scale

A Mind Apart: Journeys in a Neurodiverse World
By Susanne Antonetta
Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2005. 256 pp., $24.95, cloth

American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer
By Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin
Knopf, 2005, 722 pp., $35.00, cloth

Reading nonfiction is a bit like talking on the phone to your sister-in-law, knowing that when you hang up you'll have to decide what to take at face value, what to treat with the suspicion it deserves. The reader of a novel knows, to a large extent, what is expected: a suspension of disbelief, an entry into a world conceived by someone else. The setting may be a city you recognize, but it's a city peopled by someone else's imagination, and those people walk imaginary streets with real street names. The reader of poetry is quickly reminded that the world of the poem is fictive, that its truths are metaphorical, and that the writer does not need to account for the veracity of its details. The reader of nonfiction, however, is required first to assess the nature of the "non" in the book at hand. Each book is measured on a sliding scale that ranges from the clearly objective on one hand to the supremely subjective on the other; this is further complicated by the fact that there are varying degrees of objectivity or subjectivity, and among them, the reader needs to take into account his or her own preconceptions and subjectivities. In other words, in order to determine meaning (and value), the reader must first decide how the book is to be read.

The researched article parades itself as objective, but we hold ourselves on the alert for places where a personal agenda might get in the way of a more "pure" conclusion. The biography tilts toward the objective, but, oh dear, the author must have had specific reasons for choosing to look at this particular life, and who knows the motives behind the book? A story of personal experience—the trip down the Amazon, the mountain climbed, even the addiction conquered—ought to be innocuously middle ground; in general, its account is assumed to be accurate (and verifiable), and we grant the writer about the same degree of embellishment with which we tell our own stories. A full-blown memoir is obviously categorized as subjective from the outset, and readers understand this, but even then we must make internal adjustments for *degrees* of subjectivity, assessing just how much to enter its terrain, how much to hold back in order to gauge its authenticity. A collection of essays demands similar scrutiny on our part, measuring the observations or conclusions of the author on a scale of probability or logicality, turning the meanings over and over in the mind to see whether they feel valid.

I'm not talking about the easy cases—the James Freys of this world—where deception is deception. I'm talking about the harder issues of just how, in legitimate books of nonfiction, we recognize tone, or infer motive, or grasp intent – and then, once we think we understand *how* the book demands to be read, whether it has been adequate to the task.

Over the past year I've read two books that, at first glance, appear to be unlikely bedfellows, yet I've found myself thinking of them in tandem more than once. The first is *A Mind Apart: Journeys in a Neurodiverse World* by Susanne Antonetta, an account of how the world appears to people with atypical neurological conditions—autism, AD/HD

syndrome, schizophrenia, bipolar disease—with a foray into some contemporary theories of genetics and evolution. The second is the Pulitzer prize-winning *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer,* written by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, the result of twenty-five years of prodigious research into the life of one of America's most prominent and problematic scientists. The first announces itself as highly subjective; the author explores her own manic-depressive episodes as one representative element of what she calls neurodiversity. The second appears to be objective on any scale—all its facts questioned and verified and annotated—and it is made even more so by the fact that it has two authors, which acts (at least in theory) as a further check against bias and partiality. What connects these books is the sense they try to make of a mind that ventures outside the norm, along with an implied questioning of the norm. The approach differs so widely that the experience of reading these books is poles apart, but the thoughts that arise during the reading process overlap with surprising frequency.

A Mind Apart is a blatant mix of the subjective peppered with relevant research, a hybrid that stubbornly refuses to define itself, although the author (who writes nonfiction under this name, poetry under another) does state in the Prologue that in these ten essays she is writing " for myself and for those who do find a value, even a rich existence, in their mindways . . . ." As Antonetta chronicles her exploration into "neurodiversity"—through wide reading of books and articles, discussion, and interviews – she also reveals her battle with the cycles of mania and depression that sometimes cause her thinking to be distorted. She recalls a tempestuous adolescence, disastrous misdiagnoses, the bizarre

ways she must have appeared to others. Accepting her own life (now medicated) as viable, she raises the tricky and highly significant questions that loom on the horizon of biogenetic engineering. As we gain control over our genetic codes, will certain people simply cease to exist? Will we cull from the gene pool those who are disposed to think and act "differently"? Where on the scale of "different" do we draw our lines?

Pondering these very questions, Antonetta attends the trial of a sixteen-year-old neighborhood boy accused of brutally murdering an eight-year-old from the same neighborhood. The young boy might as easily have been her son, she thinks. But, also, the older boy might very well have been her, or some version of her earlier self, caught in the delirium of his distorted thinking. Haunted by her desire to know the degree of his alienation from society, she haunts the courtroom, hoping to find some answers in his demeanor, in his very defense. She leaves the experience as stymied as before, knowing no more of what makes an Eichmann or a Kyle Anderson than she had previously, but also believing that she had felt some momentary connection. She briefly finds her answer with the backward flow of logic:

> If there's a principle of maximum diversity, there needs to be these insane stretches of the atom: planets with rings; jeweled tropical creatures like the peacock, the extravagant opposite of camouflage, because the easy tropics require that life stay pruned. There needs to be Kyle Anderson.

The premise, here, is that maximum diversity is the ideal, but Antonetta can't help undercutting her own conclusions with her ongoing questions. She's seen the results firsthand.

In this prevailing mode, Antonetta seems open to any and all ways of being; she is actively curious about things that I would probably dismiss before the fact. For example, she attends the peace conference at the Maharishi University of Management in Vedic City, Iowa, a place that declares itself the Capitol of the Global Country of World Peace, where she interviews David Lynch, who answers her in rhyming couplets. Some essays deal with her friend Dawn, a woman with Asperger's syndrome who found it easier to deal with gorillas than humans and has become a primatologist; others chronicle her ongoing friendship with a man named N'Lili, who is the host to dozens of female personalities with whom she exchanges e-mail conversations. This makes for some fascinating reading. But *A Mind Apart* is more than an account of personal experience and forays into memory; Antonetta sprinkles the text with quotes from a variety of sources so that her own, somewhat angst-ridden questions are mirrored in the more measured tones of the scientific researcher or the medical ethicist. In the end, the book raises serious issues that—in the Orwellian world we are coming to inhabit—we are going to face sooner rather than later. The author notes that, in a class her husband team-taught that included the topic of genetic engineering, students were allowed to do a hypothetical zygote, or prebirth, screening. "A majority who screened (not everyone in this class of seventy chose to) picked the male child, tall, with a high IQ and good physique."

A Mind Apart opens with an account of the author's young son, Jin, coming to awareness of language while they watch a pod of itinerant whales with their own particular ways of speaking to each other. It closes on a chapter in which the author has flown to Atlanta to speak with Chantek, an orangutan who can use sign language, and

with his former owner/keeper. The gap between the human and the animal world shrinks as the communicative space widens. The "neuroatypicals" of the intervening chapters suddenly find a place in the order of things.

If I have a complaint about this book, it's that it is too short for its subject matter. It feels, at times, too casual. It flits from subject to subject with lightning speed (in this, it mirrors the AD/HD condition it mentions), but some of the questions raised and some of the experiences themselves deserve fuller treatment, maybe more "neurotypical" treatment, in order to emphasize their seriousness. Antonetta makes claims that may very well be true—for example, that Plath, Van Gogh, O'Keeffe, Rossini were all manic-depressive—but does not even pay lip service to the fact that this is an inference we make after the fact. Many of her arguments rest on the claim that creativity and neuroatypicality go hand-in-hand (and I'd tend to agree), but her statements pronounce rather than postulate. So it is that most of her claims leave us to puzzle where they stand on the objectivity/subjectivity index. We find ourselves simultaneously charmed by the personality rendered here in such an intimate way and, at the same time, alert to the fact that we must guard against casual agreement. Even the citations feel commandeered to serve the book's premises. What often masks as "proof" is simply someone else's concerted opinion or scientific conjecture. Antonetta notes that the internet now makes it possible for special communities to form, and for a book about diversity, even she seems to assume that most manic-depressives think alike, and seems convinced that her own thoughts are characteristically "different" even when they sound quite "normal" (at least to me) – proving again just how difficult it is to see the world from any perspective but our own.

Antonetta points out the rise in percentages of autism and schizophrenia, posits that natural selection is no longer culling certain genetic dispositions from our ranks. But she does not suggest, as I might, that we may have invented new terminologies and made room for more and varied diagnoses of what was always there. Never mind, Susanne Antonetta, in an engagingly quirky collection, has opened up Pandora's box. *A Mind Apart* raises underlying questions that are fundamental to how we will develop as a species and how we will tackle vital ethical issues. What I'd like to see now is a more rigorous study of these very issues by the established scientific community. While it may not be half as interesting reading, I'd still like to hear that proverbial second opinion.

Twenty-five years in the making, *American Prometheus* is so carefully researched and annotated that it cannot help but convey the substance of objectivity. Its subject is one of America's oddities—hero to some (for differing reasons), near-traitor to others (for equally differing reasons). J. Robert Oppenheimer, known as Oppie to friends and colleagues, was one of the country's brash young scientists in the years that preceded World War II—years that saw a flurry of scientific progress in almost every field. By all accounts a scientific genius, Oppenheimer turned out as well to be a flamboyant character, at once transparent and opaque. His rise through the ranks of theoretical physicists was meteoric, and his ability to pull people together and act as mediator, to organize structures and synthesize desires, to coerce and compromise, and to think outside the box made him a natural choice to head the team of scientists who were working to develop the first atomic bomb.

Fast-paced (for all its length) and chockablock with factual detail, *American Prometheus* recreates at its center the whirlwind activity that led up to the testing of the bomb, and then the immediate aftereffects which brought Oppenheimer into the public eye in the world of post-war politics. The biography fills in all details—his childhood, his education, his parents' political leanings, his interests, his friends, marriage, family, myriad professional and personal relationships, affairs of the heart and of the mind—and provides a running backstory of international historical events that shaped the times. The reader is reminded that much of this activity occurred at a time when people, and nations, were forced to make choices between Hitler and Stalin, between shades of right and wrong as though they could be quantified. Political circumstances dictated that the U.S. was first in league with the Russians, later their arch enemy.

The real meat of this biography comes in the sections after the bomb has delivered its explosive message. Caught in the political cross-hairs, at once dependent on funds for his research and under pressure to produce, Oppie turned out to have more than scientific expertise. His was a mind that understood implication, and he could predict not only scientific, but political, fallout. Moving from the rigors of the army into the slippery politics of the academy and to the even more treacherous politics of Washington D. C., he convinced himself that he had the skills to bring nations together. Awed by the powers he had helped to unleash, he began to question what any keeper of such power might become, and he turned his mind toward international solutions precisely at a time when the cold war and national interests dominated the political scene.

Bird and Sherwin follow the natural arc of Oppenheimer's career from triumph to inevitable downfall, carefully establishing the forces that will eventually polarize

scientists and laypeople alike. The story becomes that of a man whose inventive, quicksilver mind is thwarted by the persistent cunning of others; in fact, the story takes on the elements of tragedy as we watch him spiral more and more out of control of the very dynamics he had mastered. We watch his subtle mind—innovative and elastic, so interested in a wide variety of subjects that he sometimes found it hard to focus—undermine his very strengths. The story of the early Atomic Energy Commission, and of the Senate committee's McCarthyite tactics to suggest that Oppenheimer had Communist leanings is fairly well known, and this book goes into such detail that it's often hard to keep the players straight. With such rigorous attention to the evidence, however, the reader becomes convinced that no stone has been left unturned. And turned again, as Bird and Sherwin redouble their efforts in the light of new (now declassified) access to evidence to determine just how much truth there was in the accusations. Along the way, we learn more about not only the climate of the 1950s, but the realities of the nexus of the American Communist party in the intellectual circles of the 1940s.

What's fascinating, then, is the sense that Oppenheimer remains unknowable, and that his quirky (neurodiverse?) mind saw beyond his personal problems to the implications we face today, forty years after his death. Even more fascinating is the sense that, for all their objectivity, the authors of this biography reveal their subjectivities in subtle ways. It's clear that they sympathize with Oppenheimer, see events through his eyes, subtly influence the reader through the use of an adjective ("alarming") or adverb ("incredibly")—and that their extensive research has, in fact, pushed them even further in this direction. But because of their belief in his essential innocence, they become critical

of his essence. Having exposed his mercurial mind and his elusive nature, they become frustrated that, for all their research, he has managed to elude them as well.

When Oppenheimer was up for appointment as the head of the Institute for Advanced Study, one of the trustees described him like this: ". . . despite his preoccupation with atomic physics, he has kept up his Latin and Greek, is widely read in general history, and he collects pictures. He is altogether a most extraordinary combination of science and the humanities." The authors go on to note the books he reads (world literature and philosophy), the poets and philosophers he brings to the Institute, the way he fused the sciences and the arts. They also record his increasingly invasive bouts with depression. But somehow, even these facts do not open the door to his enigmatic mind. Having been unable to penetrate his strengths, they begin to probe their hero's weaknesses. So, even as they side with him, they begin, slightly, to judge him. They note his (and his wife Kitty's) peculiar coldness toward their children and their ability to turn their backs when they are most needed; they characterize his actions (always with attendant corroboration) in such sentences as "Emotions ran deep, and led to irrational outbursts." They become increasingly fascinated with the way Oppenheimer seemed, at least partially, to orchestrate his own troubles: "It was an extraordinarily perceptive and brazen speech," they tell us, and the next paragraph begins, "It is hard to imagine a more provocative speech." Later, recounting a disagreement with Einstein, they write:

> Einstein's instincts were right—and time would demonstrate that Oppenheimer's were wrong. "Oppenheimer is not a gypsy like me," Einstein confided to his close friend Johanna Fantova. "I was born with the skin of an elephant; there is

no one who can hurt me." Oppenheimer, he thought, clearly was a man who was easily hurt—and intimidated.

Noting where his silences undermine his statements, they project on him an agenda of their own: "For a man who had been so politically engaged in the 1930s and '40s, Oppenheimer was oddly disconnected from the turmoil of the 1960s." This comment does not factor in Oppenheimer's age and health (he died in 1967) nor even the intense personal turmoil he had experienced; it simply seems tinged with the desire to have him step up to their plate.

American Prometheus is such an outstanding biography—readable, enlightening, judicious, comprehensive—that it deserves all the praise it has received. It stirs up old issues and raises new ones, bringing Oppenheimer's visionary ideas beyond its pages into a troublesome future. The book is timely in the extreme; it's clear that inherent in Oppenheimer's proposals for nuclear cooperation and oversight were all the implications of an Iran with a nuclear arsenal. Despite its dual authorship, it's also beautifully written, as though with one voice. Bird and Sherwin integrate quoted material with such skill that it is never intrusive, and their style and diction clarify, but never diminish, the many facets of this complicated life. Still, the complexity of their own relationship to the man they've studied for the past two decades makes its way into their sentences. One feels their disappointment that they cannot somehow rewrite his part of history, and this hint of repressed desire fuels the very heart of their objectivity. Without it, this book might feel like advocacy; with it, it slides along the scale toward crucial understanding.