

LIONS AT LAMB HOUSE

By Edwin M. Yoder, Jr.

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“This wonderful novel discloses the nature of two monumental minds, making each more dazzling in the process . . . A rare book, as moving as it is thoughtful.”—Roger Rosenblatt

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Lions at Lamb House imagines what happens when an Austrian psychiatrist responds to the urgent request of a Boston colleague. The colleague, who fears his brother’s intention to rewrite his early novels may be the sign of debilitating neuroses, urges the Austrian psychiatrist to visit and evaluate his brother at home in the south of England. The time is 1908. The Austrian is Sigmund Freud. The Bostonian is William James and the novelist is his brother Henry. What comes of Freud’s ten-day visit to Lamb House is fiction of a high order, at once artful and entertaining.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. James understands life through the art of writing where Freud understands it through science. Does the author give a clear conclusion as to which gentleman’s perspective illuminates life more clearly?
2. Fletcherism, a charlatan’s theory that seems preposterous to us now, is subscribed to by the intelligent Henry James. Can you think of any theories presently practiced that, in hindsight, will seem ridiculous to following generations?
3. Seeing the way the townspeople react to the notion that James may be “mentally ill,” how does their perception of psychoanalysis compare with the present-day perspective of the same practice?
4. How does the author rendering of Freud compare with your prior understanding of him? Of James?
5. Can you imagine other imminent minds meeting? Would their theories work in concert or conflict?

INTERVIEW WITH EDWIN M. YODER, JR.

- Q:** From where did the idea of a Freud-James meeting come? Is there any evidence that the two men met?
- A:** No evidence that I know of. How I came by the idea: It was when I discovered that Freud had visited his half brothers in Manchester in 1908. I already knew the immediate surroundings and circumstances of Henry James's life at that time. I also knew that his brother William and Freud had a famous meeting at Clark University (whose President, Stanley Hall, was one of Freud's first American followers) the following year. All this was the nacre of what I hope is a novelistic pearl!
- Q:** Freud is pitted against James in a debate to decide if life is better understood through science or art. Was this a pre-planned dynamic, or did it develop over the course of writing?
- A:** I believed it emerged as I developed the story, although of course it was implicit in any meeting of the two that could be imagined. Once the story was drafted it proved to be opportune to sharpen the thematic encounter and verbal exchanges to fit it. I hope I didn't simplify the intellectual orientation of either major character. Freud was in his own way an artist, as any reader of his case histories and monographs knows – for instance his 'Moses and Monotheism,' which advanced the controversial idea that Moses was Egyptian. Inasmuch as the origins of Moses are shrouded in myth, no one can know definitively whether Freud's idea was right, but it certainly was as creative as it was controversial. On the other hand, Henry James's literary criticism shows a mind of extraordinary analytical acuteness; and science ran in the family, as witness his brother's distinction in psychology I would hope the reader of 'Lions' would understand that I intended no absolute separation between art and science.
- Q:** The novel demonstrates fluency with both men's professional work, but there is also a great deal of familiarity with their mannerisms and personal behavior. Was this supposition? Are there accounts of their personal behaviors?
- A:** On the latter point, the answer is yes—in spades. Both Freud and Henry James have been the subjects of monumental biographies – by his early disciple Ernest Jones and, later, by Peter Gay and others in Freud's case; by Leon Edel and countless others in the case of Henry James. In my descriptions of their mannerisms, I imagined a good bit but the imagining was heard Henry James's. I imagined James stuttering a bit, and Freud – who was fluent in several languages including English – sometimes getting his English verbs in Germanic order. This was imagination on my part, but again it was imagining based on a fairly full grasp of their personalities and mannerisms.

- Q:** In the novel, James and Wharton have a lovely relationship. Is there evidence that they were confidants?
- A:** The chief evidence of their being confidants is their large correspondence, which has in fact been collected in a single volume. They met and traveled together quite a lot, chiefly in France, England and Italy. James fondly accused Wharton of being an ‘angel of devastation’ in whisking him off on tours in her automobile, but there is no doubt that James relished these excursions and her company. I think of them as very close friends indeed. It was Wharton who organized other James friends to present the famous Sargent portrait and who intrigued (unsuccessfully, alas) to get him the Nobel Prize. But then, among the transcendent early 20th Century novelists, James, Conrad and Joyce (and Lawrence) were not Nobel Laureates, which many lesser figures were. The capacity of the Nobel judges for getting it wrong has continued.
- Q:** A novel of historical fiction draws on the author’s keen sense of research, a quality essential to journalists. What are other similarities of writing in the two idioms, fiction and non-fiction?
- A:** Having now had some substantial experience in both, I can say that the similarities are almost non-existent. I did not understand that when I began writing fiction for the first time since college days. I thought that my extensive experience in discursive writing would serve me adequately, but in fact (setting aside relatively minor issues of style, grammar etc.) Writing fiction draws upon very different psychological resources. Personalities and their stories must be imagined – literally; they come from a different place in the writer’s psyche.
- Q:** You poke fun at the nature of tabloid/irresponsible journalism with the Rye Register incident. Is this a comment on the modern proliferation of tabloid media?
- A:** Well, I wouldn’t want to plead guilty to a didactic purpose but the evidence is there, I suppose. In fact, Henry James had a strong distaste for journalism, especially of the trash tabloid variety. He wrote a novella called ‘The Papers’ which makes that distaste quite explicit and I drew on it when I have James tell Freud that the gullible readers of journalism leap at the bait like gaping fish; or words to that effect. The other day, a friend of mine, an eminent journalist, observed that all you have to do to find out how inaccurate journalism is, is to be the subject of it. That has been my experience too. I asked him if he had ever been written about with complete accuracy. ‘Once,’ he said. Newspapers are indispensable but this is their flaw. But the flaw is minor by comparison with the junk so plentifully dished out every day in the electronic world – both the internet and broadband/cable television, and of course ‘talk radio.’

BIOGRAPHY

Edwin M. Yoder, Jr. was educated at the University of North Carolina, and at Oxford, where he studied political history as a Rhodes Scholar. He was a newspaper editor in North Carolina and Washington, where he won a Pulitzer Prize, and for many years wrote a column for the Washington Post and its syndicate. He is the author of *The Night of the Old South Ball* and *Joe Alsop's Cold War*, as well as a memoir, *Telling Others What to Think: Recollections of a Pundit*. He lives with his wife, Jane, in Alexandria, Virginia.
