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Book Review

A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers

Adam Feinstein
Wiley Blackwell ISBN 978-1-4051-8653-7

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This is an extraordinary book which makes use of conversations with major researchers in the field of autism and childhood developmental disorders to elucidate a condition that formerly attracted a diagnosis of childhood schizophrenia.

Its readability makes it attractive to a diverse audience while its intellectual content calls for mandatory reading by students, academics, and professionals across disciplines.

Feinstein supplies an extensive history of this “bewildering, intriguing condition.” He examines the contributions of Autism’s founders, Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger, and places their seminal arguments in the context of their contemporaries and personal circumstances. Learning how their contributions initially and currently are viewed make for compelling reading. Suggestions of Nazi allegiances and plagiarism are fascinating.

The theoretical controversies provided by Bruno Bettelheim and his assertion that parents were to blame add to the controversial history surrounding autism. Feinstein presents this history in an objective yet empathic way. For example, while we learn that Bettelheim allegedly was abusive to children who attended his orthogenic school, we also are reminded that he was a holocaust survivor who had a remarkable gift for teaching and an empathy that belied the accusatory nature of his writings. Sadly we also learn that he suicided on the anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Austria.

Feinstein’s conversations with major figures like Michael Rutter and Lorna Wing provide more recent reflections on autism as a disorder. The book provides pertinent information from a large number of areas including neuro-developmental research conceptualisations, diagnostic battles and current diagnoses, cross-cultural contributions and findings, effective treatments for children with autism, and biographical details including case studies.

This book is a remarkable achievement not only because of its academic content and educative value but also because it tells the story of a condition that attracts much current interest. Autism continues to be misunderstood and misdiagnosed. Anyone with an interest in people will learn from and enjoy this book.

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