Book Review

WHICH WINNICOTT?

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A review of *Tea With Winnicott*, by Brett Kahr, illustrations by Alison Bechdel (2016), Karnac, London, 42 pp.

*Tea with Winnicott* is a charming book—and the value of charm is not to be underestimated in these utterly charm-deprived times. I believe that, beyond being charming, *Tea* will be usefully informative to a wide audience—not just for students, its intended audience, but for professionals as well. There is an amazing amount of information in this book about Winnicott’s life and work and about the culture of psychoanalysis and English society itself during the first three fourths of the 20th century. The playful premise of the book is a “posthumous interview” the prominent psychoanalytic historian Brett Kahr has arranged with the great English psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, with the assistance of Mrs. Joyce Coles, Winnicott’s secretary from 1947 until his death in 1971. The book reflects Winnicott’s own playfulness, of course one of his major theoretical interests. At the beginning is a list of the *dramatis personae*, beginning with Winnicott and Coles, with the dates of their deaths, and then “Professor Brett Kahr, interviewer. (Not yet deceased.)” Similarly, the engaging illustrations by Alison Bechdel, primarily of Winnicott, contribute to this sense of whimsy. She has strong Winicottian credentials herself—her graphic book *Are You My Mother?* (Bechdel, 2013) can also be thought of as a good introduction to Winnicott’s theory.

The book is the first in a new series from Karnac: “Interviews with Icons.” Kahr is preparing another book with the same format, but with Sigmund Freud as the interview subject. (*Coffee With Freud* was published earlier this year.) Kahr is a leading historian of psychoanalysis; he has written and edited several other books, including the first biography of Winnicott (*D. W. Winnicott, A Biographical Portrait*), published in 1996 to mark Winnicott’s centenary. He also has yet another book about Winnicott coming out this year: *Winnicott’s Anni Horribiles: The Creation of*...

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“Hate in the Counter-Transference.” It is an expansion of his fascinating 2011 article of almost the same title, published in American Imago, which explores not only the background of Winnicott’s very complex personal life but also the culture of the British Psycho-Analytical Society at the time he was developing his theories.

Tea follows Winnicott’s life and illustrates how his life is woven throughout his work. We learn about his early life, especially about the influence of Wesleyanism as one foundation of his ethos of helping others and of his family’s tradition of public service. Winnicott’s experience as a medic in World War I was also formative, as a great many contemporaries died in the War, and he felt he had to live not only his life but theirs, too, which may have contributed to his understanding of the manic defense against depression (Winnicott, 1935/1958). We follow him into his medical career as a “physician in children’s medicine,” so described because “British doctors loathed that dreadful Americanism ‘pediatrician’” (p. 45). We also learn of Winnicott’s personal troubles at the time of his first marriage, which led him to his first analysis with the newly minted James Strachey—unbelievably, Winnicott was his second patient!

Tea continues with Winnicott’s experiences at the British Psycho-Analytical Society, featuring his complex relationship with Melanie Klein and, as he called them, the “sub-Kleinians.” He objected strenuously to this group making psycho-analysis doctrinaire, which he saw as an anathema to the ideal work of finding and living the truth of one’s own personal experience. Tea then recounts Winnicott establishing his first adult (that is, sexual) relationship with Clare Britton, a social worker, as they collaborated on the treatment of troubled children and adolescents evacuated from London during the Blitz of World War II. She became his second wife and, as I suggest below, gave us the Winnicott so many value today. The final chapters focus on Winnicott breaking free of Melanie Klein and establishing himself as a leading practitioner and theorist, and Tea ends with his death. The chapters are built around numerous cups of tea served by Mrs. Coles—for example, “Cup 1, The Resurrection of Dr. Winnicott.” This interview must have taken place in heaven, for no one has to take a bathroom break—how else did the bladders of men of these ages hold all that tea?

Part of the charm of the book for me is that Winnicott seems brought to life—but this may be because my disbelief is rather easily suspended. (Perhaps other readers will not have this experience.) The Winnicott in this book is the Winnicott I’ve always imagined: plainspoken, straightforward, a man whose ideas are seemingly simple, but only seemingly—somehow once they stop being played with by Winnicott himself and enter other minds, they start to become complex. This sense of being brought to life is especially important, I think, because there is a tendency in the field to forget that leading psychoanalytic theorists were (or are) living human beings and that their theories are often intimately tied to their personal histories. Perhaps in part this is the result of
Freud’s early insistence that psychoanalysis be exclusively considered a science. Freud himself discouraged the connection between his ideas and his life; he denied, for example, that the idea of the death instinct was developed out of his experiences in World War I and the subsequent Spanish flu, which took his favorite daughter, Sophie (Gay, 1988, p. 394f.). As Tea with Winnicott so compellingly brings Winnicott to life, a question consequently arises: Whose life is it, anyway?

This is not so simple a question. Tea with Winnicott is the result of decades of extraordinarily thorough study. Kahr believes that he is the only person to have read through the voluminous unpublished Winnicott material held at London’s Wellcome Library not only once but three times (this is in addition to researching Winnicott in other library archives and private collections). But does research, no matter how thorough, re-create a life? In the “Epilogue,” Kahr states, “Although none of this painstaking scholarship can replace the experience of having known Winnicott directly, I have, I trust, acquired a sufficiently rich and, hopefully, accurate grasp of both his life and his work.” He then adds,

I would like to think that I have absorbed something of Winnicott’s musicality, by which I mean the rhythm, the tempo, and the phrasing of his private speech. I have drawn on this multi-decade immersion in the world of Winnicott in order to bring him to life in this interview. (p. 200)

Bringing the deceased Winnicott to life is a complex endeavor, for he is a figure in our history about whom psychoanalysts tend to develop strong feelings. There has been the expectable back-and-forth shift in opinions about Winnicott, as there has been in so much of psychoanalytic thought, almost a pendulation of Winnicott idealizers, deidealizers, and some attempts at a more balanced view (cf. Slochower, 2011, pp. 3–44). These strong feelings about Winnicott seem to extend especially to those who knew him, and may have influenced Kahr’s claim—wish?—that he is presenting a Winnicott with some objective dimension. Kahr interviewed hundreds of people who knew Winnicott and writes,

It struck me as quite extraordinary just how many of my interviewees could quote precise conversations that they had had with Winnicott years earlier. ... It would not be at all uncommon for an interviewee to exclaim, ‘I shall never forget Donald’s precise words to me on the occasion. He said ...’ (p. 200, second ellipsis in original)

Leaving aside the fact that over the last decades we have learned just how fallible memory can be, I wonder if what Winnicott’s listeners were reporting was an experience so precious to them that they came to believe it had been imprinted in their minds or that they had literally memorized what he said. There must have been something about the living Winnicott that inspired this common response. Masud Kahn (1975) seemed to be addressing this phenomenon when he wrote in the introduction to Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis, a collection of Winnicott’s essays published shortly after his death,
I have not met another analyst who was more inevitably himself. It was this quality of his inviolable me-ness that enabled him to be so many different persons to such diverse people. Each of us who has encountered him has his own Winnicott. (p. xi)

But in our postmodern age, we know that the idea of bringing Winnicott to life is not sustainable: This Winnicott is Kahr’s version of Winnicott, irrespective of how very deeply informed a Winnicott this might be. This is not a bad thing in itself—I think we are all extremely fortunate to receive Kahr’s Winnicott—but I do think it should be acknowledged at the beginning of the book. It is worth considering, I think, if it is more in Winnicott’s tradition that we realize we each have our own Winnicotts and that they are our own transitional objects, no matter how similar they may seem or much they may be commonly held.

I would like to make another suggestion for future editions of this book, and I make it knowing that it might require an extraordinary amount of work: Professor Kahr should include a section of endnotes in the book of the sources of Winnicott’s words that he uses. This would also help clarify which of Winnicott’s statement in Tea are actual quotations and which are the author’s inventions. Kahr states that this book is written as an introduction to Winnicott, and perhaps that is the reason for the lack of citation for statements “Winnicott” makes (books referenced in the course of the interview are cited). But Tea may very well motivate novices or students—as well as scholars—to research the ideas expressed in particular passages. (Perhaps not everything would need to be cited, as it may be hard to recover all these sources; but in Young Man Luther, when Erikson (1958) lost track of a source in Luther’s voluminous writing, he stated, for example, “I have mislaid this reference, but no fair-minded reader will suspect me of inventing this quotation”; p. 275).

Such endnotes would also give Kahr a chance to comment editorially on Winnicott’s answers to his questions. For example, when in Tea Winnicott “speaks” about his success in various organizational leadership positions (p. 185), presumably he represents his own vantage point. But John Bowlby and Pearl King might beg to differ, at least in so far as Winnicott’s evaluation pertains to his two-time presidency of the British Psycho-Analytical Society. King (2004) stated she was looking over the tremendous amount of administrative work they had done for the Society (she was Honorary Business Secretary),

to see what Donald was doing at this time when John was Deputy President. To my surprise, I saw that Donald was then the President of the Society. It seemed very odd that I should have forgotten that, until I remembered that Donald Winnicott, on the whole, did not like committee meetings and that is probably why we had comparatively little contact. (p. 32)

Perhaps Winnicott didn’t realize how much he was an absentee president, at least for committee work, or for whatever reason King (and, implicitly from her
account, Bowlby) had concealed how much support he received from them; such
questions could be raised or commented upon by the author.

Making Winnicott’s voice in this book primarily reliant on research certainly
contributes to the sense of authenticity, but I wonder if it also does not constrict
the book’s content. There are issues that would be of interest in an introduction to
Winnicott that may not be present because he did not write about them; as Kahr
states, “Much of the dialogue contained in this reconstruction comes from actual
passages or turns of phrase that I found again and again in Winnicott’s private,
unpublished letters” (p. 200). For example, although Winnicott’s relationship with
Khan is discussed in *Tea* in a somewhat circumspect way (“I cannot say too much,
because Masud Khan was my patient,” Kahr has Winnicott say; p. 173), the
concerning report in Linda Hopkins’s (2008) biography of Khan (*False Self: The
Life of Masud Khan*) that Khan edited many of Winnicott’s essays so thoroughly as to
have essentially cowritten them is not mentioned. As of 1951, apparently Khan not
only became Winnicott’s patient, but also beginning shortly afterward, his editor.
That Kahr did not discuss this part of their dual-role relationship is surprising,
given that the premise of Kahr’s (2011) article on the origin of “Hate in the
Counter-Transference” is a careful, respectful exploration of many of Winnicott’s
boundary violations (apparently never sexual, but sometimes neglectful of patients
and driven by the idea, perhaps itself fueled by grandiosity, that his radical experi-
ments such as having patients live with him or work for him could be curative).

For me, in addition to these more minor criticisms, there was one curious,
major omission in this book, although I acknowledge that it would be compli-
cated to have included it: that Winnicott’s 26-year first marriage with Alice Taylor
was unconsummated. Rodman (2003), to date the only other biographer of
Winnicott, asserts that Winnicott had had no sexual experience with another
person until he began an affair with Clare Britton (while still married to his first
wife, Alice). Winnicott was 48 years old at the time. Certainly a lack of a sexual life
until that age is an unusual occurrence and one that, it seems reasonable to
assume, was an important part of Winnicott’s life experience. I do not think to
discuss this fact of Winnicott’s life is mere gossip; in my opinion, too often interest
in the personal lives of analysts is dismissed as such, but following the psycho-
analytic ideal of thinking about anything seriously, perhaps the idea of gossip
itself needs to be explored. It seems as though many different meanings are
conflated into this one word, and so is important to note that it has its roots in a
special relationship, being constructed from “God” in *godparents* and “sib” from
the root underlying the word *sibling*. Shakespeare was the first to turn the noun
gossip into a verb very early in his career, in *Comedy of Errors* (probably 1592), and
used the word for a range of meanings in other works—from heartless tattling of
others’ faults to a special confidential relationship. We all need relationships
where our ordinary human curiosity and speculations about other people can
be discussed, interests that are not always so polite; some of us call this psychoanalysis.

Not only is gossip not necessarily demeaning, information about Winnicott’s sexual life is not even private, given that he discussed it with his close friends and they were willing to tell interviewers. These loyal friends seem to have wanted it to be known (Kahr, 1996; Rodman, 2003)—perhaps because Winnicott’s sexual difficulties were so human. To my mind, that Winnicott was able to overcome his longstanding sexual inhibitions with the help of Clare Britton, at his late age, is a miracle of human growth. Rodman (2003) quoted a very touching letter from Britton to Winnicott, in which she seems to be comforting him in his difficulties trying to be sexual with her (p. 100). In my opinion, Clare Britton is one of the unsung heroes of psychoanalysis, for arguably it was her personal influence on him that gave us the Winnicott that we know (Kanter, 2004). I think his work changed after the beginning of their relationship, in large part because she forced him to become his own man, beginning with her insistence that he either act on his sexual attraction to her or leave her alone (Rodman, 2003, p. 92). She also helped him to separate from Melanie Klein (Rodman, 2003, p. 106f.). Although the centrality of their relationship is acknowledged in the book when discussing their marriage—Kahr’s Winnicott says, “It allowed me to become the theoretician of play and creativity and health, rather than just a theoretician of madness and breakdown and misery. … Clare did all of that for me … and more” (p. 182, ellipses in original)—I think that the sexual dimension of their relationship, given its seeming importance in Winnicott’s life, could have been more explicitly acknowledged in Tea with Winnicott.

This omission is all the more curious because in the first pages of the book, there is a description of the “Interviews with Icons” series that states, “We have resurrected the most famous psychoanalysts from the dead and have invited them for a frank and detailed conversation about their lives and their work” (p. vi). But finally perhaps Tea with Winnicott is not frank enough. Further, Kahr’s Winnicott repeatedly states in this posthumous interview that Kahr can ask him anything. There is one instance of Winnicott telling Kahr that during World War I, when he was a medical officer on a ship, the sailors gave him an education in sex (p. 40). This would have been a natural segue to asking about Winnicott’s own sexual life, but as an “interviewer,” Kahr then changes the subject. On another occasion, Kahr asks Winnicott about his domestic life when he was married to Alice. It might be argued that to ask Winnicott about his sexual life is too personal, but if this is the position taken, we have forgotten that this is a fictitious Winnicott whose private life cannot be violated and whose feelings cannot be hurt.

For me, the effect of these omissions and emphases is that sometimes Tea with Winnicott seems too idealizing, even though I struggle with an idealization of my own Winnicott! One example is the way his relationship with Joyce Coles, his secretary from 1947 to 1971 (his death), is portrayed. Winnicott states, “She and I would infuriate each other, you know, but only a little. In over 50 years, I never had a better
secretary” (p. 17). I have read Winnicott’s letters to Mrs. Coles, in his papers at the Wellcome Library in London, and, if memory serves, several of those letters were apologies from Winnicott to her for his blow-ups, which apparently were severe enough that she threatened to quit, and which he writes hoping that she will continue working for him. It’s important to push past the idealization of Winnicott and to see that he could have a sharp edge; even elsewhere his letters can be harsh, as is evident in his criticism of presentations at the British Society, sent to the authors the morning after (Rodman, 2003). Furthermore, Kahr himself questioned Winnicott’s use of Coles, in his wonderful article about the background of the writing of “Hate in the Counter-Transference.” In that article, Kahr certainly does not preserve an idealization of Winnicott, as he discusses Winnicott’s boundary problems, while presenting a balanced, humane perspective on him.

I want to emphasize that the issues I raise in my comments are secondary to my deep appreciation of this book. Like Winnicott, this book is deceptively simple. Kahr has been able to create an easy-reading introduction to this most complex man and psychoanalytic theorist. Tea with Winnicott can help all of us develop our own Winnicotts!

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