

the focus on roads and routes, and female superiority in recognition of landmarks, relative locations and memorizing road names. Gender aside, two fundamentally differing cognitive styles are outlined, one imposing a formula and relating the parts to that system, the other developing a theory through the gradual accumulation of data, building up a network of connections. It is perhaps worth noting that logico-scientific, paradigmatic learning is still the predominant mode of educational practice.

However, Baron-Cohen's diagrammatic representation of the full range of brain profiles includes a category that he refers to as 'the balanced brain' (pitched exactly between the extreme male and female brains), suggesting that, despite the biological differences and perhaps differential social and educational support, a significant proportion of male and female adults demonstrate an equal range of both empathizing and systemizing skills.

Baron-Cohen's stated intent is to explore, value and indeed celebrate differences in the male and female patterns of intelligence. He suggests that popular texts such as *Men are from Mars and women are from Venus* present a divisive and unhelpful model in terms of understanding male and female cognitive strategies. *The essential difference* is one of those rare texts that has the potential to permanently add colour and dimension to the reader's world view of a well worn subject.

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#### INSIDE HIDDEN LIVES

*Prostate tales: men's experiences with prostate cancer.* Ross Gray, 2003. Harriman, TN: Men's Studies Press Paper; ISBN 193132008 Paper, 195 pp., £8.00 paper.

Prostate cancer is a secret killer in the hidden lives of men. Prostate cancer not only affects one in eight men in the western world but is surrounded by a shadowy aura of confusion, uncertainty and lack of easily available information. Many men know very little about their own prostates. According to a Mori poll published in the UK in 2001 only 12% of men knew what the prostate gland does and 20% wrongly believed that it is located in the testes.<sup>1</sup> But even more importantly a corrosive culture of shame, silence and humiliation is often associated with prostate cancer and its main side effects arising from treatment – incontinence and impotence.

This dominant culture of isolated fear and shame is turned upside down by Ross Gray in his book, *Prostate tales*. It is an 'in-depth study of prostate cancer and masculinity', revealing the complex challenges facing men with prostate cancer. He does not do this through an academic report that is aimed at a narrow circle of other academics, but through the adventurous innovation of experimenting with nonstandard, written forms and mainly through a blend of fiction with social science observations. The result is a fresh, surprising, energizing read, in a book that combines fictional, narrative accounts based on transcribed interviews, with more reflective commentaries on the emerging links between prostate cancer and a gendered awareness of masculinities' viewpoint, and detailed information and references to some of the medical issues involved in prostate cancer.

Part of the engagement and challenges of reading these stories comes from the ambivalent positioning of the reader, straddling different genre expectations, of moving, sometimes uneasily, between social documentary and literary fiction. There are a few unanswered questions that remain about the precise processes of narrative composition: how did the author reassemble and shape spoken fragments into the significant, narrative form of a story? How is significant form in a story different from that of a social documentary? And how are symbolic patterning devices used by the author to focus meaning and purpose in terms of the wider intentions of his social project?

The author's broader sense of possible audiences for these stories involves reaching out to a range of 'cancer educators, health professionals and policy makers, researchers and community organizations' as well as other men who are struggling with prostate cancer, their spouses and other family members and friends. Ross Gray is a social scientist working in a cancer programme in Toronto. In the book's prologue he talks about his motivation for writing the book. He says he wanted to 'understand what men go through when they have prostate cancer'. All the narrative accounts and one dramatic script in the book are based on interviews that his research team carried out with men with prostate cancer.

Each man was interviewed 4 or 5 times. We asked the men about their experiences with prostate cancer and, beyond that, about their entire lives. In discussion with these men, we considered the full impact of prostate cancer. The life situations described in the narrative accounts ... were inspired by these interviews. Many of the words spoken by characters in the accounts were drawn directly from what men actually said in interviews. One part of my task in writing has been to honor the perspectives and expressions of the men we interviewed. Another part

has been to protect their individual identities by fictionalizing their accounts, combining bits provided by various men and disguising identifying details.

The strength of *Prostate tales* is the unique emotional sharing of men's experiences. In a dominant culture of repression and denial, it is so unusual to listen to men tentatively exploring forbidden territories, like depression, incontinence, grief, loss, sexual problems and joyful alternatives, unemployment, fear of death and marital conflict. It is the narrative power of the stories themselves that pulls the reader in to entering some of the emotional realities of older men's lives with prostate cancer. The reader is offered a compassionate understanding of these men's lives from the inside, not just facts about the disease but emotional experiences to engage with. To give you something of the flavour of the 13 stories and the one drama script, here are a few memorable lines selected from the book: 'If I would sneeze I would wet myself.' 'Now the Playmate-of-the-month could walk in here without a stitch on and I'd just yawn.' And 'I'd rather die than lose my potency.'

The stories use the concrete detail of the original interview transcripts but also work on the creative imagination of the reader through a process of careful crafting and shaping. For example, the imaginative tension in one story, 'Frederick tries for a job', is fashioned through the clash in a 62-year-old, gay man's life between his dreams of status and self-respect through a new work identity and the bleak, present reality of a man who has considerable anxiety and some despair about his 'severe urinary incontinence'. At the very end of the story, Frederick visibly pees himself just before the job interview. He knows that he can not go for the interview in that state but the reader is persuaded to feel some kind of emotional connection for Frederick's predicament through a carefully worked, metaphorical contrast in the last paragraph. Here are the last few sentences of the story: 'For a few moments he [Frederick] stands quietly in the foyer, looking around him at the displays in the windows. A couple of them strike his fancy, very much like the kind of work he would do. Then he steps back through the revolving door, out onto the snowy street.' Frederick's dreams of creating fashionable, window displays (almost like a longed for self-presentation as well), like he did in the Warsaw of his youth, are savagely punctured at the point where he has to confront the grim, icy reality of his collapsed hopes and fantasies in the 'snowy street'. So, in the collection as a whole, the effectiveness of the story's shape (fictional artifice/ symbolic patterning) can deepen the force of the social science argument.

The other key point about the stories is their social range and diversity. In this collection, gay men rub shoulders with heterosexual men, black with white, unemployed, working-class men with other men who are more financially secure with jobs. This social breadth seems to be achieved effortlessly without any forced contrivance. Indeed, it is probably one of the richest, most culturally diverse books that I have read within the men and masculinities' field. There is no empty rhetoric or tokenism here. Instead there is a multiplicity of different experiences and social perspectives with their own biographical variety embedded into the collection.

I was very moved, disturbed and excited by the stories. I was moved by the way Ross Gray makes the hidden, often shamed worlds of men with prostate cancer more visible through the stories. I was also excited by the author's personal and political commitment to reconstructing traditional masculinities and gendered identities. As he says, prostate cancer profoundly disrupts a conventional, masculine biography. Prostate cancer is a 'huge blow to a man's sense of being a man' as well as being a serious health issue. The severe trauma of prostate cancer threatens the stability and bodily coherence of conventional masculine identities. It is this threat that, ironically, often provokes a difficult process of remaking social relations (men trusting and helping other men as well as women); re-embodiment (men becoming more aware of and looking after their own bodies); and provokes a movement towards taking up non-competitive and nonhierarchical masculine identities. As a result, positive well-being for men with prostate cancer is closely tied into these masculinity shifts where, traditionally, homophobic fears of being seen as 'weak' or 'soft' can often block a man's journey towards closer intimacy, friendship and mutual understanding.

In short, then, *Prostate tales* is a courageous book that I can enthusiastically recommend to all *Auto/Biography* readers. It is an exciting but unsettling read. What disturbed me about these stories are the examples of men struggling to keep alive within a dominant culture that squanders men's resources and, ultimately, men's lives. Some men's capacities to share themselves more fully, to live more fully, to love more fully and intimately, even to have longer and more fulfilled lives are all so strictly contained through social/cultural regulation and self-surveillance. As one of the story characters remarks: 'Do men have to be sick or on the brink of death before they wake up to their common humanity?' (p. 47). It is hoped that these stories will play a part in opening up men's silences about the hidden pain and loss in their lives.

## NOTE

1 From The Men's Health Forum 2002: Getting it sorted: a new policy for men's health: The Men's Health Forum. London

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## POSITIVE ABOUT VIRTUALLY EVERYONE

*Living history.* Hillary Rodham Clinton, 2003. London: Headline; ISBN 0 7472 5515 6 cloth, 562 pp., £20.00 cloth.

There is a story of a Native American who was taken to see the ocean. Instead of being awestruck by the majesty of the vast seas as the kindly white guide had intended, it was the vast crowds on the beach at Long Island that astonished him. Surely there could not be so many people in the world. Reading Hillary Clinton's autobiography I feel like that Native American, baffled by quantities of humans. Surely it is not possible to have so many aides, so many teams of cherished helpers, so many good friends, such a gigantic social milieu; simply to know so many people. Three pages of acknowledgements are needed to thank the people who helped her with the book, including three women who each spent two years working closely with her on it. It is hardly surprising that there is not much sense of an individual reflecting and interpreting in the chronicle of events that the reader gets.

Though *Living history* is about world historical events it is a dullish read. With so many people to talk about it is hard to manage penetrating characterization: 'I was excited to see Naina Yeltsin evolve in her role since we'd ... met in Tokyo ... . In 1995 I had helped her secure a donation of nutritional formula Russia needed' (p. 411); two Arkansas friends offer 'personal support as well as helpful perspectives on politics and history' (p. 259); the Hungarian president is a 'heroic figure' (p. 361) and 'my talented domestic policy staff [seven names listed] was invaluable' (p. 383). Rodham Clinton is positive about everyone – well not quite everyone. Kenneth Starr, prosecutor in the impeachment of Bill Clinton, is not in the great circle of friends. She says that of all the world leaders she has met she disliked only two – or rather, dislike is my interpretation as what she actually says is 'only two have acted in ways that I found personally disturbing: Robert Mugabe ... who giggled incessantly and inappropriately ... and the Prime Minister of Slovakia' (p. 361). Rodham