

Bernice and Her Multiple Personalities

Zora O. Young

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Through the 1950s and 1960s, hypnotherapist Dr. Zora O. Young treated a troubled woman named Bernice whom he diagnosed with what he calls “multiple personalities.” *Bernice and Her Multiple Personalities* tracks Young’s experiences with his client’s multiple identities during hypnosis sessions and through letters that the two exchanged.

Some of the letters were written by Bernice’s other identities, known as “alters,” and some were composed by Bernice herself. Some of her identities were benevolent, such as Nancy; some were domineering, such as Anne and the Captain; and others were scared and confused, such as a lonely child named Roxanne and an entity named the “dreamer.” Nancy facilitates communication between herself, Bernice, and Roxanne, while Anne labels Young a threat to all of Bernice’s alters. As Bernice’s therapy continues, the warring alters push Bernice herself into the background. Although the story of Bernice’s treatment comprises the bulk of the book, Young also recounts other cases in which hypnotherapy helped clients, and he concludes the book with reprints of Bernice’s poetry. Today, Bernice’s condition is known as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).

The book has many of the ingredients necessary to produce a fascinating case study: a woman with mental illness as she struggles with her inner demons, and her doctor’s attempt to offer his patient some relief. Unfortunately, several factors prevent the narrative from being fully accessible to a general audience. While the author explains how hypnotherapy can retrain the brain, he does not provide an introduction to the concept of multiple personalities, so the uninitiated must learn about this disorder from within the narrative.

To further complicate matters, spacing problems and inadequate section divisions within the text make it difficult to ascertain where the description of a session ends and related correspondence begins. The undifferentiated blocks of text result in several personalities mentioned in the same paragraph without identification. Frequent use of sentence fragments and improper punctuation add to the confusion. Furthermore, it takes an astute reader to realize that Bernice is being treated in the 1950s and the 1960s. Had this time frame been made clear at the outset, it would explain Young’s use of the outdated term “multiple personalities.” Failure to clearly state the dates of Bernice’s therapy gives the impression that the book would be useful to mental-health practitioners as a current case study, which it is not.

While the inclusion of Bernice’s beautiful, raw poetry offers some insight, it comes too late in the book. Interspersing her poetry throughout the volume would have provided more access to Bernice’s own voice; as is, the presence of the alters overshadows the patient’s suffering for much of the story. *Bernice and Her Multiple Personalities* is recommended only for those with mental-health backgrounds and prior knowledge of DID.

JILL ALLEN (September 5, 2012)

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