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IT'S COMPLICATED

Sarah Boxer

Freud is family, my family. Not literally, but dreamily. I first awakened to Sigmund Freud's presence in my crib. When I was a year old or so, just lying there, my father approached me. I saw him walk toward me from the hallway. He stuck his pointer finger through the bars and said, "Bite!" And I, toothless, did bite. Nothing weird, right? In retrospect, though, this innocent scene seems kind of kinky. Thank you, Sigmund Freud, for warping my very first memory.

On the other hand, thank you, Sigmund Freud, for putting me in a class with Leonardo da Vinci. As I learned much later, Leonardo had a similar remembrance, which he recounted in the *Codex Atlanticus*: "it comes to my mind as a very early memory, when I was still in the cradle, a vulture came down to me, he opened my mouth with his tail and struck me a few times with his tail against my lips." Freud loved this vulture "memory" so much that he wrote a book about it, *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood*, in which he said, Leonardo's "phantasy conceals nothing more or less than a reminiscence of nursing—or being nursed—at the mother's breast," and when Leonardo grew up, his infant vision became "a passive homosexual phantasy."

In the house where I grew up, everything had meaning—unconscious meaning, double meaning, hidden meaning, manifest

meaning, latent meaning. Thanks to Freud, nothing was what it seemed. The finger might well be a phallus or a bird; the mouth, toothless, might be a threatening abyss. Hakuna Matata? Never. Vagina Dentata? Could be.

My dad had a shelf of Freud's writings, which he applied liberally to our daily lives. He labeled his wife's and his daughters' emotional outbursts "hysterical." (They weren't.) We were trained to be on the lookout for unconscious motives. (Always there.) We were schooled in sussing out the latent criticism behind remarks, jokes, even compliments. (We're not paranoid; we're realists!) When I took up rock climbing I was diagnosed with a "death wish." No dream went unanalyzed, no gift horse's mouth went unlooked-in. My childhood was a world of fizz and buzz, toil and trouble. Anyone who didn't see all the stuff churning under the surface of everyday life was a damn fool.

By age sixteen, I began to grapple with Freud's writings. Looking for a topic for an English paper, I ran my finger along my father's Freud shelf as if shopping for clothes on a discount rack. I grazed the paperbacks—*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Moses and Monotheism*, *The Future of an Illusion*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*—finally landing on one, untouched and thin, that pleased my eye and my ear: *The Ego and the Id*. It wasn't really the best choice. I liked the exotic title, but the insides were a scientific mess. At the kitchen table I pored over Freud's incomprehensible diagram of EGO, ID, Repressed, acoust., Pcpt.-Cs., and Pcs., staring at the menagerie of terms, some abbreviated, some in italics, some in ALL CAPS (only crazy people use ALL CAPS!), all linked together by an oval representing a brain.

Then something on the next page caught my eye: Freud noted that the EGO sported a little "cap of hearing," an acoustic helmet, and wore it "awry." How jaunty! At this point Freud plunged into one of his best metaphors: The ego "in its relation to the id . . . is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse. . . . Often a rider, if he is not to be parted

from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own."

I was hooked. Freud's jockey metaphor won me over. I wrote my English paper on *The Ego and the Id*, or, as Bruno Bettelheim later renamed it, *The I and the It*. I had no idea what I was talking about. I got an A because the teacher couldn't understand what I was talking about either.

By the time I went to college, Freud was largely passé, at least at Harvard. The only Freud book I read there, *Three Theories on Sexuality*, was for a course on intellectual history. Meanwhile, the Harvard department of psychology and social relations was, as far as I could tell, populated by sadists. Lurking somewhere in that department was the behaviorist B. F. Skinner, the king of controlled environments, so-called Skinner boxes, where pigeons, rats, and even people were coaxed, by positive and negative reinforcements, to do whatever they were conditioned to do.

I never took a psychology course. It all seemed god-awful. Nonetheless, I came pretty close to being part of that world when I interviewed for a summer job in the Harvard lab of Torsten Wiesel and David Hubel, who were already famous (and soon to be Nobel famous) for their work on the visual processing systems of kittens. Now they were moving on to monkeys. The job I interviewed for was taking care of the monkeys. But when I found out that the new experiment entailed forcing monkeys, heads immobilized, to stare at a visual stimulus for hours on end every day for the rest of their lives, lives that would end with a beheading and an analysis of what all that torture had done to their brains, I bailed. As I left the lab, Wiesel told me that although the monkeys' lives would not be pleasant and would inevitably end with a decapitation, "at least their lives will be a little better if you care for them." Was he guilt-tripping *me*?



I fled psychology, psychiatry, and every associated field. But not forever. I moved to New York and found work as a science journalist. I had roommates. I had boyfriends. I had problems. I needed therapy. So once I finally managed to earn a living wage, with benefits, I went looking for a therapist. I tried many. I rejected many. Finally, one stuck.

He was a Freudian. He told me I'd have to kill a dozen shrinks before finding the right one. I think he was number six or so. He was older than my dad. He walked crookedly, like he was about to fall over. He had a sense of humor, but I worried that he was a crackpot. Once a week I went into his darkened room and lay on a couch and talked. He often steered the conversation to rage. When I looked into his background many years later, I learned that he had a horribly tragic history (captured in the 1984 movie *Bay Boy*). His parents were murdered in their home in 1941 by an anti-Semitic policeman who lived in the building they owned. No wonder my therapist was examining my rage! I'd be examining my rage too if I were him. Which didn't mean that I didn't have any.

Anyway, psychoanalysis was not dead, at least not to me. I resumed my Freud reading (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) and kept a dream journal. Then, in the late 1980s, while enjoying a brief period of unemployment and some severance pay from Time, Inc., I moved to Berkeley and started doodling. I daydreamed and I drew. Maybe I could start a comic strip. I'd always drawn a bunny and he always looked troubled to me. I tried to get him to talk and move. He wouldn't. I placed him in a bar and got him drunk to see whether he'd talk. No. Then, suddenly, a lightbulb! This bunny was totally neurotic. Why not send him to a psychoanalyst? He desperately needed help.



Thus Bunnyman, my neurotic superhero, was born. And he quickly found a quack analyst, a bird, Dr. Sigbird Floyd. In the

mold of Dr. Freud, Dr. Floyd, the bird analyst, was only interested in Bunnyman's psychic life. Although Bunnyman came running to Dr. Floyd because he was being chased by a wolf, Dr. Floyd assured Bunnyman that the wolf was just a fantasy. But then, at the end of the very first episode, just as Bunnyman left the safe haven of Dr. Floyd's office, a wolf walked in the door for his own analysis with Dr. Floyd. It was Mr. Wolfman! This was how my first comic, *In the Floyd Archives: A Psycho-Bestiary*, began.

To research my comic, I dove deep into Freud's case histories. I studied the Wolf Man and Daniel Paul Schreber (who would merge to form some of the details of my bipolar, cross-dressing Wolfman); the Rat Man (who would become my obsessive-compulsive hoarder, Ratma'am); Dora (who would become Lambskin, the fleece that was sometimes worn by the cross-dressing Wolfman); and Little Hans (who would become my Oedipal star, Bunnyman).

By the time my comic really took shape, in the 1990s, I had a new job as an editor at the *New York Times Book Review*. There I was in charge of all books about science, nature, psychology, and psychoanalysis. Dumpster-size containers full of books came in every week. I got to decide which ones would get reviewed and who should review them and then I would edit the reviews. For a few books (*On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* by the child analyst Adam Phillips being one), I did the reviewing myself.

One of my first—and scariest—editing assignments was handling the review of *Final Analysis: The Making and Unmaking of a Freudian Analyst* (1990) by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, who was infamous for his battles with psychoanalysis. In the 1970s, Masson, a charming and dogged Sanskrit scholar who was also a psychoanalyst in training, befriended the founder of the Freud Archives, Kurt Eissler, as well as Freud's daughter Anna Freud, keeper of her father's flame. Shockingly, the two of them handed Masson the keys to the psychoanalytic kingdom in 1980: Masson was named the project director of the Freud Archives and thereby gained access to all of Freud's letters and interviews. Eissler came to regret it, bitterly. When Eissler died in 1999, I wrote

his obituary and quoted what Gwen Davis had written about him in the *Nation*: Eissler was like “old Geppetto, who had carved himself a son, only to discover, to his profound chagrin, that Pinocchio was a naughty boy.”

Once Masson had access, beginning in the early 1980s, to Freud’s letters, he zoomed in on what he considered the most scandalous and amoral turn in Freud’s life—his abandonment of the so-called seduction hypothesis. In 1895, Freud wrote a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess stating his belief that *all* neurosis was caused by child abuse. Then, less than a year later, Freud scaled back his hypothesis, arguing that *some* neuroses might be caused by the *fantasy* that one had been abused. In a 1983 *New Yorker* essay titled “Trouble in the Archives,” the journalist Janet Malcolm described the revision: Freud “never doubted that seductions and rapes and beating of children sometimes do take place,” she wrote, but he “came to believe that many or most of the seductions reported by his patients were ‘wishful fantasies.’”

To orthodox Freudians, this shift away from historical reality toward so-called psychic reality was the very key to psychoanalysis. To Masson it was a horrible abandonment of abused children and a disaster for psychoanalysis. In her *New Yorker* piece, Malcolm quoted Masson’s 1981 address to the Western New England Psychoanalytic Society, in which he damned Freud’s revision: “By shifting the emphasis from a real world of sadness, misery and cruelty to an internal stage on which actors performed invented dramas for an invisible audience of their own creation, Freud began a trend away from the real world that, it seems to me, has come to a dead halt in the present-day sterility of psychoanalysis throughout the world.”

Masson was promptly removed from his throne at the Freud Archives. And then he had a royal tantrum that lasted years. By the time I handled the review of his 1990 book *Final Analysis*, in which he chronicled his own terrible psychoanalysis and his ejection from the Freud Archives, his antitherapy rampage was famous. He had already written two other books against psychoanalysis, *The*

Assault on Truth (1984), detailing his case against Freud, and *Against Therapy* (1988), arguing that “abuse of one form or another is built into the very fabric of psychotherapy.” Most ominously (to me), he had sued the *New Yorker* in 1984 for Janet Malcolm’s reportage about him, which had become, in 1983, a book, *In the Freud Archives*. His case went all the way to the Supreme Court, where he ultimately lost.

Even after I left the *New York Times Book Review* to become an arts and ideas reporter at the *Times*, psychoanalysis remained one of my regular beats. In 1997 I wrote a piece titled “How Oedipus Is Losing his Complex,” and an article on the history of hysteria. In 1998 I wrote about pupaphobia, the fear of puppets, and also covered the heated debate among psychoanalysts about Freud’s abandonment of his seduction hypothesis. By the late 1990s, when the so-called Freud Wars had reached a fever pitch, I was embedded more or less with the Freudian troops. I understood their lingo and seemed to care more than anyone I knew on the *Times* staff about the past and future of psychoanalysis. I felt it was my duty to report honestly about the Freud Wars from the front.

Nonetheless, I had plenty of doubts about Freud and his methods. The comic I was drawing made hay of Freud’s mania for fantasy over reality. I had also modeled the most sinister character in my book, Dr. Fleece, who threatens Lambskin with a fleecing, on Freud’s quackiest friend, Wilhelm Fliess. But, despite my skepticism, I felt no kinship with the anti-Freudians. They struck me as humorless, petty, and mean.

On December 17, 1995, for instance, I reviewed Paul Roazen’s book *How Freud Worked: First-Hand Accounts of Patients*. His main point was that Freud had no boundaries with his patients, which sure seemed true. Among Freud’s analysands were his own daughter, his daughter’s friend, his translator, and his caregiver. As I noted in my review, “He was personable to the point of being

meddlesome and indiscreet, he was more than willing to ask favors of his patients and give them advice, and he vacationed, played cards and spoke unguardedly with his favorites.” But when I, after agreeing with Roazen’s main argument, took issue with his tendentious quotation marks and his questionable logic, finding his book a “minefield of shattered quotes and non sequiturs,” he sent me hate mail. And when a new Italian translation of the book came out he sent me jauntier hate mail.



By the end of the twentieth century, Freud’s attackers seemed to have gained the upper hand in the Freud Wars. At the *New York Review of Books* the critic Frederick Crews often published long essays on Freud’s faults (which he then collected in a 1995 book titled *The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute*). And when, in 1995, the Library of Congress first announced plans for an exhibition on Freud’s legacy, the anti-Freudians, so the rumor went, managed to get the show postponed until a more critical take on Freud could be found.

Three years later, in 1998, when *Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture* finally did open, the Freud bashers seemed to have won some concessions. As I wrote in a 1998 essay for the *Times*, “When Verbal Resists Visual: Freud’s Defense Against Art,” the exhibition’s greatest claim for Freud was merely an irrefutable and obvious point: “Freud, like it or not, has had an extraordinary influence on our culture, from Thurber to Popeye.” Still, a lot of Freud’s bashers were unhappy; they seethed that such a man got to be honored with such a show in such a venue. As the British historian and philosopher John Forrester put it in his 1998 book *Dispatches from the Freud Wars*, Freud’s harshest critics had a “heartfelt wish that Freud might never have been born or, failing to achieve that end, that all his works and influence be made as nothing.”

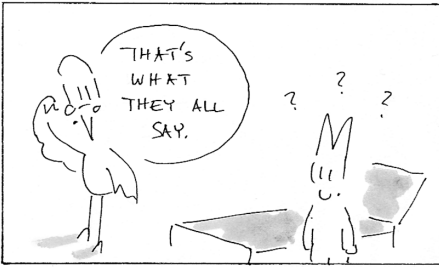
Were the bashers going to get their way? Was the ship of Freud sinking? Were there any lifeboats? Could psychoanalysis be saved?

The Freudians seemed to be on their heels. I wanted to know what would happen. So I gathered all the Freud-bashing books I could find and reviewed them in an essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, “Flogging Freud” (August 10, 1997). My tone was fairly breezy, as if Team Psychoanalysis would sail on no matter what, with a cigar-smoking Freud on its prow: “Freud has proved to be a great whipping boy for our time. He has been blamed for turning children against their parents (Frederick Crews) and for excusing parents who seduce their children (Jeffrey Masson), for being a crypto-biologist (Frank Sulloway) and a crypto-priest (Richard Webster), for believing patients too little (Jeffrey Masson) and too much (Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen), for hiding his faults (Henri Ellenberger) and flaunting them (John Farrell).” But deep down I was worried. Freud wasn’t exactly my personal hero, but he was, after all, family.

At the height of the Freud Wars, I was putting the finishing touches on my spoof of Freud’s case histories, *In the Floyd Archives: A Psycho-Bestiarium* (2001). By this time my main characters were so closely tied to Freud’s famous patients, the Wolf Man, the Rat Man, Dora, Schreber, and Little Hans, that I felt compelled to add some seventy-five endnotes to my comic. And I decided to name my book after *In the Freud Archives*, Malcolm’s book about Masson’s undermining of the Freud Archives. My comic was neither tribute nor hatchet job. It was . . . Freudian. I turned Freud’s ideas on themselves, sometimes making fun of them. In one review, titled “An Analytic Casebook Full of Animal Instincts” (*New York Times*, September 6, 2001), the playwright Jenny Lyn Bader wrote, “If Freud had a bad dream, it would probably be Floyd.” Fair enough.

Freud’s case histories, his most vivid and dramatic material, captivated me, but I knew they were treacherous territory. In the Wolf Man case, Freud totally overreached in claiming to know with certainty what his patient really had seen as an infant and how it affected him. Was the Wolf Man’s dream of wolves silently sitting in a tree really proof that as an infant he saw his parents having sex doggy style? And the infamous Dora case was Freud at his worst.





This was ground zero for “No means yes.” When Dora, a teenager, told Freud that his old friend “Herr K” had tried to seduce her, Freud demurred, saying that her report merely showed her wish to be seduced by Herr K, and by Freud too. Talk about unexamined projection! In dealing with this infuriating and almost absurdly awful material (and, by the way, Herr K later confessed to Dora), I still was awed by Freud’s ability to be both maddeningly literal minded and beautifully metaphorical in almost the same breath, his talent with puns and slips, and his great ease with unconscious life. Sometimes he used his gifts atrociously. But what gifts they were!

I won’t say that the *Floyd Archives* ended the Freud Wars, but I will say that the Freud Wars ended abruptly and dramatically on the day of what was supposed to be my first New York book party for *Floyd*, originally scheduled for September 11, 2001. (Needless to say, the party was canceled.) On that day, the Freud Wars came to a screeching halt. Freud was worse than dead; he was totally beside the point. Who cared about psychological reality when actual reality—airliners used as weapons, collapsing towers, three thousand dead, a smoke-filled city, the threat of future terrorism—was so clearly present?

However, not everyone got the memo. To some people, or at least those who attended my book talks, Freud still mattered. At one of my talks for *In the Floyd Archives*, a few audience members voiced outrage that I was using Freud’s ideas at all. Someone asked: If Freud has been discredited, why would you spend so much time on him? Another asked: If Freud hated women so much, why would you, a woman, pay him any mind? I was on the defensive. I imagine I said something unwitty about Freud’s wit.

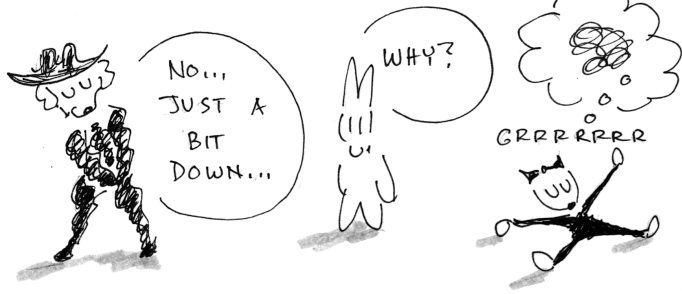
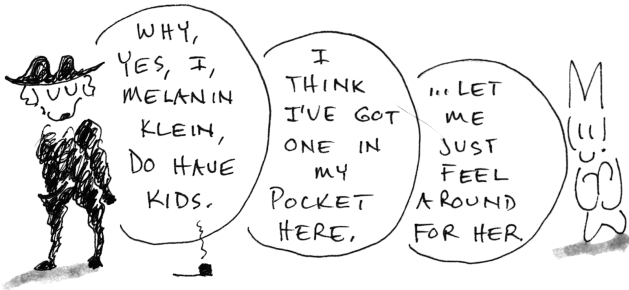
Closer to home, I faced opposite challenges. From Freudians and psychoanalytically inclined persons, including some from my family, came questions about the critical tone of *In the Floyd Archives*. Why do you mock Freud? At a meeting of the Ameri-

can Psychoanalytic Association, I had a little friendly back-and-forth with Harold Blum, who had become the executive director of the Freud Archives in 1986, after Masson was fired from that post. In a conversation called “Dr. Freud and Dr. Floyd” Blum and I compared what was in the Freud Archives with what was in the *Floyd Archives*. Apparently I was still welcome among the psychoanalysts, but I could tell that my audience, battered and bruised by the Freud Wars and September 11, was in no mood for Freudian fun and games. Everyone with a psychoanalytic bent wanted to know what my real attitude toward Freud was. Once again, I was on the defensive. If I recall correctly, my answers boiled down to one rhetorical question: Wasn't I honoring Freud by engaging him, playing with him, fighting him on the very playground that he himself built? I'm not sure anyone bought it.

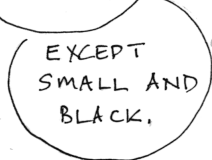
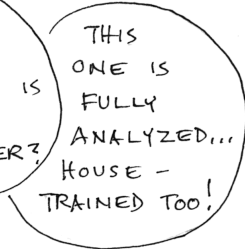
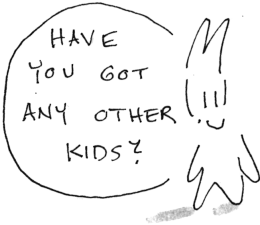


Several years later, I wrote and drew a sequel to the *Floyd Archives*, titled *Mother May I? A Post-Floydian Folly*. There I played with some of the wild ideas that Freud formulated at the end of his life—the father-fearing, father-killing, father-worshipping foundations of civilization as he outlined them in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*—as well as some of the mother-centric ideas of the post-Freudians, namely the breast-obsessed object relations theory of Melanie Klein and the play therapy of Donald Winnicott. My new comic turned out to be a much broader comedy than the *Floyd Archives*. So when International Psychoanalytic Books wanted to publish *Mother May I?* (along with a new edition of *Floyd*) I was both pleased and surprised.

In *Mother May I?* I was as tough on late Freud and the post-Freudians as I had been on early Freud in my first book. By turning Melanie Klein, the great analyst of rage and envy, into an intrusive and bossy little sheep named Melanin Klein (which means “Little Black”), I literally belittled her. And if that weren't









enough, I gave Klein, the prime theorist of the infant-mother bond, three disturbed animal children: Melittle Klein, a kitten who hates her mother with a passion (true to life); Little Hans (aka Hans Klein), a happy but violent little bunny named for one of Freud's sweetest cases; and Squiggle Piggie, an indignant pig who speaks only when someone pulls his tail. (I modeled him after the so-called Squiggle Game that the child analyst Winnicott used to play with his patients.)

In 2019 I gave a slide talk at 192 Books in New York titled "How to Psychoanalyze a Bunny." (The title of my talk was a nod to a short documentary about the artist Ray Johnson, *How to Draw a Bunny*.) There I presented the brief and sometimes tragic true life stories behind each of the characters I drew in *Mother May I?* After my talk one die-hard Freudian I knew asked: "Why are you so hard on Freud?" And I responded: "Why are you so easy on him?" He never spoke to me again.

I do not hate Freud. I grew up with him. Sure, he had deep faults, which are especially evident in his case histories, the works I drew on most. But there is so much brilliance in his leaping logic. When Freud, whose study was cluttered with antiquities, was once struggling to get his favorite patient, the obsessive-compulsive Rat Man, to open up, to unearth his real thoughts, he told the Rat Man that if he kept all his disturbing unconscious thoughts to himself, buried, he would actually be preserving them, keeping them alive and powerful, just as antiquities are protected from air, hands, accidents, and soot as long as they are left buried underground. It is a beautiful, deep, and complicated metaphor that I think of often. Without Freud, it would not exist.

Without Freud: No Freudian slips. No Oedipus complex. No latent content. No repression. No wish fulfillment. No death drive. No unconscious life. No ego. No id. As I think now on my long engagement with Freud, back to the crib, I keep returning to Freud's words and metaphors. It is magical stuff. The world would be worse without it. I do not hate Freud. Nor do I worship him. I am conflicted, which is a feeling from Freud, who defined the psyche as a

field of conflicts. My ambivalence is Freudian. Which is not to say, as Freud might, that my resistance to Freud is a defense against my attraction to him. My “no” is not a “yes.” Nor is my “yes” a “no.” Rather I would say that after all the love and war, Freud is still the air we breathe, the language we speak, and the finger we bite.

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