

*Human Traces* by Sebastian Faulks (Random House) R160

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Readers of Faulks's best-selling novels *Birdsong* and *Charlotte Gray* will not be surprised to find that his latest novel is once again a meticulously researched recreation of a distant time, indeed, once again the turn of the twentieth century in England and France. But whereas his earlier books dealt more specifically with the First World War, *Human Traces* appropriates a slightly larger chunk of history: 1876 to the early 1920s, to be exact. This span does of course include the Great War, but the war itself occupies a relatively minor part of the story. Faulks's subject this time is the early history of psychology, broadening out, as we are repeatedly told in the novel, into a consideration of what it means to be human.

*Human Traces*, then, is an ambitious book, and, at more than 600 pages, a hefty one. Faulks's method is to invent his central characters, but to place them in a historically accurate context, interacting with "real" people. This is of course by now a familiar technique – Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, for instance, makes brilliant use of it – and can present a problem only to the most literal-minded reader. But for the technique to work, the fictional part must be buoyant enough to float all that ballast of scholarship. And *Human Traces*, alas, all but sinks under the weight of its own erudition. Faulks structures his tale upon the parallel careers of Jacques Rebière and Thomas Midwinter, one French, one English, both sixteen at the start of the story. Meeting by chance in a French seaside resort, they discover that they both cherish an ideal to discover, as Thomas calls it in his halting French "The way in which functions the mind of the human." Jacques is driven by an ambition to cure his elder brother Olivier, suffering from an as-yet nameless mental disorder known today as schizophrenia, and the two boys swear allegiance to each other and the cause.

The two young men both qualify as "mad-doctors" and after a spell in asylums in England and France respectively, open a clinic in the Austrian mountains. Their common aims are achieved with unrealistic and indeed un-novelistic ease: an idyllically-situated schloss just happens to be available, and money for the refurbishment seems to be theirs for the asking. Two young women whom Thomas rescued from the asylum in England join them to help in the running of the establishment, and for a while one expects Julie Andrews to appear over an alp singing *Climb Every Mountain*.

But the more successful the clinic is, the more apparent it becomes that Thomas and Jacques are following different routes to their common goal: Thomas remains faithful to the neurologically-based empirical approach, whereas Jacques is attracted to what would seem to be an early form of psycho-analysis.

The difference between them reaches a point of conflict when Jacques diagnoses a young woman as suffering from sexual repression and treats her accordingly; Thomas diagnoses ovarian cysts, rushes her off to hospital, and saves her life. He also marries her, in one of the remarkably trouble-free courtships that characterise the novel, thus installing Jacques' humiliating mistake as a permanent feature in the ménage.

Paraphrased like this, the story seems more banal than it is; but it also seems more dynamic than it is. Spread out over six hundred pages it wears very thin; Faulks's interest is not really in his story as much as in his enquiry into the origins of human

consciousness. We are twice given, verbatim, a twenty-page lecture on the subject, first by Jacques and then by Thomas; and an after-dinner chat can, at the drop of an allusion, turn into an extemporised disquisition on the subject. In particular, we have Thomas's frequently reiterated belief that insanity is the price we pay for being human: differently put, that that part of the brain that is responsible for mental disturbance is also the part that distinguishes us from the animals. The "voices" that mentally disturbed people hear, Thomas argues, in earlier times, were accepted as the voice of the gods or God; having lost our gods, we have no place for those who believe they are in touch with them. This is a bald summary of an extensively researched and in itself gripping enough debate. But it remains a debate, and the characters remain puppets, albeit extremely talkative puppets, imagined from the outside, in terms of their places in the debate. The two women, Sonia and Kitty, are virtually interchangeable in their stoic, indeed saint-like, devotion to their husbands and children; the two men, for all their professional differences, are both types of the dedicated scientist who stops working only to make love. The pathos of their situation – dedicating their lives to a doomed quest for a cure that still does not exist – never really comes off the page: they don't engage the reader, and possibly not the author, at that level.

As an imaginative treatise on human consciousness and its relation to mental disease *Human Traces* is challenging, even provocative. Its manifest contempt for Freud, for instance, whose name is rather oddly never mentioned, will raise hackles or cheers, depending on the allegiance of the reader. But as novel, it is both sprawling and thin, containing – dare one say it? – far too few human traces.