

## Book

### In the novelist's chair

Sebastian Faulks once told an interviewer that in a different life he would have liked to be a psychiatrist. Certainly, he has not neglected psychiatry in his novels. *Human Traces* used factual and fictional characters to tell the story of psychiatry at the end of the 19th century, while *Enderby*, a darker tale, centred on the mental world of a psychopath. Now in *Where My Heart Used to Beat*, Faulks has returned not only to psychiatry, but also to his favourite themes of war, love, philosophy, history, consciousness, and France.

His principal character to take us on this journey is Dr Robert Hendricks, an English psychiatrist towards the end of his career, who we first meet at a conference in New York, where he has an unsatisfactory encounter with a sex worker and has to leave in a hurry. Back in London, he receives a letter from the enigmatic Dr Alexander Pereira, an elderly French neurologist-turned-psychiatrist, who invites Hendricks to his house on a small island off the coast at Toulon. Pereira entices him by saying he has information about Hendricks' father, who was killed in World War 1 when Hendricks was still a baby.

Pereira is terminally ill, and wishes Hendricks to become his literary executor. But first he persuades the British psychiatrist to reveal something of his background, which allows Faulks to take up his narrative of the history of psychiatry much where *Human Traces* left it, and likewise to extend his depiction of the horrors of 20th-century warfare from World War 1, where he left it in *Birdsong*, to World War 2. Hendricks had served as an officer for the still controversial 1944 landings at Anzio, the account of which forms the best part of the novel. Sadly, Faulks resists his previous temptation of blending real and fictional characters, so we get no glimpses of Major Denis Healey on the beaches, or Eric Waters, killed at Anzio, but the father of Roger Waters of

Pink Floyd fame and the subject of their bitter song, *When the Tigers Broke Free*.

Faulks' passages on Anzio are powerful, as is his description of how Hendricks gradually comes to see his time at war as the most successful part of his life. It is the only time that he was truly in love, with an Italian girl he meets at a party, but who mysteriously disappears. In late middle age he realises that the relationships he made at Anzio would be the strongest of his life—and that he would never recreate the intense feelings he experienced then. As Herbert Spiegel, a US Army military psychiatrist, wrote in 1944, "men fight for love".

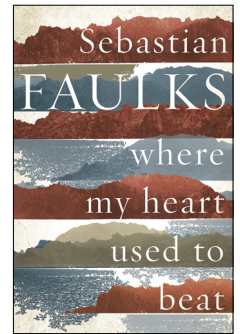
**"...in *Where My Heart Used to Beat*, Faulks has returned not only to psychiatry, but also to his favourite themes of war, love, philosophy, history, consciousness, and France"**

Hendricks' war finishes at Anzio, although we are not sure why. He returns to civilian life, completes his medical training, and becomes a psychiatrist. But his feelings about his chosen profession remain ambivalent. When asked by strangers about his occupation, he is more likely to tell people he is a general practitioner. Hendricks spends time working in an asylum, "a warehouse for those whose illness had defeated medicine". In *Human Traces* Faulks gave the early voice of Freud to his fictional psychiatrist, and in this novel Hendricks starts to channel the young R D Laing as he talks at length to a patient with psychosis, and starts to wonder if perhaps madness is not as incomprehensible as he had been taught. He leaves the asylum, where "the only thing that had changed in 100 years is that the spirit of hope had died". Now Hendricks becomes the full R D Laing: he helps found a therapeutic community in Bristol, "The Biscuit Factory", where staff and patients live on equal terms.

He writes a book that he describes to Pereira as "anti-psychiatry", although as the narrator describes the content of the book it seems anything but. Perhaps Faulks' affection for psychiatry prevents him from giving the full flavour of texts by Thomas Szasz and Laing in the 1960s.

Hendricks will eventually repudiate his anti-psychiatry book, saying that he "lied about the extent to which madness is biological. I couldn't face it". Faulks toys with a possible "third way" between a psychiatry of mind and one of body, but fails, although he is by no means alone in that. And so Pereira's archive reveals that he once tried to find a biological basis for psychoanalysis, but was unable to pursue this, not least because he "had to leave out the neuroscience for a first year audience". So we are spared something that can all too easily become cannon fodder for the wonderful *NeuroBollocks* blog. Instead, Hendricks seems to accept that perhaps it is best to cultivate our gardens, because psychiatry cannot progress until the time when "scientists far cleverer than you or I have picked apart the genetic factors, isolated them and found a response", but until then all psychiatry has to offer is to listen with respect to our patients, and to hear what they say. No contemporary psychiatrist would disagree with those injunctions, but that is the beginning of what psychiatry does, not the end.

Faulks' fascination with the history of psychiatry then shifts back to Pereira's early years. He also once wrote a book, called *La Conspiration de la Serre*. Here Faulks uses a favourite device, giving a character credit for the work of a real psychiatrist—Julius Wagner-Jauregg who won the 1927 Nobel Prize for the use of malaria inoculation to treat neurosyphilis. Pereira takes this work one stage further and induces malaria to treat psychosis. Once again, Faulks benefits from hindsight, since one assumes this episode is resurrected because of recent findings on possible



**Where My Heart Used to Beat**  
Sebastian Faulks. Hutchinson/  
Random House, 2015.  
Pp 336. £20.00.  
ISBN 0091936837

links between immunity, inflammation, and mental illness. He also indulges in some word play—Hendricks translates Periera’s title as “The Conspiracy of the Glasshouse”, preferring glass house to the more usual greenhouse. Glasshouse is slang for a military prison, and Serre is a Somme battlefield.

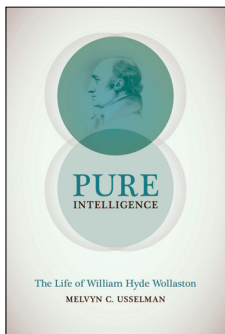
Hendricks embarks on a sentimental journey to tie up the loose ends of his life. His old Commanding Officer reveals that Hendricks’ war had ended because he had “lost it” leading a reckless infantry assault—a classic case of “battle fatigue”. This rings true—it was about the same time that the first recognisably modern studies of combat breakdown were revealing that after about 100 days of continuous infantry fighting or combat flying, most units were combat ineffective due to psychiatric breakdown. Another mysterious

contact, this time via a phone call, puts him briefly in touch with his lost 1944 love and another plot line is resolved.

But the final piece of the jigsaw of Hendricks’ unsatisfactory life comes after Pereira’s death. Hendricks becomes his literary executor. Faulks slips in another tease, since one of Hendricks’ first acts is to republish the older man’s ironically forgotten neurological case history entitled “Alphonse Esteve: the Man Who Forgot Himself”, which now becomes a successful book in the “wake of a new interest in popular anecdotal neurology”. As Hendricks has previously revealed his suspicion of anecdotes one wonders if this is a joke at the expense of the late Oliver Sacks. But more seriously, Pereira has bequeathed his account of how Hendricks’ father really met his end—disappointingly, it’s a path well worn in Great War drama.

*Where My Heart Used to Beat* is a big novel. Psychiatry becomes the hook that Faulks uses to tackle the real theme of the book. The 20th century was a catastrophe from start to finish. The Renaissance and Enlightenment were all for nothing, since as Hendricks says “it was the twentieth century that demonstrates that individual life is without intrinsic value”. Hendricks, like most contemporary psychiatrists, believes that dreams are not what they used to be, but as the narrative reaches its multiple resolutions, he has a dream that would serve as the abstract for the novel: “I won’t recount the dream that I had that night, except to say that it was about sex and war, death and peace...I dreamt of a century less insane”.

Simon Wessely  
Simon.wessely@kcl.ac.uk



**Pure Intelligence: The Life of William Hyde Wollaston**  
Melvyn C Usselman. University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp 413. £24.50. ISBN 978 0 226 24573 7

## In brief

### Book **Physician turned physicist**

In the first quarter of the 19th century, the natural philosophers Humphry Davy, Thomas Young, and William Hyde Wollaston dominated science in the UK. Strangely, all three died in 1828–29. But whereas Davy and Young are remembered, Wollaston is largely forgotten; a biography by a friend fizzled out in the 1850s, and his manuscripts disappeared until 1949. Yet, as *The Lancet* stated in 1888: “although [Wollaston] later on abandoned the practice of the healing art for physical research, his genius and his achievements must ever remain prized and treasured ornaments of the profession”.

Wollaston is most notable in physics and chemistry, including his discovery of palladium and rhodium. That said, his medical research was far from negligible and receives detailed discussion by Melvyn Usselman in *Pure Intelligence*. Sadly, Usselman died

shortly before the book’s publication. Happily, besides being the first major biography of Wollaston, it is a definitive study.

In 1797, Wollaston’s first scientific paper “On gouty and urinary concretions” applied his talent for chemical analysis to the nature of urinary stones (calculi) and gouty deposits. In 1810, he returned to the subject, analysed the substance in a bladder stone, and named it cystic oxide. Although the name was changed to cystine in 1833, Wollaston’s discovery of the amino acid was confirmed by 20th-century techniques applied to the same stone kept at Guy’s Hospital in London. Moreover, after analysing the dung of geese fed entirely on grass and the urine of gannets fed entirely on fish and noting the urine’s high uric acid content, Wollaston argued against the then-current treatment of sufferers from stones and gout with

a diet high in fish: another insight confirmed by modern medicine. Other experiments—done on himself and others—showed that muscles contract in a series of short sequential contractions instead of a long, continual one; and a wide variability in an individual’s capability to hear high-pitched sounds, along with a general loss of high-frequency hearing with age.

Wollaston numbers among science’s most innovative experimenters. So why is he not better known? The main reason, Usselman concludes, is that he “lacked the one attribute that scientists and historians value above all in their pantheon of heroes. He refused to advance theories without overwhelming experimental justification”. Unlike the leading physicians of his day, Wollaston was too cautious for the good of his reputation

Andrew Robinson