

The Dream Collector Review—Book One Review

The Historical Fiction Company

"The Dream Collector" by R.W. Meek is an extraordinarily long novel: It is also an extraordinarily gifted piece of work and a true delight to read. As a word of caution, to drift or to momentarily experience a lapse of attention is to run the risk of missing the beauty of a precious description of a moment, a sensation or the indication of an acutely observed aspect of a place, a person's personality, or appearance or attitude. There is a warning to pay attention and to be aware of casual skimming from the estimable figure of the woman seemingly named Julie Forette, a truly remarkable young woman around whom much of the action and the remarkable figures of Paris in the late nineteenth century revolve like fireflies. Julie is a highly intelligent young woman, daughter of a Polish father and an Irish mother, and much of the means by which she displays and deploys this is by her omnivorous acquisition of knowledge stemming from her father's massive library of her girlhood:

"Father facilitated our [she and her sister whom she affectionately terms 'bijou'] education by teaching us a method of rapid reading. We learned to scan pages quickly, extracting their inherent ideas from first and last sentences, paragraphs.....For what use are words, father asked, if they do not serve an idea? Read aggressively, he advised....But the goal, father said, was to reach the heart of the idea, the core, the philosophical construct latent in the text. All the little words, 'tout les petits mots', will either awkwardly collide or eloquently dance to a theme."

A salutary lesson, then, to the casual reader flicking through the pages inattentively. For readers of this occasionally difficult to penetrate book, patience will certainly reap a truly rich reward!

Julie, a connoisseur and collector of other peoples' dreams and with a penchant for Egyptology and hieroglyphics, starved for art and with much more to her besides, she leaves provincial Marseilles, the city of her birth, with her bag packed and an agile mind brimming over with her many talents and energies and sets off for Paris, the Capital - 'The City of Light'. She has a specific mission of mercy and compassion and has in her sights the august and celebrated figure of Doctor Jean- Martin Charcot; the eminent and foremost neurologist of the age and the darling of the hospital theatres and lecture halls the same man who will lure young Sigmund Freud, already with a cocaine habit, from Vienna to enter his orbit like a moth to the flame. This Charcot is the man young Julie seeks to impress with her skill as a stenographer and her own system of shorthand based partly on hieroglyphics. This is the Paris of the year 1886 and the symbol of all that is best and finest and most glittering of 'La Belle Epoque': The time of the French Third Republic, a period of an extraordinary flowering of optimism and economic prosperity, of huge technological, scientific and cultural innovations and, especially, a veritable explosion of artistic and painterly talent. In the more than capable hands of R.W. Meek, the teeming metropolis of Paris and its crowded population of over a million souls is transformed into something akin to a village as, one by one, the truly significant people of the Paris of the time, intellectuals, writers and especially the painters, appear on the page. They interact around each other and stand revealed, their psychological and physical properties, their thoughts and emotions clearly etched. Here is an early physical description of the sixty-one-year-old Maestro, Charcot, as he strides majestically, his cape flowing, sweeping dramatically onto the stage of a packed auditorium for one of his celebrated lectures, this time on the subject of 'hysteria' cured by hypnosis. It will prove to be a breathtaking demonstration:

"The doctor's hair was dark, silver-streaked, and fell long behind his ears. He was plump, well fed and surprisingly short. Yet what the newspapers said was true, he bore an uncanny resemblance to Napoleon, possessing the same brooding brow, the same aquiline nose, and in his bearing something inherently regal."

The lion like and magisterial figure of the Maestro Doctor strides, uncontradicted and infallible, through his personal palace of the Hospital of Salpêtrière; a place that is in essence a city within a city, with its own huge population of staff and inmates [700 nurses, 85 doctors, over 50 interns and 5000 patients], all united in a fervent reverence for the figure and person of Doctor Jean-Martin Charcot. This reverence extends beyond the borders of the hospital. Invitations to the soirees and dinner parties of the Doctor in his castle like mansion are jealously sought after and the cream of society, of science and literature, compete and gather for the luxurious banquets and to soak up all the wisdom whilst his beloved pet monkey rampages across the dinner table. All of this the extraordinary Mlle Forette observes and notes, having become a trusted aide and almost personal chattel of the Doctor and a friend and confidante of his daughter Jeanne. She has plenty of time and opportunity to observe and note in her role of Charcot's constant and always accurate scribe whilst the others of his highly sycophantic staff **"had no greater ambition than to find a tell tale sign for a neurological disease and have it named in their honour"** - for Charcot with his spectacular displays of staged pyrotechnics and skillful lighting is, first and foremost, a showman Doctor of the mind; one existing in his own hermetically sealed vacuum and utterly impervious to outside advances in medicine. **"The renowned Professor of Neurology was not to be persuaded by an idea not his own."**

Meek never fails to stun and impress with his evocation of scenes and events, of sights and dialogue, and of peoples' reactions to them. Here is Julie as she accompanies Charcot and his latest team of open mouthed and reverential interns [including Freud] as he conducts them on a tour of his hospital wards, never failing to produce a medical bang and whistle for the benefit of his admirers. This particular journey is something not out of place in Dante's 'Inferno'. Charcot describes it as **"a vast emporium of human suffering."** First they enter into a world of white fog and steam and the screams of patients: **"a frightful cacophony of shrieks and protests which would chill the bravest heart."** This is the 'HydroTherapy Department', where a hundred naked women are being subjected to various forms of 'water treatment.' **The doctor took in the pandemonium of women splashing, shouting and desperately writhing in the hundred tubs with an air of benign acceptance."** They enter another large ward, even more bizarre and surreal than the hydro-Therapy Unit'. The doctor bids his audience to look up. **"How difficult to comprehend the aerial spectacle above! We waited, anxious for a scientific explanation as to why men, still in their frock coats, and women, attired in fashionable dresses, were suspended in midair? Why did they hang, entrapped in head harness, gently swinging like pendulums? Charcot rescued us from our incredulity."** These, he informs them, are outpatients; rich men and women contributing large sums of money to the hospital and in return undergoing a 'new therapeutic modality' to assist their various neuralgias. The scene reminds Julie of something from her childhood when she, a daughter of a laundress, made deliveries of laundry. **"I regularly passed the open shed of Marseilles' abattoir, where the carcasses hung like this, and sometimes swayed."** The scene in the next ward, the 'Department of Electro-Therapy' is perhaps the most nightmarish of all. In this room an elderly man shuffles towards the group, he is struggling with severe palsy. Freud mouths to Julie 'Parkinson's disease' and she nods in agreement. The man is guided to a strange looking chair with a rod attached to a metal helmet. **"Cure me," the patient whimpered to the one person he recognized, Doctor Charcot."**

The Doctor answers him. **"Dear friend, I am not God, but I will do what I can."** The man is attached to the chair and the purpose and reason is explained. It is an electrically operated chair designed to assist. It is a vibrating chair and once the current is turned on both the chair and the patient begins to "migrate haphazardly" across the floor. More electricity increases the violence. As the man is released, the Doctor accurately mimics the walk of a person with Parkinson's disease. Is there no end to this man's talent? **"The Parkinson man, released, said "Blessed Sir, I am cured!"....."Am I cured, sir?" he asked. Charcot smiled his sympathy. "Not quite, old friend; perhaps some fine day..."** It is perhaps worthy of note to mention at this point that Charcot delights in his free Tuesdays off and when he takes great pleasure in visiting the Zoo and riding his favourite elephant. Perhaps this brings the man a measure of comfort and respite from the truly poisonous and seemingly deranged hate mail that arrives with a predictable frequency.

Much of 'The Dream Collector' is focused upon Julie and her increasing antipathy to the Doctor and his beliefs and, sensing a kindred soul and spirit, she develops a firm friendship with the young intern, Sigmund Freud. He is sponsored by an American pharmaceutical Company to investigate the effects and possible medical uses of cocaine, to which end they have provisioned him with seemingly copious supplies. Together they enjoy and share many bouts of cocaine use together; in the course of which they share their mind-expanding thoughts and discoveries together. Here is an account of Julie's first experience of the effects of the drug:

"Ever so slowly, a pleasant feeling of mild heat began to pervade my entire body. A smile came to my lips. for in equal measure I felt relief, contentment, and strength.....I closed my eyes, certain that I approached, unimpeded, the shores of bliss, at first content to warmly sail to the region, and then able to thrillingly soar!".....

Whilst remaining a firm disciple of the good Doctor, Freud is also a firm believer in the therapeutic benefits of hypnosis and in this Julie, the 'dream collector' actively encourages him in his early journeys to a destiny which will make him famous for all of time. She believes in the use of hypno-therapy for her own secret reasons. Julie is also passionately devoted to art and the artists who create it and Paris in the year 1886 is of course the ideal location for a sensitive young woman whose only prior experience of art was the lurid 'Sacred Heart' made of iron that her devout Irish mother nailed above their beds when she and her beloved sister were little. As in all other things, her passion for art is all consuming! As is her passion for the dreams of others, for, though a frequent sleepwalker, she finds herself poor at recollecting her own dreams.

Quite early on in her relationship with Doctor Charcot and his arts and crafts loving wife, Julie has impressed both them and their intelligent and sensible daughter Jeanne, with her burgeoning knowledge of art and her keen eye. Charcot, himself a collector, has appointed her as a sort of talent scout for good art, though she believes him to be somewhat philistine in his preferences. Julie has been a sleepwalker since childhood but is very frustrated at her ability to recall her dreams - hence her fascination with the dreams of others! At this juncture Julie has a dream that she does remember. In the dream, two nuns, a mother and daughter, come to tell her that her sister had died, but that if she hurries to the Church of St Michael the Archangel, she will be able to see her sister before burial. The two nuns are there, with a man who they swear on their Holy medals is Jesus Christ. He has a very unlikely appearance for the Son of God, dressed as he is like "a conservative Parisian notary", thick hair parted in the middle and spectacles. He explains that he needs the spectacles for all the reading he does

on scientific matters such as hypnotism. He then raises her sister from the dead and Julie awakes. This very 'Freudian' dream has doubtless been provoked by a lengthy and intense discussion with the Charcot family and in particular a discussion regarding a painting of Lazarus in his shroud by the Italian painter Mantegna. This is perhaps the first intimation to the reader that all is far from well with Julie's sister and of Julie's actual motives and her fears for her.

Love of Art is what leads her into what is truly a consuming obsession with the art and person of Paul Cezanne, first sparked by a chance glimpse of a still life of fruit in the window of an artists' paint maker. She is transfixed by the sight:

"The still life would not let me leave. A bowl of fruit, 'c'est tout', nothing more than oranges, lemons and apples, but so solidly painted as to seem imperishable. The fruit, piled in a ceramic bowl, rested upon a precariously tilted table and appeared to roll riotously from out of the canvas, yet everything on the tilted table somehow remained locked into place.....there was no blur of motion, no dissolvment of form, no bravura flurry of brush strokes, yet the 'facture', the brush strokes enthralled me more. I ransacked my mind, searching for the word to convey how the artist used his brush. 'Construction, he constructs', I decided."

Here, as in so many other passages, R.H. Meek reveals both his deep knowledge and his equally deep love of the subject. Julie's new friend Tanguy, the owner of the paint shop and whose wife constantly nags him, describes the 'Impressionists' thus: They are 'the vanguard soldiers' of the new art, he tells her. They are 'of the people'.

"They set their easels wherever necessary, in humble village markets, atop hotel balconies, down in railway stations, everywhere to catch the hubbub of modern life....they are dedicated to depicting real folk who must earn their bread and butter, our working citizenry who sometimes gain a few hours of pleasure in the Sunday parks and outdoor cafes."

It is easy to see, therefore, why Julie comes to dislike the portentous and ponderous art preferences of Dr Jean Martin Charcot. He is especially proud of his possession of the painting 'A clinical lecture by Dr. Charcot at the Salpêtrière' by the artist Andre Broullet. He is especially proud of this as he himself figures prominently in it and the reader is strongly recommended to view it as it also contains an image of a woman who becomes crucial to the whole book. This is the extraordinary figure of Mlle. Sabrine, an extraordinary creature who seems to run the whole spectrum, the entire repertoire of 'hysteroepilepsy' and whom the Doctor delights [his prize exhibit of whom, like his monkey, he is fiercely proud] in displaying for the edification and delight of his many admirers and students.

From this "damascan" moment, arrested at the sight of the painting in the shop window, Julie becomes an obsessive stalker of the shy and introspective Provencal painter through the backstreets of Montmartre. She seeks for example of his art everywhere [making the acquaintance in the process of the writer Zola, a childhood friend of the painter and who she comes to detest for, amongst other things, his betrayal of Cezanne in his latest book. Zola, in fact, agrees to act as intermediary between the two, a passer on of their correspondence for Cezanne becomes as obsessed with her and her modelling sessions for him as she is with him]. It is as a result of her association with Cezanne that, directly and indirectly, she becomes involved with a glittering galaxy of all the painterly greats of the epoch, a veritable 'who's who' of personages. The impoverished 'Father' Pissarro and his quest for a further exhibition and resurrection of the Impressionists and a man to whom Julie forms a deep attachment.

Claude Monet and the lascivious Pierre-August Renoir, spurning Paris in their idyllic retreat, the ostensibly irascible but inwardly soft Edgar Degas and the haunted tramp like figure of Vincent Van Gogh whose raging toothache Julie cures on a night train to Paris. And there is Paul Gauguin a man who, like Lord Byron, is 'mad, bad and dangerous to know and with whom Julie embarks on an extended sexual adventure, full of passion, but containing no love. **"I was beginning to fear that each sexual encounter might be our last! I wanted us to tear off each other's clothes, grapple in lust on the floor and take each other fiercely....."**

A strong aura of eroticism, in fact, clings to all of these highly individualistic men in Julie's dealings with them and the reader is recommended to cross reference the many references to specific works of art in the book. They cast a strong light upon the narrative. Here is Julie, a true 'dream collector' with her 'Eye of Ra' pendant in which different people see different things, Van Gogh, for example, sees starlight. She even 'collects' a very revealing dream that Freud himself has. She cures a momentarily struck blind Monet in a thunderstorm through hypnosis. She 'steals' a dream that has been plaguing Cezanne and she and Freud spend a great deal of cocaine fueled moments in analyzing it as Freud moves slowly, one might say ponderously, towards a fuller understanding of the benefits of hypnosis. Ever adventurous and compassionate, she brings restful sleep to a pain ridden Van Gogh and, in an especially moving moment, to Gauguin's young son in a smallpox fever after burgling his house in search of missing Cezanne canvasses. Her quest for items of Cezanne's art even brings her to drug Zola in her search of these and to enter the hidden domain of Edgar Degas. She becomes fearless in her quest for knowledge and truth.

At the Hospital, things are escalating Julie's frustration. Both she and the Doctor's daughter Jeanne are becoming increasingly protective of the woman Sabine. Freud too, in his increasing belief in the beneficial properties of Hypnotism, is equally concerned as Charcot's measures and his proposals for the cure of the poor woman grow more outlandish and cruel. This comes to a head with Charcot's invention of a type of corset he names an 'Ovarian Compressor', which does precisely what the name implies. Freud's time at the Hospital and Paris is fast running out. He arranges for a final farewell to his mentor and a list of suggestions for the future treatment of Sabine. This takes place in the Doctor's Library, in which Julie has secreted herself to observe. Sabine has increasingly become a medical battlefield over which he and Charcot skirmish. This now becomes a full-blown battle. Charcot reveals his utter contempt for the theories and suggestions of Freud, or indeed any other. He causes Sabine to appear like some special guest and subjects her to a horrifying experience under hypnosis which is more of a religious exorcism than a medical procedure before announcing his decision to make a surgical intervention, an "oophorectomy" - the medical removal of her ovaries. It is at this moment that Julie Forette makes a dramatic intervention, revealing her true self and her true purposes and everything is changed forever.

"The Dream Collector" by R.W. Meek is an extraordinary book and achievement and it has been this reviewer's honour and privilege to read it! This book is deserving of recognition and success and is very highly recommended.

"The Dream Collector" by R. W. Meek receives five stars and the "Highly Recommended" award of excellence from the Historical Fiction Company.