Human Traces
Sebastian Faulks

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH
Sebastian Faulks is a well-known author, but this was the first time I have read any of his work and I came across it purely by accident as it was one of my mother’s books. However, I found this book to be a fascinating and insightful read, giving me much to reflect on in terms of modern-day psychiatry. The book is set in the late 1800s—early 1900s and follows the path of two psychiatrists, Thomas and Jacques, from their training through to the development of their career, and ultimately their decline.

Jacques has a schizophrenic brother and at the beginning of the book you see him caring for this brother, who is forced to stay out of the main house and is ultimately admitted to an asylum. This leads Jacques to become a psychiatrist as he wants to be able to give his brother a better life. At the same time, he meets Thomas, who is more fascinated by the mind, and they agree that once they have finished their studies they would join together and develop a clinic.

Thomas works initially in an asylum in England as a medical officer, describing well the conditions of the time. The two of them then set up a clinic where they are able to explore mental illness in the context of the time as well as the psychiatric theories of the day.

Apart from the interesting historical context, the author describes an interesting viewpoint on mental illness through the eyes of the two psychiatrists and the leading lights of the time. Jacques believes it stems from traumatic experience, but loses this belief after a person he treats turns out to be physically ill. He had been treating a patient for the traumas they had experienced, believing this was the cause of their symptoms, but they had had rheumatic fever. However, I personally feel this highlights more the link between mental and physical states, and was disappointed that this was brushed aside in the book, and their symptoms, but they had had rheumatic fever. However, I personally feel this highlights more the link between mental and physical states, and was disappointed that this was brushed aside in the book, and highlighted simply as a failure.

Thomas, by contrast, is fascinated by Darwin’s theory of evolution and believes the mind has evolved just as the body has. Prior to developing the ability to read and write, and to communicate over a distance, we would all have heard voices in our heads. Experienced, believing this was the cause of their symptoms, but they had experienced, believing this was the cause of their symptoms, but they had heard voices in our heads, and thought provoking, and would definitely recommend it as a historical perspective on mental illness and its treatment.

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