

## Michelle Butler Hallett, *Double-Blind* by Helene Staveley

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using the kind of data (extensive recorded interviews with living subjects) that historians laboring away in archives on the European continent, for example, are denied. This is not to say that either the notes section or the bibliography are anemic; both reflect some engagement with larger scholarship. However, my chief concern is that the scholarship is not integrated into the narrative of the work itself. A second critique involves Rieti's tendency to employ what Jon Elster has called "black box" macro-social mechanisms. In this case the concepts (to name a few) of scapegoating, stereotyping and social solidarity are used to explain phenomenon but are not actively seen as operational within the data itself. Despite these limitations one will look long and hard to find a more nuanced treatment of both the subject matter and the data.

As a final note, I have been familiar with Rieti's earlier journal length essays on witches for a decade and had wondered aloud if a book-length treatment would ever appear. For those of us who have waited patiently this text does not disappoint. For those coming to Rieti's work for the first time, whether scholar or general reader, this is an important contribution.

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Michelle Butler Hallett. *Double-Blind*. St. John's: Killick-Creative Press, 2007. ISBN 1897174217

PAEDIATRIC PSYCHIATRIST Dr. Josh Bozeman is already thoroughly haunted by the time he is recruited by a shadowy military offshoot by the ironic name of SHIP: The Society for Human Improvement and Potential. In his South Dakota childhood Bozeman survived the polio that killed his younger brother Bobby, who was sometimes able to link with him telepathically. He also survived the extended depression that his mother experienced after Bobby's death. In his first professional posting the army assigned Bozeman to work with severely traumatized soldiers just returned from Vietnam. In comparison, working with mentally challenged children in Newfoundland looks to this American psychiatrist like a peaceful respite rather than the first firm step down the path of human evil. These children are, after all, society's discards — Hallett's protagonist points out that they have been labelled "*morons, imbeciles, idiots, and juvenile lunatics*" (23-24) by the province's Health board. Surely any intervention in their mental health is an effective act of concern and an intervention for the better. Yet each decision Bozeman makes becomes a deliberation among evils and *Double-Blind* becomes an exploration of the proverbial good intentions that pave the path to hell.

The central dramatic conflict plays out against a 1970s backdrop and closes in 2003. Hallett's fictionalized Newfoundland becomes a chilling staging ground for bru-

tal military experiments in telepathy. Plaintive lyrics from Beatles songs mingle with allusions to T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* to resonate intriguingly against the plot's concern with complicity and responsibility in an environment dominated by mind control research, sinister organizations, psychotropic drugs, and military uses for child telepaths. Bozeman affectionately names the targeted drugs he designs after towns in his adoptive home, but it's a dubious honour since the "Gander Bomb" and the "Foxtrap Angel" bring compliance, oblivion and anguish. The isolation of the island amid the cold Atlantic, the disorienting St. John's fog, and later the windswept loneliness of a re-assigned ocean research station become emblems of the trackless abandonment Bozeman experiences as his moral compass grows increasingly conflicted.

*Double-Blind*'s portrait of Newfoundland accumulates tones of paranoia, film noir and the gothic as it moves within the dangerous territory of complicity. With the exception of young Christy Monroe, otherwise known as Subject B-2, the Newfoundlanders who fill out the cast of characters remain shadowy figures themselves, ambiguous to the point of being grotesque. Orderly Joe Rideout enjoys his sadistic role in the project while Patricia Fleming — "an oddity, a woman paediatrician born and raised in Newfoundland, just back from Toronto, correcting anyone who called her *Patsy*" (57) — looks on with alert disapproval but does not interfere. The orphaned Christy, meanwhile, is Bozeman's most precious charge and becomes his ultimate victim, a pathetic child who wants nothing more than to watch cartoons like other children but who is restrained, drugged, and experimented on by the doctor she had trusted. Hallett's Newfoundlanders have an almost grotesque grimness that is very much in keeping with her contemporary Gothic ethos, echoed in other texts that participate in the emerging Newfoundland Gothic narrative such as Lisa Moore's *Alligator* and E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*. In *Double-Blind* this characterization serves to emphasize the ambiguity of human intent, the way that good intentions can be compromised even by attempts to avoid harm.

This amorphous ethical haze contaminates everything it touches. Bozeman's secret obligation to SHIP involves ascertaining whether his own approach, healing the children's telepathy into their individual identities, will produce more effective military applications than Fraser's approach of erasing the self through trauma before rebuilding it around telepathy. Bozeman navigates carefully between his desire to contribute to his field of research, his conscious obligation to heal his young charges, and his growing suspicions about Fraser's methods. A Hamlet-like inner debate about responsibility ripens until Bozeman stumbles on a hidden laboratory where one half-dead human experiment sleeps on a cot and another is "huddled in the cage, vertebrae clear, thin and multicoloured wires threading down the back of the head." While Fraser brags about his results, Bozeman reverts to the researcher's detachment:

I wish I could tell you that I said nothing [in praise], or that I turned around, or fainted or did anything besides just stand there and gawk under pretence of scientific objectivity. The moment of deciding these subjects — I couldn't tell their genders, didn't try — the

torment of deciding they were subjects, ours to study, ours to torment: the moment didn't exist. It had been decided by someone other than me. And that was enough. (55)

Bozeman is sickened and horrified when he sees the far-reaching effects of his own complicity, and while this reaction makes him more human than Fraser, he still chooses to comply with SHIP in a desperate attempt to stave off even worse abuses of his own patients. Bozeman's connection to his charges enables him to break through his own inertia eventually, but by now the damage has been done: Fraser's methods work and will be picked up by later research, while Bozeman himself has been a useful enough instrument that he and his patients become grist for SHIP's research mill.

The film noir echoes come out especially in the dialogue among the SHIP-ites: the bosses, Dr. Fraser, and some of the researchers are all linked by their laconic dialogue and their pop-culture references. Fraser is the recognizable villain of the piece, a cardboard cutout of a buffoon from the mainland, distinguished by his plaid pants, his inability to speak without uttering the word "eh," and his sadistic obsession with gaining control. I wished for a more dimensional character in this and other secondary roles, as I wished for less laconic, more polished dialogue. While I thoroughly enjoyed Hallett's saturation of Bozeman in the grey regions of dubious experimental ethics, I also waited in vain for some pay-off to come from certain suggestive plot details, including Bozeman's own participation in telepathic research as a child subject and including his relationship with his father, another researcher in top-secret military projects.

But *Double-Blind* is worth reading. To write human evil as banal rather than glamorously monstrous is to buck the continuing trend, and Hallett ensures that not just Fraser but all who touch or use evil are virally contaminated with banality. The questions that gather force are troubling: Is it always possible to recognize the moments to take responsible action? And is there anything that can be done once those moments have slipped past? The distinction between testing human subjects and mistreating them is a perennial concern since it can easily become vexed, and Hallett's strategy of exploring this distinction through an already-damaged psychiatric researcher brings some evocative nuances to an enduring anxiety that contemporary thrillers delight in probing.

The novel is Hallett's second full-length publication. *The Shadow Side of Grace*, a collection of short stories published earlier in 2007, earned praise from reviewers. *Double-Blind* confirms Michelle Butler Hallett as a strong developing talent, capable of writing complex and provocative fictions. Her incisive eye into the murky regions of responsibility and the forces that keep them murky promise much for her future career.

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