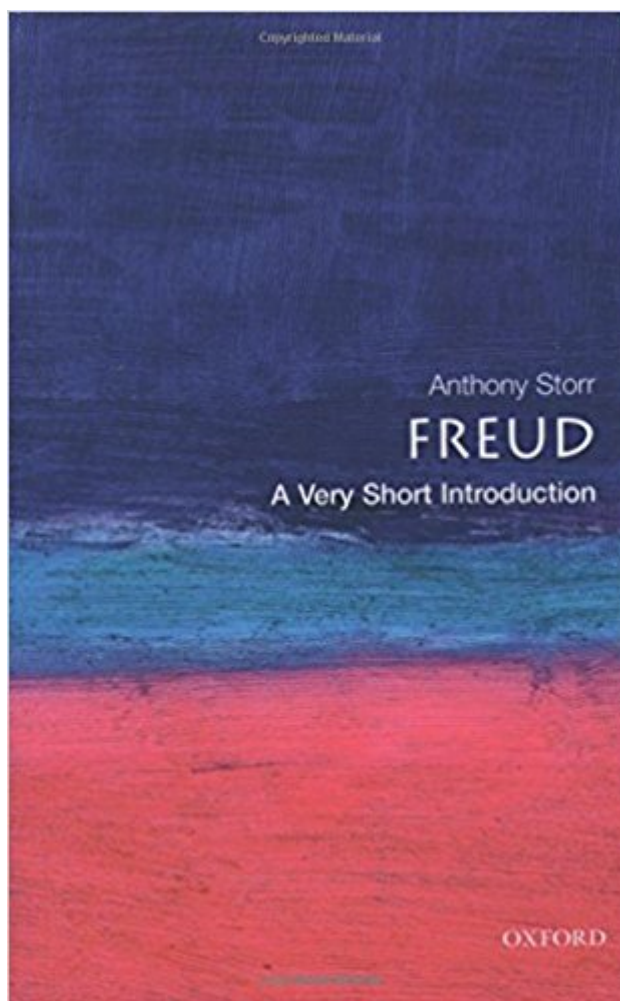


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Freud: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, developed a totally new way of looking at human nature. Only now, with the hindsight of the half-century since his death, can we assess his true legacy to current thought. As an experienced psychiatrist himself, Anthony Storr offers a lucid and objective look at Freud's major theories, evaluating whether they have stood the test of time, and in the process examines Freud himself in light of his own ideas. An excellent introduction to Freud's work, this book will appeal to all those broadly curious about psychoanalysis, psychology, and sociology. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

"Invaluable to the novice approaching Freud's works for the first time....As an evaluation of Freud's theory, Storr's book is concise and up-to-date....An important addition to any library collection."--Choice
"Storr's brief, elegant, and interesting book coolly surveys what we might term the house of Freud and finds almost everything flawed...yet he does not dispute that the builder of the shaky house was a genius."--D.M. Thomas, *The Observer*
"A model exercise in synthesis."--The Independent

Anthony Storr is Emeritus Fellow of Green College.

Instead of picking up all the baggage that comes with Freud's bad reputation, Storr's account of Freud in this "Very Short Introduction" narrowly focuses on the actual results of Freud's practice. Consequently, it's a very successful introduction. Storr was one of those rare intellectuals who knows the theories about human behavior but then can actually treat human beings like human beings, even in a clinical setting. So Storr isn't out to prove Freud's theories wrong so much as show that Freud's ideas emerged from his contact with patients and he constantly revised them (based on further contact with patients). Storr's own ideas about Freud and psychoanalysis are based largely on his own work with patients and reading about other people's work with their patients; he's therefore more interested in how psychoanalysis helps us to understand and help people and he's less interested in how it creates a totally coherent and non-contradictory theory of human life. He shows that Freud was often at his best when he had similar intentions. Storr's overviews of Freud's books are well-written and accurate. Additionally, Storr is sharp when he points out how it was necessary for Freud to think he was being scientific even (especially?) when he wasn't, and that Freud showed all the classic signs of the obsessive. That the Psychoanalytic Movement had cult-like beginnings doesn't mean that good things didn't come of it. Storr's principle criticism of Freud is that there was too much emphasis on the individual feeling good about himself -- and it was usually a "himself", although many of Freud's patients were female -- and not enough about the individual being in good relationships, i.e., feeling good with and about other people. This is a good, interesting, quick little read.

This is one of the best (and definitely among the longest) of the books that I have read in the Very Short Introduction series. I have to confess at the outset that I'm not a fan of Freud. Over the years I've dipped into his work from time to time, but each time have found him off putting and many of his ideas counter intuitive. It was helpful for me to realize that many others, including psychologists like Anthony Storr, also find much of what Freud wrote to be either wrong or in need of considerable emendation. I was always sceptical that our dreams (or at least my dreams) had the kind of structure that Freud insisted that they did. And I felt his reasoning about the sexualization of desires of very small children implied a vastly more sophisticated understanding of sex than I possessed as a young child. I have found the object-relations school to be infinitely more persuasive than Freud on child-mother or child-father attachments, and not just because that school actually saw a major role for the mother compared to Freud. I was also hurt in my explorations of Freud by reading what Storr argues are his worst books, things like *MOSES AND MONOTHEISM*, which I frankly found

absurd, or his book on jokes. So, my impression over the years was that Freud was borderline silly. I credited him with causing us to take more seriously child development and to acknowledge the centrality of sexuality in our lives, but I found the general contours of his thought to be quite unhelpful in understanding my own life. I must admit that I was also put off Freud by a host of writers who misused psychology in exploring everyday life. I once was talking to my professor at Yale, Paul L. Holmer, about W. Jackson Bates's great biography of Samuel Johnson. He thought it one of the truly great books on Johnson, but was uneasy with Bates's tendency to attribute Johnson's fundamental beliefs to one or another psychological cause, in particular his religious beliefs. Holmer argued that the biographer was justified in examining why someone might wash his or her hands 30 times a day, but had missed the point in attempting to use Freud to explain why someone believed in God. So, while I understood just how large Freud loomed in our culture, I never found him to be that impressive as a thinker. I still don't. However, Storr did manage to make a case for Freud on many levels while at the same time fairly and soberly pointing out his legitimate achievements alongside his unfortunate failures. He clearly admires Freud while still not hesitating to acknowledge where he went off track. He also does an exceptionally fine job of making clear Freud's main ideas. I came away from the book with a clearer and fuller picture of Freud than ever. I'm now at the point where I actually want to read more by and about Freud. I have long owned a copy of Peter Gay's celebrated biography as well as his large selection of Freud's writings published by Norton. After reading Storr I'm far more likely to do so. But Storr also provides an absolutely splendid annotated list of suggestions for further reading. One of the best aspects of the Very Short Introductions series are the bibliographies and this may well be the best one that I've seen yet. If I do go on to read more about Freud, Storr's Further Reading will certainly guide me.

Over the years, I suppose I have read a dozen different introductions to Freud's work. This is by far the best. The author (a psychiatrist himself) manages to write clearly and directly while attending to the nuances of Freud's thought and noting how Freud's conceptualization of key ideas changed over the course of his very long professional career. In addition, Storr appears to be very fair-minded in pointing out the shortcomings of some of these ideas and ways in which they have not proved out in clinical practice. If you want to follow up with a bit more about Freud's life -- or if you prefer a more visual approach -- I suggest you pick up a used copy of *Freud for Beginners* by Appignanesi & Zarate (Pantheon Books).

I am going to be honest: I came to read this book with a very negative image of Freud from a

scientific point of view. I come away with a different image of Freud and his ideas altogether after reading it. This book portrays a very balanced view of his work. I'd easily recommend it to anyone interested in a clear explanation of his main ideas and his contributions to humanity.

Yes, it's true that he pretty much reduced everything to sex in some way or other. But if you go beyond that little foible then you see that SF was one of the most brilliant people of the last century, without doubt. There's a section in here on his analysis of jokes and why we tell them that is priceless. And if you are honest with yourself then you will have to admit that he is exactly right on target. This book has definitely spurred my interest in the field and SF himself. I do think that the author glosses over SF's religious views and writings a little too glibly, as though he thinks that SF really didn't believe what he wrote. I actually think that these are some of the most profound of Freud's writings and some that I definitely intend to pursue further. All in all though, this is definitely worth your time and money.

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