Long after his literal and figurative deaths, Sigmund Freud is making a return visit to the United States of America: as a literary character. The psychoanalyst resurfaces in three US American novels, all written in the first decade of the 21st century, but from highly different traditions: (1) Jed Rubenfeld’s suspenseful historical detective novel, *The Interpretation of Murder* (2006), in which Freud becomes involved in a kinky Manhattan homicide while on his way to Worcester, Massachusetts; (2) Selden Edwards’s sprawling time-travel narrative, *The Little Book* (2008), in which a late 20th century rock star finds himself transported to late 19th century Vienna, where he consults with the young Doctor Freud; and (3) Brenda Webster’s subtle novel of self-discovery, *Vienna Triangle* (2009), in which a young graduate student in the 1960s interviews the aging Helene Deutsch and thereby enters into the world of Victor Tausk, Lou Andreas-Salomé and Sigmund Freud. Despite their differences, these novels all take on the nuclear kernel of psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex.¹


¹. All three novels are cited with permission of the authors.

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presents the man in a similarly positive light. E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975) mentions Freud and his 1909 visit to the United States as part of a wide-ranging depiction of early 20th century America. While Freud is an important figure in *The White Hotel* (1981), by D.M. Thomas, Lisa, his female patient known as Anna G. is really at the centre of that beautiful, poetic, dreamlike and, ultimately, shattering novel. More recently, Freud is a staple in Frank Tallis’s British detective series featuring Max Liebermann as a psychoanalytically trained forensic detective. Irvin D. Yalom’s novel, *When Nietzsche Wept* (1992), also features Freud as a significant character, but focuses more heavily on Friedrich Nietzsche, Joseph Breuer and Lou Andreas-Salomé; Freud plays a similarly significant, but nonetheless secondary, role in Angela von der Lippe’s *The Truth about Lou* (2006), which is primarily about Andreas-Salomé. Several dramatic works focus on Freud’s final years in England. The 1993 play, *Hysteria*, by the British author Terry Johnson, is a fictionalized extravaganza inspired by an actual meeting in 1938 between the psychoanalyst and Salvador Dalí, while the 2009 play, *Freud’s Last Session*, by the American Mark St Germain, is a more speculative piece, based on the possibility of a meeting between the Christian C. S. Lewis and the atheist Freud. Christopher Hampton’s 2002 play *The Talking Cure* starts with Carl Jung’s treatment of Sabine Spielrein and proceeds to investigate his relationship with Freud; Otto Gross makes an amusing appearance. (*The Talking Cure* served as the basis for David Cronenburg’s film *A Dangerous Method* [2011], starring Viggo Mortenson and Keira Knightley.)

Freud’s 1909 visit to the United States has sparked a number of artistic and theatrical responses: Michael Merino’s play *Porcupine* (2008) follows Freud from Worcester to James Jackson Putnam’s country house in the Adirondacks, while the artist Zoe Beloff has used Freud’s historical visit to Coney Island to create a marvellous fictitious world called ‘The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and its Circle’, which was exhibited and published in 2009.

Out of this broad array of fictional representations of Freud, a concentration on early 21st century novelistic depictions in US American writing (thus excluding drama, British novels and earlier 20th century accounts) reveals a focus on questions related to Oedipus, which does not seem to be as strong in some of the other – earlier, dramatic, and British – texts. All these novels share an intellectual, almost academic, bent that certainly distinguishes them from most works of fiction. Rubenfeld’s *The Interpretation of Murder* ends with an author’s note containing extensive historical documentation. Selden Edwards cites numerous other scholarly works – for instance, Carl Schorske’s

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2. See also Carey Harrison’s 2009 play on a discussion between Jung and Freud, * Scenes from a Misunderstanding*. 
Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture (1982) – that can help the reader learn more about this era. Brenda Webster’s ‘Afterword’ directs the reader to texts by authors such as Helene Deutsch, Lou Andreas-Salomé and Paul Roazen. These novels therefore respond to, and comment on, academic scholarship on Freud and his circle, while reaching out to a broad public audience.

Two studies in particular stand out as important for an understanding of the American context in which these literary works by Rubenfeld, Webster and Edwards emerge. The first is Paul Roazen’s Brother Animal: The Story of Freud and Tausk, which appeared in 1969. Roazen uncovers the story of Victor Tausk’s suicide, which had disappeared into obscurity. Tausk was the dashing young romantic who had come to psychoanalysis in 1909. Trained as a lawyer, he took on the cases of marginalized defendants, including a Muslim woman who, out of fear and desperation, had killed her illegitimate child. During World War I, he defended deserters and successfully pleaded for the acquittal of a young man who had refused to participate in the mass shooting of war prisoners. In addition to an important paper on the psychology of deserters, Tausk introduced the term ‘identity’ into psychoanalytic discourse in his still significant paper concerning schizophrenia, ‘On the influencing machine’ (Roazen, 1969, p. 188). Apparently irresistible to women, Tausk had a short affair with Lou Andreas-Salomé when she arrived in Vienna in 1912 to work with Freud, for which reason many people know him primarily as another of Andreas-Salomé’s lovers. After World War I, Freud refused to analyse him, recommending that Helene Deutsch take on his case. When Freud subsequently advised Deutsch to end the analysis, Tausk drank some slivovitz, wrote a calm, collected and friendly note to Freud – and shot himself.

The suicide shocked and surprised the psychoanalytic community. Tausk, with his politics, his love affairs, his energetic theorizing on challenging topics like schizophrenia, seemed like the very embodiment of vitality. Freud wrote a lengthy, generous and appreciative obituary for Tausk, mentioning, for instance, Tausk’s commitment to defending the human rights of unpopular defendants during the war: ‘It is also greatly to his honour that during the war he threw himself wholeheartedly, and with complete disregard of the consequences, into exposing numerous abuses which so many doctors unfortunately tolerated in silence or for which they even shared responsibility’ (cited by Roazen, 1969, p. 136). But in private, Freud was withering. On 15 July 1919, he wrote to Andreas-Salomé: ‘I confess I do not really miss him; I had long taken him to be useless, indeed a threat to the future’ (cited by Roazen, 1969, p. 140).

Roazen’s work opened up new vistas on Freud and his legacy. The author of many works on Freud and psychoanalysis, including the influential Freud and His Followers (1975), Roazen shares many
psychoanalytic presuppositions. Indeed, he became an honorary member of the American Psychoanalytic Association in 2004 (Pearce, 2005). But his study marks the beginnings of a departure from the hagiographic narratives that, for instance, John Huston or Irving Stone had constructed around Freud’s life. Psychoanalytic authorities on both sides of the Atlantic fought this new negative image of Freud. Anna Freud, who had allowed Roazen into the Freud archives, quickly rued her decision, claiming that everything he wrote was a ‘menace’.3 Kurt Robert Eissler, the champion of orthodox American psychoanalysis, took Roazen’s charges seriously enough to write two defences of Freud’s treatment of Tausk: Talent and Genius: The Fictitious Case of Tausk vs. Freud (1971) and Victor Tausk’s Suicide (1983).

Although Roazen reads the relationship between Freud and Tausk fairly straightforwardly as oedipal, he remarks that: ‘The Oedipus complex should not be presented only from the point of view of the son.’ He stresses that: ‘While a son may hate a father surrogate, it is equally likely for an older man to be jealous of a younger one’ (Roazen, 1969, p. 112). In the case of Freud and Tausk, he feels that it is clear that the father killed his son, not the other way around. Indeed what Roazen sees in Tausk, as well as Freud’s other followers, is a great need for love: ‘Freud’s male pupils wanted his love, but he gave it only if they came close to castrating themselves as creative individuals. Yet at bottom Freud lacked respect for the men who became his servile followers’ (Roazen, 1969, p. 113). While Roazen’s new narrative of Freud remains Freudian in the centrality that it grants to Oedipus, it provides an impetus to rethink the complex, in part based on Freud’s intellectual biography.

The second major work that informs modern representations of Freud in American literature is Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson’s The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory, which came out in 1984. A charismatic professor in the field of Sanskrit at the University of Toronto, Masson developed an interest in psychoanalysis and quickly became Eissler’s protégé. With access to literally thousands of unpublished documents from the early days of psychoanalysis, Masson believed that he found considerable evidence supporting Roazen’s hunch that Freud’s biographical intellectual evolution merited close critical scrutiny.

Masson’s argument famously centres on Freud’s alleged suppression of the so-called seduction theory. After initially arguing in 1896 that hysteria was the result of actual physical sexual abuse of children, Freud concluded in the late 1890s that many children imagined such abuses as a way of dealing with their own sexual desires for their parents. As Masson puts it: ‘Earlier, he had recognized the aggressive acts of parents against their

3. It did not help that Roazen also revealed that Sigmund Freud had analysed Anna Freud (Roazen, 1995).
children – for seduction was an act of violence. Now Freud had a new insight, that children had aggressive impulses against their parents (Masson, 1984, pp. 112–13). The Oedipus complex was thus a product of Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory. On 10 September 1981, Anna Freud confirmed in a letter to Masson that giving up the seduction theory is a necessary step for the conceptualization of the Oedipus complex: ‘Keeping up the seduction theory would mean to abandon the Oedipus complex, and with it the whole importance of phantasy life, conscious or unconscious phantasy. In fact, I think there would have been no psychoanalysis afterwards’ (cited by Masson, 1984, p. 113).

Masson’s book achieved much more publicity than Roazen’s had. Many of the salient points in Masson’s research appeared in The New York Times as early as 1981 (Blumenthal, 1981a, 1981b, 1984). What might have been a purely internal psychoanalytic dispute achieved a new level of notoriety when Janet Malcolm wrote two long pieces for The New Yorker in 1983, which were subsequently published as In the Freud Archives. Insisting that he never made many of the remarks attributed to him, Masson sued Malcolm and her publishers, claiming that her story made him look ‘egotistical, irresponsible, sexually promiscuous and dishonest’ (Margolick, 1990, p. B8). The case went through several appeals, all the way up to the Supreme Court of the United States and back down to two jury trials, receiving extensive press coverage in part because it went to the heart of the limits of freedom of the press in the United States. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that Masson did have a right to sue, but that the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States meant that the bar was very high for libel suits and that journalists had considerable freedom to rewrite quotes, as long as no malice could be proven. Under these guidelines, the final jury ruling was, for instance, that it was not libellous for Malcolm to claim that Masson had said he would turn the Freud house into a ‘place of sex, women and fun’, because – even though she could not prove that he had ever uttered precisely those words – she could prove that he had actually said that there would be ‘great parties’ at the Freud House, where people were ‘going to live it up’ and ‘pass women on to each other’ (Margolick, 1990, p. B8).

All this publicity meant that once again Freud was in the American news as a vivid character, surrounded both in his life and in his afterlife with controversy and extraordinary personalities. For those who managed to get beyond the gossip about the people involved, it was clear that, psychoanalytically, what was at stake was the Oedipus complex. Roazen’s work focused on Freud as a father-figure and his mistreatment of his discipline and figurative son, but had ultimately led to Roazen’s questioning the Oedipus complex. Masson’s work looked more directly at the emergence of the theory of the Oedipus complex out of the wreck of the seduction theory. Several decades after the publication of the
studies by Roazen and Masson, this particular strand of American Freud criticism continues to be the context in which US American novelists discuss Freud.

**Brenda Webster’s Vienna Triangle**

Not only does Brenda Webster’s *Vienna Triangle* focus on the complex relationships between Freud, Tausk, Andreas-Salomé and Deutsch, but its afterword specifically mentions Roazen’s *Brother Animal* as ‘the main source for factual material’ (Webster, 2009, p. 227). In addition, Webster discusses both Roazen’s and Masson’s work (as well as Malcolm’s critique thereof) in her fast-paced autobiography, *The Last Good Freudian* (Webster, 2000, p. 82). The memoir reveals that Webster has personally made the acquaintance of almost all the players in the American reception of Freud. Her mother completed a short analysis in Vienna with Helene Deutsch (Webster, 2000, p. 11). After the analysis with Deutsch, Brenda’s mother went on to 30 more years of analysis, five and sometimes six days a week, primarily with Marianne Kris, an analyst from the early circles around Freud. The swashbuckling progressive, Muriel Gardiner, shared the country estate where Brenda spent her childhood summers. (Gardiner was herself a fascinating character: a wealthy heiress who went to Vienna to study psychoanalysis and was active in the resistance against the Nazis, she was allegedly the basis for Lillian Hellman’s *Pentimento*, which Fred Zinnemann turned into the 1977 movie, *Julia*, starring Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave [McDowell, 1983].) In college, Webster’s analyst was none other than Kurt Robert Eissler. Webster’s relationship with analysis was not just personal – she became a literary scholar, using psychoanalytic approaches to write such books as *Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1973) and *Blake’s Prophetic Psychology* (1984). By the time of the publication of *The Last Good Freudian*, Webster had reckoned with her analytic tradition and broken with it, yet it is clear from *Vienna Triangle* that she is still fascinated with the history of psychoanalysis and many of the questions that it raises.

The novel starts out in New York City, in 1968. Kate Berg, a young graduate student in psychology at Columbia University, visits her mother in Provincetown on Cape Cod, where she makes the acquaintance of an elderly psychoanalyst who turns out to be Helene Deutsch. As Kate probes Helene’s story, she finds out more and more about the early days of psychoanalysis and Helene’s relationship with Sigmund Freud, Lou Andreas-Salomé and Victor Tausk, who – in this rendition of the story – turns out to have fathered a child with Hilde, the woman he was planning on marrying when he committed suicide in 1919. That child is Kate’s mother, making Kate Berg Victor Tausk’s granddaughter. In the novel, Victor Tausk also has two children with his legal wife: Emil and
Marius. Both are fictional: Emil is gay and Marius is based on Kurt Robert Eissler, who of course was not in reality the son of Victor Tausk (see Figure 1).

At times, Kate views psychoanalysis quite positively. When trying to understand why Helene was so enthusiastic about Freud, she notes: ‘It was hard to remember how Freud’s theories had struck Vienna like an electric storm. Learned neurologists had called him a pervert and a danger to family values. For Helene to have left her family, gone to University, and taken up with Freud’s radical new doctrines was already a great deal’ (Webster, 2009, p. 51). When Victor Tausk’s gay son Emil asks whether Freud was homophobic, Kate responds: ‘But he also thought we were all bi-sexual. I think if he’d been around today he might have been more progressive. Actually it was the later analysts who insisted homosexuality was an illness that needed to be cured by lengthy psychoanalysis’ (Webster, 2009, p. 113). Moreover, Kate remains generally very positive about the principle of the ‘talking cure,’ arguing in favour of uncovering truths and revealing them: ‘Hidden things are like abscesses, they fester and in the end probably cause more pain than if they could come to the surface’ (Webster, 2009, p. 189).

The characters certainly object to many features of Freud’s analysis, particularly those that are gendered. Early on, Kate wants to know why Helene didn’t break with Freud on the basis of his assumptions about female masochism: ‘He really did think that masochism and passivity weren’t just tendencies to be combated. He thought they characterized women’ (Webster, 2009, p. 50). In the course of the novel, however, Kate learns that many of the women around Freud shared his belief in women’s masochistic tendencies. As the novel reminds its reader, Deutsch’s ‘major discovery had been the often fatal attractions of self-abnegation in certain

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women’ (Webster, 2009, p. 155). Kate is, moreover, surprised to discover that Andreas-Salomé, the strong woman with the whip in the famous picture with Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Ree, wanted to be ‘mistreated and abused’ by men (Webster, 2009, p. 98). Nonetheless, Kate’s feminist objections to Freud’s thinking do seem to have their effect on Helene who – albeit *sotto voce* – ultimately calls Freud’s belief that pregnancy is ‘woman’s highest goal … her only compensation for not having the valuable male organ’ nothing but ‘pernicious nonsense’ (Webster, 2009, p. 156).

The feminist critique of psychoanalysis makes its presence felt most clearly in the novel’s treatment of Oedipus. Analysts such as Nancy Chodorow emphasize the powerful differences between the male child’s structural position in the Oedipus complex and the female child’s position, differences that make the boy’s separation from the mother easier than the girl’s (Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992, p. 467). Webster writes positively about Chodorow in her memoir. Both in her autobiography and her novel, however, Webster posits the girl in love with her father – not the boy in love with his mother – as the classic oedipal figure. Displacing the oedipal boy with the oedipal girl makes love of the father the central issue in this novel. Almost all the characters desire to find a missing father or yearn for a closer relationship with their own father. This is true of the female characters: Kate’s father is gone, as is her mother Emily’s father, who turns out to have been Victor Tausk. But it is also true of the male characters. For many of the characters – Marius Tausk, Helene Deutsch and, most traumatically, Victor Tausk – Sigmund Freud clearly becomes the father figure toward whom all the oedipal love is directed.

Helene Deutsch herself sets the tone for the discussion of Oedipus, indicating that – whatever her other doubts about Freud – she still grants the complex central importance. Chatting with Kate, she notes: ‘If Kate had been a patient, they would have talked for hours about the symbolism of the triangle, coming to rest finally on the tangled oedipal relations between father and son, mother and daughter’ (Webster, 2009, p. 23). Kate also accepts the oedipal nature of the relationship between Freud and his disciples, but she links it with paranoia. In establishing the mindset that children want to kill their fathers, Freud sets himself up for constant anxieties about his surrogate children. When Helene speculates that Freud had a certain paranoid streak, Kate puts two and two together: ‘“It makes

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4. In a personal e-mail dated 20 August 2010, Webster writes of her interest in ‘Chodorow’s idea of the greater difficulties the girl would have because she had to change her objects [from the mother to the father]’.

5. In the autobiography, Webster writes, tongue in cheek: ‘I was the perfect Freudian child; I worshipped my father’ (2000, p. 13).
a certain sense, if you think every son is out to kill his father when he becomes too weak to defend himself,” Kate said, excited by the unexpected corroboration of her own idea about the link in Freud’s mind between Tausk and Oedipus’ (Webster, 2009, p. 187). *Vienna Triangle* thus emphasizes the dangers that this paranoid oedipalism poses for the father figure and, by extension, for his ‘children’. Considering Andreas-Salomé’s complicity with Freud’s treatment of Tausk, Kate spells out the consequences of this rejection of Oedipus: ‘God knows what Lou’s refusal to abandon Tausk might have led to ... Questioning the dangers fathers face from their sons? Or maybe suggesting that a son might have something important to add?’ (Webster, 2009, p. 202). The Oedipus complex, ostensibly about the killing of the father, in fact enshrines patriarchy, at least it does in Freud’s case, by requiring the father to build up fortifications to protect himself against threats from his sons.

Tausk, however, does not strive to replace his father. He loves him and wants his love. Interestingly – especially given Helene Deutsch’s presence in this novel and given her work on masochism – this puts him in a masochistic position. As Kaja Silverman outlines it: ‘The wish to be loved by the father’ is ‘the taboo desire from which the entire condition of masochism ostensibly derives’ (Silverman, 1988, p. 58). Silverman explains that this can be accommodated in a fairly straightforward way within the context of a little girl’s ‘positive’ Oedipus complex (in which, as Silverman puts it, she ‘connects libidinally to the father and narcissistically to the mother’), but only through the little boy’s ‘negative’ Oedipus complex (i.e. in which he experiences erotic love for his father and wants to replace the mother).6 Thus, despite Tausk’s prowess as a heterosexual male lover, *vis-à-vis* Freud he is in a feminine and masochistic position. Silverman argues that, for the male subject to come to terms with his Oedipus complex, it is of paramount importance to address his ‘*homosexual* attachment to the father, not his erotic investment in the mother’.7

If the son’s unrequited love of the father is the reverse of the father’s oedipally-induced paranoia with respect to his sons, perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the novel’s examples of a character who seems to escape the traumas of Oedipus is Emil Tausk, Victor’s fictional homosexual son. In *Vienna Triangle*, Emil actually discovers the body of his dead father and thus feels terribly guilty about the death of his father. Perhaps Emil’s ability to acknowledge his homosexuality helps him attain a measure of peace, as he successfully works through his feelings of responsibility for his father’s death. The other character who offers hope for escaping the oedipal cycle is Kate. By the end of the novel, she chooses

6. Silverman is citing ‘A child is being beaten’ (Silverman, 1988, p. 36).
7. Silverman is working with *The Ego and the Id* here (Silverman, 1988, p. 40).
to break several familial patterns that threaten to repeat themselves. As she reveals to her mother that Victor Tausk is their ancestor and tells her about their new relatives, Marius and Emil, she has the sudden insight that her father loved her, even though he left the family when she was 3: ‘Dad loved me,’ Kate said now. ‘Whatever happened between you two, I think he really loved me’ (Webster, 2009, p. 221). As the novel concludes, and Kate’s mother Emily dies, Kate realizes that she is going to stay with Keith, her boyfriend, keep her baby and pursue her career: ‘With love and luck, she wouldn’t make too much of a mess of things’ (Webster, 2009, p. 226).

**Selden Edwards’s The Little Book**

While Brenda Webster’s *Vienna Triangle* engages heavily with Paul Roazen’s *Brother Animal*, Selden Edwards’s *The Little Book* responds most clearly to Jeffrey Masson’s *The Assault on Truth*. Although neither the novel nor the afterword specifically mention Masson’s book, the story circles around Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory in ways that clearly reference *The Assault on Truth*. Anything but little, *The Little Book* is a sprawling 400-page epic in which Frank Standish Burden III, known as ‘Wheeler’, finds himself transported from the America of 1987 to the Austria–Hungary of 1897. 1897 is precisely when Freud develops the theory of the Oedipus complex, while 1987 is just three years after the publication of Masson’s *The Assault on Truth*. Thus, it is no surprise that Wheeler directly confronts Freud on what he considers to be Freud’s abandonment of patients who were actually sexually abused as children.

More than three decades after Edwards began work on it in 1974, *The Little Book* became a big hit when it appeared in 2008 (Donelan, 2008). Although most reviews were positive, some reviewers objected to the over-the-top descriptions of the protagonist, Wheeler (‘banking heir, rock idol, baseball hero, best-selling author’, according to the back-page publicity of the paperback). Ron Charles of *The Washington Post* concludes, somewhat mean-spiritedly: “The whole narrative is soggy with hero-worship, like the fantasy of a skinny teenage boy staring into a mirror” (Charles, 2008). Like many reviewers, however, Charles does not take into account the distinctive narrative structure of the novel, which turns out to be the mother’s account of the father’s imaginative act.

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8. In an e-mail correspondence dated 21 August 2010, Selden Edwards writes that he read Masson’s *Assault on Truth* when it came out and that it helped inform Wheeler Burden’s critiques of Freud.
The authorial narrator is Wheeler’s mother, Flora Zimmerman Burden. Preceding the novel is her opening statement in which she announces that she is the author of ‘the story of how, through a dislocation in time, my son, Frank Standish Burden III, the famous American rock-and-roll star of the 1970s, found himself in Vienna in the fall of 1897’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 1). Her source is the journal that her son Wheeler kept while he was travelling in time. He leaves it with a 22 year-old woman he meets in fin-de-siècle Vienna who happens to be his own grandmother; she passes it on to Flora. This is not the first major work Flora has written – she is also the author of Persephone Rising, a 1955 treatise that ‘established her, a few years later, as one of the first voices, along with Betty Friedan’s Feminine Mystique, in the American feminist movement’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 36). ‘Often considered as much an anti-Freudian as a feminist treatise’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 289), The New Yorker is said in the novel to have called it ‘the counterweight to Freud’s Oedipus complex’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 36).

In the story that Flora relates, Frank Standish ‘Dilly’ Burden, tortured by the Nazis in World War II, transports – by sheer force of will – his grown son Wheeler from the future (1987) to the past (1897). From the torture chamber, the 20-something Dilly creates a fantasy world:

And then when the pain got so terribly grinding, and I needed something even stronger, I developed the Vienna plot. It was like creating a three-dimensional novel in my head, filled with all this [...] Music and coffeehouses and your grandmother and ... you. (Edwards, 2008, p. 234)

Dilly’s vision has a ‘plot’, like a ‘novel’. This admission within the framework of the novel that the events are the product of the creative imagination of one of the characters playfully hints at the fictitious nature of the novel itself.

Vienna is where Dilly is able to meet his 47 year-old son Wheeler. He also gets to witness the courtship between his awful anti-Semitic father, Frank Burton, and his 22 year-old mother, Eleanor Louise Putnam (travelling at the beginning of the novel under the assumed name Emily James, and known more generally as Weezie), both of whom are in Vienna at the time (see Figure 2). Putting these facts together, he is able to interrupt the courtship between his father and mother by interposing his son into their relationship. This fantasy Vienna functions a little like Rome in Freud’s writing, as a metaphor for the unconscious. It is a place where you can dream of killing the young Hitler and preventing the Holocaust. Or, through your son, you can make an attempt on your father’s life and try – perhaps successfully – to seduce your mother.

Dilly wants to get back at his father because of his father’s complicity in the rise of anti-Semitism and fascism. In fact, Dilly explains to his son Wheeler that all his heroic efforts in World War II could be read as
oedipal: ‘Not out of hatred for Hitler but, as Dr Freud would pinpoint, to kill my father’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 357). Wheeler also concurs in accepting Oedipus as a psychological constant, telling Freud: ‘Everything has now fallen into place for you ... You have recognized that remembered infatuation with the mother and jealousy of the father are universal, that the oedipal relationship of the child to the parents is, as you say, “a general event in early childhood” ’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 289). While Dilly explicitly wishes to kill his father, the novel does not propose anything so obvious as that he would consciously express a desire to have sexual relations with his mother. Instead, Dilly imagines his grown son (47 years old) travelling through time to meet his young, 22 year-old mother, where romantic sparks fly. Indeed, Weezie has her first orgasm with her grandson. Dilly creates a powerfully coherent oedipal fantasy in the Nazi torture chambers – that he is able to send his mature son back in time, both to confront his anti-Semitic father and to seduce his beautiful young mother.

Within a framework of basic support for Freud’s conceptual framework, however, the novel – especially the protagonist, Wheeler – tests aspects of psychoanalysis in a variety of ways, particularly with regard to the seduction theory. Significantly, the narrator makes her presence felt when her son confronts Freud on this matter, because apparently Wheeler left only rudimentary records of this matter in his journal. According to the narrator, ‘we can imagine the scene in which Wheeler confronts Freud on the reality of child abuse: “Caustic child-rearing abounds in Vienna,” Wheeler said. “That is a known fact. Children are raised with religious austerity and harshness at best, and actual physical abuse at worst. You know this, and you are willing to overlook it” ’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 228). Relating this matter to the Oedipus complex, Wheeler concludes: ‘Your new Oedipus theory discounts the evidence of real abuse and blames the child’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 228). The novel’s narrative structure cues the reader to imagine the interaction of Freud’s thought with Masson’s critiques of Freud.
The novel goes so far as to suggest that the real abuse of children is behind Hitler’s monstrosity. After directly asking Freud whether the seduction theory might possibly have been correct after all, Wheeler turns the discussion to the young Adolf Hitler, whom he wishes Freud would analyse. Wheeler gives his interpretation of the origins of the Holocaust:

[He] is going to grow up to be a monster, all because of the humiliating childhood abuse he could not escape. He is mistreated constantly by his mother, beaten almost every day. He is learning to be obedient and to accept daily punishment. Most of Germany is accustomed to that kind of poisonous parenting. I don’t think that even you would argue that the cause was entirely sexual tension, that he lusted after his mother. (Edwards, 2008, p. 290)

The novel does not attempt to explain why Hitler, of all the abused children of central Europe, would be the one to become the Führer, but it makes the case that Freud and his colleagues should have continued focusing on the improvement of actual parenting practices.

Edwards’s playful time-travel novel encourages the reader to rethink the Oedipus complex as the nucleus of psychoanalysis. Edwards, through his protagonist, accepts many elements of Freudian thinking, including the existence of the unconscious, the deleterious effects of sexual repression, and the topographic model of superego, id, and ego. Indeed, he actually seems to accept the basic notion of the Oedipus complex as a universal psychological phenomenon as well. Under the influence of Masson, however, The Little Book insists that psychoanalysis needs to take into account the effects of actual child abuse.

**Jed Rubenfeld’s The Interpretation of a Murder**

In The Interpretation of Murder, Jed Rubenfeld (2006) develops a framework for reversing Oedipus, arguing that in fact the fathers have the murderous desires, not their children. Rubenfeld, a professor of law at Yale University, is the author of literate and readable treatises such as Freedom and Time (2001) and Revolution by Judiciary: The Structure of American Constitutional Law (2005). His first foray into Freudian detective fiction, The Interpretation of Murder, generated considerable

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9. Edwards’s argument is based on Alice Miller’s For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence, which first appeared in English in 1983 (Miller, 1990, pp. 195–7). In the e-mail correspondence of 21 August 2010, Edwards mentions his interest in Miller’s work.
buzz in the publishing industry (Trachtenberg, 2006). In the novel, Stratham Younger, a fictional assistant professor of psychology at Clark University, comes to New York City to pick up Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Sandor Ferenczi, who are travelling from Europe to speak at Clark’s famous 1909 conference. Younger meets the three European psychoanalysts, as well as Ernest Jones (who had come down from Canada for the occasion) and A. A. Brill (who was living in New York City). On their way to Worcester, Massachusetts, they become entangled in a (needless to say, fictional) murder. The young and beautiful Elizabeth Riverford is found dead in one of the luxurious new apartment buildings rising around Central Park. The building belongs to a certain George Banwell, a ruthless businessman and repellent male chauvinist who introduces the Freudian part of the mystery, for Banwell is intimately acquainted with a wealthy young woman named Nora Acton, whose story is based upon Dora, who appears in Freud’s famous ‘Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria’ (1905).

Readers familiar with Freud’s Dora will recognize Rubenfeld’s Nora. Suffering from amnesia and aphonia after an assault, Nora undergoes treatment with Stratham Younger, under the supervision of Sigmund Freud. In her treatment, it emerges that her father tolerates the advances George Banwell makes upon his daughter because he, the father, is having an affair with George’s wife, Clara. Not only has Mr Banwell made advances several times on Nora, Nora has witnessed Mrs Banwell performing oral sex on her father. George and Clara Banwell thus take on the role of Herr and Frau K in Freud’s account. In the course of Rubenfeld’s novel, we learn that at the core of Nora’s neurosis lies her love for Mrs Banwell, just as Dora’s unconscious desires for Mrs K are a significant part of her psychic make-up (see Figure 3).11

With the exception of the murder, most of the details of Freud’s visit to the United States are historically accurate. There are also frequent direct citations of passages from Freud’s writings, above and beyond the homage to the Dora case. In his author’s note, Rubenfeld points to his fictional character Freud’s declaration that ‘satisfying a savage instinct is incomparably more satisfying than satisfying a civilized one’, reminding the

10. Rubenfeld (2011) has subsequently published a follow-up, The Death Instinct.

11. The real Dora was of course Ida Bauer. While Freud elides any reference to the Jewishness of his patient, Rubenfeld’s Nora is not Jewish at all, and even mildly surprised that anyone would think that her friend Elsie Sigel was a Jew. Ida Bauer’s brother was Otto Bauer. He plays no role in Freud’s account of Dora’s neurosis; accordingly, Nora does not have a brother. The historical Otto Bauer became a leading social democratic politician; Nora’s support for local unionizing strikers perhaps recaptures some of Otto’s political legacy.
reader that the historical Freud made the same argument in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). Similarly, Freud’s critique of marriage in the novel comes from his critique of marriage in ‘“Civilized” sexual morality’ (1909):

For society, marriage is undoubtedly beneficial. But the burdens of civilized morality are too heavy for many to bear … Satisfying intercourse does not last long in most marriages. After four or five years, marriage tends to fail utterly in this respect, and when this happens, it spells the end of spiritual communion too. As a result, in the great run of cases, marriage ends in disappointment, spiritual as well as physical. (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 235)

As just one more example among many Freud citations, Rubenfeld includes a passage from Freud’s famous letter to an American mother, in which he explains that he will not treat her homosexual son because ‘homosexuality is certainly no advantage, but it cannot be classified as an illness. It is no shame, no vice, no degradation’ (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 423).

Moreover, the novel generally presents the basic ideas of psychoanalysis quite positively. Younger reinforces the revolutionary aspect of Freud’s doctrine by telling his patient Nora that: ‘Psychoanalysis takes the side of memory against the forces of suppression’ (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 95). As the narrator, Younger delivers a kind of psychoanalytic credo:

> That we have an unconscious mental life, that we are constantly suppressing forbidden sexual desires and the aggressions that arise in their wake, that these suppressed wishes manifest themselves in our dreams, our slips of the tongue, our neuroses – all this I believed. (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 155)

Throughout the novel, however, the narrator resists the Oedipus complex, declaring: ‘But that men want sex with their mothers, girls with their fathers – this I did not accept’ (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 155).

Interestingly, the first major theoretical challenge to Oedipus comes from Carl Jung, who is otherwise presented quite negatively. Jung begins
his observations with casual misogynist remarks about aging women that are typical of much of his gender politics: ‘We know the grown son does not actually covet his mother sexually, with her varicose veins and sagging breasts. That is obvious to anyone. Nor does the infant son, who has no inkling of penetration’ (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 285). Jung concludes that:

The adult conflict reactivates the infantile material. The neurotic’s suppressed libido is forced back into its infantile channels – just as you have always said! – where it finds the mother, who was once of such special value to him. The libido fastens onto her, without the mother ever having actually been desired. (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 285)12

That this insight allegedly appeared in a dream underscores the flakiness that characterizes Jung in this novel. But it does adequately portray Jung’s position on the Oedipus complex and neatly explains the break with Freud (which did not, however, happen historically until a few years later).

In many ways, the narrator Stratham Younger is a better Jung. The German word ‘jung’ means ‘young’ in English and ‘younger’ translates as ‘jünger’ in German. The German ‘Jünger’ also translates as ‘disciple’ – which both he and Carl are. If Carl is young [jung], Stratham is younger [jünger], the real disciple. Jung’s efforts at rewriting the Oedipus complex are thus a set-up for the intervention of Younger, who produces a more highly elaborated theory of a reversed, mirror-image, Oedipus:

Yes, when a little boy enters the scene with his mother and father, one party in this trio tends to suffer a profound jealousy – the father. He may naturally feel the boy intrudes on his special, exclusive relationship with his wife. He may well half want to be rid of the suckling, puling intruder, whom the mother declares to be so perfect. He might even wish him dead. (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 387)

Like Jung, Younger cannot accept that the infant child has patricidal feelings. But, while Jung still locates the source of psychic anguish in the patient, Younger moves it decidedly to the parents, particularly the father: ‘But what parent will acknowledge a wish to kill his own issue? What father will admit to being jealous of his own boy? So the Oedipal complex must be projected onto children’ (Rubenfeld, 2006, p. 387). Younger retains Freud’s notion that the source of the oedipal complex remains in the childhood family structures, but attributes the cause to parents, not children.

12. Like the Freud citations, this citation is rooted in Jung’s own writing. In an e-mail communication dated 3 December 2010, Jed Rubenfeld pointed out that Jung expressed similar thoughts in a letter that he wrote to Freud on 2 August 1912.
Conclusion

In a wide range of literary genres, reaching a broad and varied public audience, all three of these early 21st century American authors reject the centrality of the Oedipus complex. Webster’s Vienna Triangle points out the psychological dangers of living a life structured around anxiety about the patricidal threats of the next generation. It suggests that adopting the Oedipus complex as the primary metaphor for human social existence leads to a kind of self-fulfilling paranoia that can have murderous effects on the (literal and metaphorical) children, encouraging a kind of masochism in the younger generation. Edwards’s Little Book focuses more concretely on the specific harms done to the young by the old, arguing that – even if the Oedipus complex is a universal – actual sexual abuse has a more tangible effect on children than their infantile sexual desires. According to The Little Book, that actual sexual abuse requires as much or more attention than the Oedipus complex. Rubenfeld gives Freud a chance to defend his controversial argument that a young girl like Nora (or Dora) should appreciate the sexual overtures of older men (Rubenfeld, 2006, pp. 134–6). But his narrator Stratham Younger does not ultimately accept Freud’s arguments on this point, instead offering the reader a theory of a reversed Oedipus complex, in which the parents are the perpetrators.

Each book shifts the emphasis away from the sexual and murderous desires of the child with respect to its parents and toward the dangers that the parents pose for their children. Significantly, the novels adopt the perspective of the child, rather than the parent. This is most clearly the case in Edwards’s Little Book, in which Wheeler, who dies in 1897, before he was even born, does not have children. (In fact, he has a vasectomy in the 1970s.) At the end of both Webster’s Vienna Triangle and Rubenfeld’s Interpretation of Murder, the protagonists Kate Berg and Stratham Younger have founded or are on the verge of founding families, but the reader primarily experiences them as literal or figurative children, interacting with parents or parental figures. These texts are all less interested in uncovering the complex and morally ambiguous nature of childhood, less interested in unmasking the sentimental image of the innocent child, and more interested in revealing the potential for danger that adults pose.

The critique of the parental figure culminates in a nuanced portrayal of Freud himself. The Freud of Webster’s Vienna Triangle is mysterious and distant, mediated through figures who love him, such as Deutsch, Andreas-Salomé and Tausk, but he is in some way implicated in Tausk’s death. In Edwards’s Little Book, Freud is a revolutionary whose effect on the world will be positive, but he is apparently ultimately obtuse to Wheeler’s pleas regarding the seduction theory. In Rubenfeld’s Interpretation of Murder,
Freud is a congenial genius, but nonetheless wrong about Oedipus. These portrayals contrast starkly with narratives such as that proposed in John Huston’s 1961 film *Freud*, in which precisely Freud’s rejection of the seduction theory emerges as the culmination of his heroic willingness to expose scientifically the deepest and darkest human secrets, regardless of the consequences. In the half century separating Huston’s film and the novels of Webster, Edwards and Rubenfeld, Freud’s stature has declined for many reasons, but the focus on Oedipus in these novels suggests that they are responding specifically to the battles about Freud that began with Roazen’s work and continued with Masson’s exposés.

Feminism has had a role in the dimming of Freud’s star in the intellectual firmament. Much more could be said about its role in all of these texts. Webster draws on feminist interventions in psychoanalytic thought to underscore the links between the oedipal structure and the paranoia of the father and the masochism of the child. Masson’s *Assault on Truth*, so important for Edwards’s novel, dovetailed with feminist concerns in the 1980s about sexual abuse and its effects. Particularly Alice Miller’s work plays an important role in Edwards’s conceptual world. Edwards’s narrator is herself a prominent feminist in the world of the novel; Edwards takes advantage of his novel’s narrative structure to push the reader to think through an encounter between the late 19th century Freud and late 20th century feminist critiques of Freud. In Rubenfeld’s work the extreme anti-feminist utterances of some of the more villainous characters speak for themselves. Jung’s misogyny prevents him from reaching the breakthrough in rethinking Oedipus that his American counterpart, Younger, achieves.

It is equally telling, however, that these writers continue to negotiate Freudian terminology. While they maintain a critical stance toward psychoanalysis, they do not reject it entirely. In one interview, Brenda Webster summarizes her attitude toward psychoanalysis:

> Well, my concluding view is that, as an intellectual tool and as a method of introspection and understanding motivation and so on, psychoanalysis does sensitize you to those issues, and I still continue to do that, to see people in terms of their motivation. I try to analyse them, I do it without meaning to even, and I suppose I use it in building my characters. (Foley, 2003, p. 661)

Edwards’s protagonist seems to agree with Freud on most points, and his plot provides considerable support for a Freudian psychology. Rubenfeld’s narrator explicitly agrees with most Freudian presuppositions. For all three of these authors, many aspects of the Freudian model remain relevant to the understanding of humanity. Indeed, perhaps one of the most important conclusions of this study is that contemporary literature, including works with both popular and critical success, keeps alive and develops the discussions about Freud and psychoanalysis in the United States of
Authors such as Webster, Edwards and Rubenfeld, acutely attuned to the lively discussions about Freud that blossomed in the United States in the late 20th century, are continuing and developing these conversations in a broad popular forum, challenging and interrogating the Oedipus complex, hoping to move beyond it and thereby fix Freud.

References


13. Although the arguments of Roazen and Masson first took root in the United States and thus affected US American authors like Webster, Rubenfeld and Edwards, all three authors have a strong international presence. Rubenfeld’s sales, for instance, have been particularly strong in the United Kingdom, according to reports in blogs on the Internet.
Representations of Sigmund Freud in early 21st century US American novels rely on and respond to the image of Freud that emerged from investigations by Paul Roazen (*Brother Animal*, 1969) and Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (*The Assault on Truth*, 1984), which cast doubt on the validity of the Oedipus complex. Relying on Roazen, Brenda Webster’s *Vienna Triangle* (2009) links Freud’s oedipal thinking to paranoia and male masochism. Working with Masson, Selden Edwards’s *The Little Book* (2008) takes Freud to task for abandoning the seduction theory in favour of the Oedipus complex. Jed Rubenfeld’s *The Interpretation of Murder* (2006) rethinks the Oedipus complex as a projection of adults onto their children. All three novels seek to celebrate Freud’s understanding of the human psyche, while shifting the focus of the oedipal structure away from the murderous and lustful child toward the adult.

*Key words:* Sigmund Freud, fictional representations of, Oedipus complex, seduction theory, Paul Roazen, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Brenda Webster, Selden Edwards, Jed Rubenfeld, historical fiction, detective fiction, time travel, US American literature