

## BOOKS

[*The Great Pretenders: The True Stories Behind Famous Historical Mysteries*, Jan Bondeson, W.W. Norton & Co., 326 pages.]

## Not Quite True Stories

By R.J. Stove

"You try it. You try finding out why you're you and not somebody else."  
—Ezra Pound

FEARS, AND HOPES, that the Internet would kill off the printed book have of course proven spectacularly wrong. Yet the Internet has certainly weakened the market for certain genres of printed book, and *The Great Pretenders* belongs to one such genre. A decade ago, it could have been welcomed as a chatty, always readable (though occasionally careless), middlebrow production well worth your local library's while. Today, it appears largely redundant. Given several hours' communing with an adequate search engine, every World Wide Web user can obtain for himself much of the book's information. The Net's ubiquity places on writers the onus of supplying value-added merits: the late Barbara W. Tuchman's narrative vigor, or Simon Winchester's atmospheric vividness, or Robert K. Massie's unfailingly elegant prose. A writer who fails to do this is, in the brave new Google world, pushing his luck.

Jan Bondeson here is pushing his luck. Earlier volumes by Professor Bondeson—who teaches at the University of Wales, Cardiff—have included an elaborate study of late 18th-century stalking (*The London Monster*) and an emetically comprehensive guide to the annals of premature interment (*Buried Alive*). After such indisputable originality, *The Great Pretenders* seems stale; it conveys

the persistent impression of authorial haste, of being a TV tie-in, although no such TV program appears to exist or to be contemplated.

Which is not to deny its virtues. Professor Bondeson concentrates on six instances of hotly disputed ID that haunted 19th-century imaginations: the fate of Louis XVII, the "Lost Dauphin"; that puzzling German *cause célèbre* Kaspar Hauser, who first emerged in 1828 and who mysteriously perished in 1832; the possibility that Tsar Alexander I, instead of dying in 1825, simply turned into a holy hermit named Feodor Kuzmich; posthumous rumors that George III (before inheriting his crown) married, and had children by, a Quaker woman named Hannah Lightfoot; the Tichborne Affair; and whether or not the reclusive fifth Duke of Portland (whose grandfather had been one of George III's prime ministers) abandoned his ducal estate to become a humble storekeeper called Thomas Druce. The professor's approach is judicious; he has avoided imitating the catchpenny junk that insists that the Lost Dauphin was really Jane Austen or that Elvis has for 27 years been kept a drugged captive on Planet Zort. He coolly assesses the arguments for and against each claimant. When medical questions dominate, he draws on his professional expertise to determine, for example, whether X suffered from

for the even less commendable task of "proving" that English artist Walter Sickert was Jack the Ripper. (Since Miss Cornwell's principal criterion for assessing evidence consisted of extemporization upon the theme "Because I say so," few felt much wonderment when reviewers mocked her harangue.)

*The Great Pretenders'* best chapter deals with Louis XVII. While this unfortunate boy-king is officially said to have died in solitary confinement during the French Revolution, an astonishing 101 persons—including John James Audubon and four other Americans—afterwards represented themselves as (or else allowed others to represent them as) the rightful Louis, miraculously escaped from jail. (The means of escape varied: sometimes a comparatively conventional vehicle like a laundry basket, though one enterprising soul bragged of having employed for his egress a rocking horse.) Among the 101 candidates, four stood out by their obstinacy and fame; but they have singularly failed to convince Professor Bondeson, or most other commentators on the topic, of their genuineness. Writing in the wake of Deborah Cadbury's excellent 2002 survey *The Lost King of France*, Professor Bondeson is undaunted by that model and contributes notable insights into the bizarre adventures of the juvenile monarch's embalmed heart.

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tuberculosis pleuritis or whether Sydenham's chorea could have stricken Y. With those who burst into print while mistaking conjectures for facts he is suitably impatient. He cites in his closing section one Patricia Cornwell, who in 2001 abandoned her established profession of purveying lipstick-lesbian tracts thinly disguised as crime novels

As for Kaspar Hauser, despite his gaucherie and fondness for expounding improbable tales, he may have been the legitimate heir to the Grand Duchy of Baden. (Though if he was, so what? How many divisions did the Grand Duchy of Baden have?) The years after his decease witnessed the beginning of an extravagant Hauser cult, active even

now. One widely respected early 20th-century encyclopedia devoted almost a page to Hauser's non-achievements, while dismissing the rather more significant Edward VII in a single curt paragraph. If Louis XVII preoccupied eccentrics, Hauser demonstrated a rare gift for luring the insane. Abruptly appearing as he did *ex nihilo* in Nuremberg's town square—with, at first, only the most limited ability to communicate—he attracted much initial attention as a real-life Noble Savage. Other real-life Noble Savages (including Napoleonic France's "wild boy of Aveyron") had already captured the European popular fancy; nevertheless, Hauser's appeal lasted far longer than theirs and went far deeper. Sinister elements clung to him from the start, notably the philosophizing of his guardian and champion, G.F. Daumer,

a diligent student of homeopathy's founder Samuel Hahnemann. Considering that Hahnemann's hatred of Christianity verged on the pathological, it should amaze no one that Hauser inspired many brands of occult dementia, often repellent. Rudolf Steiner, inventor of anthroosophy, maintained that Hauser had somehow thwarted a diabolical Jewish plot to create a human being who lacked a soul. Other gnostics attributed to Hauser's early and violent death, "two world wars, the Nazi atrocities, the atomic bomb, and the division of Germany into East and West." From these apocalyptic assurances it constitutes but a small additional step (readily undertaken by crackpots) to the belief in Hauser as being literally identical with Jesus. Faced with such mountains of what Dr. Johnson called "unresisting imbecility,"

Professor Bondeson keeps his temper and tries to ensure that some of his madcap material makes sense.

Less interesting are Professor Bondeson's chapters on Alexander I's supposed midlife career change and George III's ostensible Quaker spouse, simply because both allegations remain so far-fetched. If Alexander really had faked his own death, the discovery of this fake would have guaranteed a succession crisis much more dangerous for tsarism than even the worst threats that the Decembrist rebels posed during late 1825. Besides, the hermit Kuzmich not only avoided impersonating Alexander, he showed active irritation when others tried foisting the pretender's role on him. These factors, along with Professor Bondeson's discussion of the tsar's physical health, do not make the tale of Alexander's great renunciation impossible—we

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are talking, after all, of a culture dadaist enough to have produced a Tolstoy and a Rasputin—but they make it improbable.

Regarding George III, the sheer quantity of negative evidence surely acquits him of fornication, let alone of a hidden bride. Devoutly Protestant all his life, he observed strict sexual morals, condemned his relatives' numerous lapses from such standards, and dwelt, moreover, in a London so awash with scurrilous political gossip as to have made long-term secrecy a hopeless goal. In Professor Bondeson's own words, "There is no contemporary evidence that Hannah Lightfoot ever met Prince George." The story that George married Miss Lightfoot first appeared after George had died. Those contemporaries who (often with justice) accused his kin of every vice would have been only too pleased to accuse George himself of a clandestine wedding. Somehow they did

not. Nor did the American colonists, who presumably would have salivated at the very notion of fastening upon the Royal Tyrant a plausible bigamy rap. Self-proclaimed descendants from Miss Lightfoot and her putative royal paramour—some of them voicing the tactless hope that Elizabeth II will abdicate in favor of themselves—have turned up in Australia and Africa as well as in America. DNA findings have shown, to date, no grounds for trusting such folk's proclamations.

The Tichborne saga makes for a somewhat more rewarding analysis. Bondeson's chapter is not helped by its first sentence's assertion that "the Tichbornes were one of the oldest and most respectable Anglo-Catholic [*sic*] families," or by the erroneous date of 1855 as the year of Sir Roger Tichborne's disappearance (it should be 1854). Still, the account here of the second Tichborne trial—which found the Claimant to be a scapegrace New South Wales butcher named Arthur Orton—packs more data into a smaller space than does almost any earlier retelling. It rightly stresses the disastrous impact made on the Claimant by his grossly over-ambitious, indeed feral, defense lawyer Edward Kenealy: "Determined to prove that the Claimant was really Sir Roger Tichborne, he [Kenealy] eschewed the suggestion that it would be sufficient to prove that his client was not Arthur Orton." (Curious, incidentally, that Professor Bondeson's list of Tichborne-inspired fiction ignores possibly the most celebrated example, from 1949: *Brat Farrar*, by the Scottish novelist and playwright whose pseudonyms included "Josephine Tey.")

At least the name Tichborne has managed to retain some public recognition. By contrast, the case of the Duke of Portland and his alleged alter ego, which rumbled on in law courts from 1896 to 1908, has slipped from the consciousness of all save experts in Victorian and Edwardian England. Professor Bondeson expresses surprise and regret at this slippage, but his own comments indi-

cate why it took place. The Druce-Portland Affair had a larger, more confusing, and less inherently vivid cast of principal characters than its Tichborne counterpart. Furthermore, the idea of an aristocrat longing for downward social mobility is bound to excite fewer people than that of a commoner longing for upward social mobility. In any event, the rise of socialism during the 1880s and 1890s meant a general loss of interest in such individual grievances as a purported long-lost legatee being cheated of noble estates.

A final chapter races the reader through allusions to other enigmas, the protagonists of which range from Jesse James (said by some optimists to have survived in Texas until the age of 103), via the Romanovs (apologies to Hollywood, but it looks as if they really did die in that Ekaterinburg cellar), to the Lindbergh baby (conspiracy mavens appear split between those who maintain Bruno Hauptmann's innocence of the baby's murder and those convinced that the baby was never murdered at all). Oddly, Professor Bondeson has omitted the more recent instance of Jimmy Hoffa, whom a tenacious urban myth credits with resting in peace underneath the goalposts of New Jersey's Meadowlands football stadium. *The Great Pretenders'* more serious faults include the overuse of personal pronouns, exacerbating the production's frequent air of hurriedly assembled voice-overs ("Personally, I think"; "I do not share the belief in the legend expressed by...") and—crucially—the total absence of an index. It would be hard to imagine a more obvious display of publishers' disdain for readers (or authors) than this last lack, which confirms the difficulty of recommending *The Great Pretenders* to anyone except mystery buffs with deep pockets. ■

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[*Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World*, Chantal Delsol, ISI Books, 325 pages]

## What Ails Us

By Mark Gauvreau Judge

DEAR HEAVEN, not another one. That was my reaction when a review copy of *Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World* arrived in the mail. Not another culture-war manifesto. I'm a conservative and love those books, but they have become more ubiquitous than the swarming deer population in Maryland where I live.

A week later, after I had finished *Icarus Fallen*, I felt like I had just seen "The Passion of the Christ"—twice. This is simply the best book about the problems of modern man since Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism*. It is so crammed with truth and insight that, as someone once said of Chesterton, every line deserves a review.

The author of *Icarus Fallen* is Chantal Delsol, a professor of philosophy at the Université de Marne-la-Vallée near Paris. Her thesis here is that man has become something of a Sisyphus (my metaphor, not hers). Having pushed the rock of his utopian dreams to the top of the hill, he has had it roll back down over him. The nightmarish ideologies of Nazism and communism, as well as the lesser sins of consumerism and the innumerable other -isms of the 20th century, have all failed to bring happiness. But the longing for utopia still prevails. And unlike previous generations, who lived through wars and depressions and were on close terms with death, modern man has attempted to cocoon himself in a nest of technological and physical comfort. Thus he is appalled when faced with a grim reality: despite all our efforts, human nature has not changed. Tragedy is still a part of life.

Rather than admit this uncomfortable truth, the man of today has erected new orthodoxies: there will be no disappoint-

ment, pain, or suffering, or somebody will get sued. Rights are ever expanding and sacred—"we suppose," Delsol writes, "that anything that is tolerated should be facilitated or even encouraged." Freedom is not to be curtailed in any way because there is no such thing as behavior that is normative for anyone. Absolutes lead to tyranny. This Delsol describes as a "movement from essential tolerance, based on an idea of the equal dignity of persons, toward a procedural tolerance or relativism, based on the idea that all lifestyles are of equal value."

*Icarus Fallen* does not name names; Delsol assumes that the reader will recognize the ubiquity in our culture of what she calls "the clandestine ideology of our time." There is no need to finger individuals, she asserts, when the theology of political correctness is in the very air we breathe. It is its own orthodoxy, with a specific idea of what man is—a person cut off from and not obligated to any tradition from the past, someone who can pursue any kind of happiness as long as it does not affect others, a man whose entire concept of self-actualization is based on ever-expanding rights. To say otherwise is heresy. "In our societies," she writes, "there are a certain number of political, moral and other opinions that the individual contests at the point of being marginalized." One must be for "the equal representation of both sexes in all spheres of power." We must consider delinquency the result of poverty. We must "hate all moral order ... [we] must equate the Catholic Church

the point of human existence is to expand human freedom. But Delsol calls attention to a basic truth that escapes even many conservatives: boundless freedom can actually make us less human. "[L]iberty, when exercised without limits, distorts and disorients the personality. And the individual, when excessively protected, is stunted in his growth .... Growing up with no other limit than the financial capacities of the nation, and in general even beyond them, rights viewed as entitlements ultimately make a society impotent; paradoxically, some gifts eventually impoverish."

The more we spend on social programs the more the public demands that they be expanded. As a result, people have become not more generous, spiritual and humane, but ever more greedy and closed off. And we have become, according to Delsol, hysterically intolerant of tragedy and even of limits. "When one is faced with danger, one learns why one lives ... entire peoples become known for their heroic deeds as well as their acts of cowardice." Limits point to the ultimate limit, death, which focuses the mind to the importance of life. Yet when the reality of the tragic is denied, and thus too the vitality of decisions made in light of eternity, man becomes "the plaything of circumstance."

Delsol is no ideologue roughly demanding that we blindly return to the old ways, embracing them without question. She defends, for example, the fear of certainty as largely reasonable, at least when based on the fact that cer-

### BOUNDLESS FREEDOM CAN ACTUALLY MAKE US LESS HUMAN.

with the Inquisition, but never equate communism with its gulags." The virtuous are to be suspect, because "invariably they must be disguising hypocritical vices." The clandestine ideology "aims to equalize the value of all behavior."

Faith in absolute personal autonomy, commingled with the endless expansion of rights, is perhaps the most entrenched belief of all in post-Christian America. No one dares question the dogma that

tainties about what constitutes the truth have in the past led to pogroms, inquisitions, and even the Holocaust. Yet she admits that man by his very nature hunts for truth and meaning, for something he is willing to die for. Thus we find ourselves stuck: by nature we long for what Delsol calls "reference points" that direct us towards absolute verities, yet by ideology we are suspect of anything that can provide the answers.