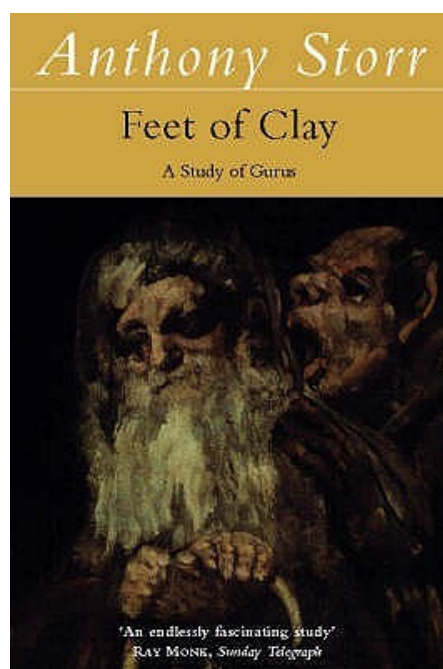




Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus

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There are many reports of strange cults which enthrall their followers and cut themselves off from the world. Invariably led by gurus, or spiritual leaders, the fruit of these cults are mass suicides in the South American jungle or the self-immolation of hundreds in besieged fortresses.

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Fiona says

So much covered in one book - gurus, nasty cult leaders, why, what characteristics they share whether they are good or downright hideous, and why people feel the need to follow them. I wouldn't have touched this if it wasn't for book club but I feel like I learnt so much. A little bit unstructured in places but I got there in the end. Learnt something. All good

Matt says

Started out pretty interesting, the first chapter talks about David Koresh and Jim Jones and dudes like that who somehow became gods to so many idiots. It later covers some other well known men, like Jung, Freud, Rajneesh, and some dude named Jesus. Anyway, it's basically saying that all people who are revered in ways like these guys are have many similar characteristics, mostly in the childhood lives.

I thought the first couple chapters were great and I was pretty into it, but about halfway through it starts to feel like a textbook and by the end I just wanted it to be over with. And that Jesus dude? Boring.

Dianne Landry says

I don't go to school so I don't want to read textbooks and this is what this felt like. No thanks.

Viola Briatková says

very interesting reading. lot of food for thoughts

Cooper Cooper says

Anthony Storr is a British psychiatrist who has written extensively about Freud, Jung, creativity and violence. In this book he takes on gurus: in particular, what do they have in common? What traits or life-experiences do they share? Should a guru with weird beliefs be considered mad? Storr discusses these issues abstractly and also illustrates them with case studies of some well-known people he considers gurus, including bad guys like Jim Jones and David Koresh, iffy guys like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and George Gurdjieff, and better guys like George Steiner, Loyola, Freud, Jung, Mother Meara (of India) and Jesus. The characteristics of a guru:

*Special Dispensation—claims to have been afforded a special spiritual insight which has transformed his

own life

*Creative Illness—the special dispensation in the form of a revelation usually occurred after a so-called “creative illness,” in which the guru experienced a spiritual crisis (sometimes of the mid-life variety), extreme psychological pain, and in some cases one or more actual psychotic episodes. (“The pattern of mental distress followed by an irrational solution is characteristic of gurus, whether they are mad or sane, good or evil. Agnostic skeptics do not always realize how deeply irrational normal people can be.”) (“We tend to diagnose mental abnormality in the socially incompetent and overlook or deny it both in the socially dominant and in the socially unobtrusive.”)

*Insight Applies Universally—the guru assumes that his insight applies to all mankind or to all of mankind’s elite. It is the unchallengeable truth—objective verification is irrelevant. Sometimes these “truths” are simply delusions (for example, the cosmologies of Steiner and Gurdjieff), in other cases they include powerful insights about mankind (for example, Freud’s “defense mechanisms” and Jung’s “psychological types”)

*Isolated as Child—the guru was isolated as a child, remained introverted and narcissistic, and developed a rich fantasy life (“Imagination flourishes best in solitude.”) (“At this narcissistic stage in emotional development the aim is to be loved rather than to love anyone else.... Those who remain narcissistic in adult life retain this need to be loved and to be the center of attention together with the grandiosity which accompanies it. This is characteristic of gurus.”)

*Few Friends—the guru has followers but few if any real friends

*Intolerant of Criticism—the guru is extremely sensitive to criticism, and interprets any questioning by “them” (the unbelievers) as assault, or by one of “us” (the believers) as disloyalty

*Elitist and Anti-democratic—though many pretend to be democratic, most gurus are in fact elitist and authoritarian—after all, they are the only ones who know (“Some gurus are dictators on a small scale.”)

*Mysterious Past—some gurus conceal their pre-revelation lives, remaining “men of mystery” (“Images often flourish in the absence of facts.”)

*Danger of Corruption—since they tend to remain isolated from the real world and are showered with positive feedback by their disciples, gurus often swallow their own bathwater in larger and larger gulps, and eventually become totally corrupted by a situation in which they can effectively act out the infant’s narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence. Some gurus start out as wise men, then promote themselves to prophet, and finally claim to be the Messiah or God Himself (Rajneesh: “I am the Messiah America has been waiting for.”)

*Need Disciples—gurus need disciples for more than money, sex and adulation—they need the reassurance of continual positive feedback to silence their own doubts about their omnipotence (“If I were wrong, why would all these people believe what I say?”) (Former lieutenant of Koresh: “[Koresh:] gets a craving. Then he finds the theology to justify the craving. When others buy into his doctrine, he starts believing it himself.”)

How do we know whether a guru is actually mad? Storr makes a couple of points on this issue:

*Social Context—the definition of delusion is determined by social context—often, if enough people believe it, it is not considered delusional. For example, the tenets of Christianity: virgin birth—come on; resurrection—gimme a break. If an unconnected private citizen espoused comparable beliefs—for example, that angels are birthed from armpits and that dead ants will rise again—he would be considered mad. Therefore, says Storr, “the diagnosis of mental illness should not be made on the evidence of beliefs

alone...”

*Problem-solving—the “truths” of gurus, whether valid insights or delusions, are actually attempts at problem-solving—at resolving their spiritual crises. The process is essentially the same as that employed by the highly creative in science and art; the difference is that many gurus think they know, and therefore do not have to subject their insights to objective verification as scientists do, or to aesthetic evaluation as artists do. And many gurus, like some creative scientists and many artists, show symptoms of manic-depression (bipolar disorder) or schizophrenia. (“Paranoid delusions have a positive function. They make sense out of chaos within, and also preserve a subject’s self-esteem. They are a creative solution to the subject’s problems, albeit a creative solution which does not stand up to critical examination.”)

Feet of Clay focuses on gurus, but Storr also has a thing or two to say about their followers. Why do followers prostrate themselves at the feet of other human beings who claim to be gurus? Several motivations come into play:

*Meaning—to give empty lives meaning (C.G. Jung: “Man cannot stand a meaningless life.”)

*Certainty—to discover a certainty that will abolish confusion and psychological pain (“Certainty is a huge seduction.”)

*Simplicity—to simplify life (“One of the major attractions of some of the faiths propounded by gurus is their simplicity. Many of us harbor a secret wish to be transported back to the world of the nursery, where black is black, and white is white...”)

*Find “Parents”—to find the “good” father or mother they never had

*Escape Responsibility—to escape responsibility for their own lives and actions

*Belong—to belong to a social group with similar interests and to engage in social activities and enjoy a camaraderie more satisfying, perhaps, than any they’ve hitherto known

*Something Bigger—to identify with and belong to something bigger and more important than themselves, and thus to escape the pain of low self-esteem or the “horror of [being a:] nonentity” who will die and be quickly forgotten (“No one can afford a total loss of self-esteem, and those who come close to doing so when in the throes of severe depression often commit suicide.”)

*Ecstasy—to experience altered states of consciousness, in particular ecstatic states of oneness with the universe (the “mystical experience”), which many extol as the crowning experience of life (Hugh Milne, a former disciple of Rajneesh: “On several occasions I reached that true bliss and abundant joy which comes from a deep meditative state. This meditative space was incomparably beautiful and worth anything to experience. Those who dismiss ‘evil cults’ have no idea at all how rapturous this state can be, and how no other pleasure can compare with it. Most people who have spent any time in a religious cult will have tasted this bliss, and it is what keeps them coming back for more.”).

For these reasons, many disciples maintain their beliefs, delusive or not, with incredible tenacity. The Christian apologist Tertullian: “And the Son of God died, which is immediately credible because it is absurd. And buried he rose again, which is certain because it is impossible.”

Some gurus do more good than bad, others the reverse. How do we distinguish between them? “The gurus who should be regarded as potentially dangerous are those who are authoritarian and those who are paranoid.” “What distinguishes gurus from more orthodox teachers is their narcissism.” “The certainty shown by gurus should, paradoxically, be the aspect of their behavior which most arouses suspicion.”

But why seek a guru at all? As epigraph for Feet of Clay, Storr chose a quote from the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides:

The wisest men follow their own direction
And listen to no prophet guiding them.
None but the fools believe in oracles,
Forsaking their own judgment.
Know that such men can only come to grief.

This is a very good, straightforward book by a sane, insightful and humane man. Apparently a few of the chapters were written earlier as papers, which results in some repetition, especially late in the book. Otherwise, Feet of Clay is well and simply written and definitely worth reading.

Ahmet Dursun says

An OK attempt at analysis of gurus. The book suffers from a lack of cohesive direction and ends up being a collection of information. On the other hand it's informative.

Bethan says

An interesting exploration of the phenomenon that is gurus by a psychologist.

The chapters are devoted to the stories of selected gurus - including Jim Jones, David Koresh, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Freud, Steiner, Gurdjieff, Jung, Ignatius of Loyola, Jesus, Paul Brunton - alongside psychological analysis of their psyches and those of their disciples.

Storr says that gurus tend to be introverted and narcissistic, people who don't think that anyone really cares for them, which may stem from childhood experiences. They lack equal relationships with others and therefore have few checks that come from criticism and egalitarian discourse which must surely help to result in their often wildly eccentric views.

Storr says that gurus tend to have come to a fixed and unique worldview from a period of psychological unwellness. There is discussion of Jung's schizophrenic symptoms, Ignatius's physical convalescence after being an athlete, Rajneesh's long depression (he is thought to be bipolar), Jesus's forty days and nights in the desert, and so on. Storr says that the formation of a fixed and unique worldview is a way to bring meaning and order to a troubled person as well as gives the narcissist a sense of self-esteem, of importance. He observes that a similar if differing process exists for scientists and creatives in that they seek tranquillity or order through their work.

In the case of gurus, Storr says that gurus must have some doubts which is why they accumulate disciples who reaffirm that they are right, as demonstrated by loyalty. Gurus often subject followers to physically demanding lengthy harangues and control over their lives to test this loyalty.

However, Storr makes the extremely good point that the line is not always so clear cut between irrational

beliefs and rational beliefs in terms of social acceptance - such as that many ordinary people believe in religion - religious beliefs are simply mainstream and sanctioned. He makes the argument that irrational beliefs are psychotic or a problem if they cause social problems.

Some positives are noted that come from gurus even if much of their theories and beliefs are discredited, such as that Freud's theories have increased tolerance while Steiner's work with disabled people treating them well has been a positive effect. Communes even if harsh are remembered by some followers as happy periods of their lives due to the sense of community and abnegation of mental responsibility that comes from following an authoritarian.

Disciples, of course, seek the peace, acceptance and authority that gurus offer. Charisma is explained as often coming from the guru's almost total self-belief and focused interest in the disciple. For example, Storr writes of Andrew Harvey's experience with Mother Meera, a seventeen-year-old Indian woman, whom Harvey would visit to have his head held by her in silence. He felt mystical experiences; a calm, love. Storr considers that Harvey was seeking a mother figure which came from the effective loss of his mother at a young age from being sent to boarding school at the age of six.

There are not always positive outcomes of course - many gurus become corrupt and are confidence tricksters such as Gurdjieff who extracted large sums of money from followers. The Jonestown massacre where 909 people famously died at the bequest of the guru, almost all from cyanide poisoning, would be a spectacular example of a negative outcome from following a guru.

Ben Tyrer says

This was an interesting look at the characteristics many gurus share, and how people develop belief systems which are then spread to others, who reinforce and even help to develop the original delusion. Comparisons are drawn between several notable gurus, which are interesting accounts, while the author describes patterns and similarities in their histories that could constitute a theory of what makes a guru. The author is generous with interjection and his own opinions, which helped keep the book from becoming tiring — which was a risk as the format became a little repetitive toward the end.

a.j.b. says

Started strong, but quickly became repetitive. Each section did discuss a different "guru", and in each section he drove home what makes a guru a guru...in pretty much the exact same words.

I don't like to bash, but I just did not enjoy the author's voice.

I had very high hopes for this book. Perhaps that was part of my problem with it.

John McCarthy says

Mostly focussed

Some parts ramble a bit too long but other chapters are incisive. There are some good buzz phrases. I enjoyed this book.

Nandakishore Varma says

Leaving this one midway. I don't know whether the original book is as bad, but translation is pretty horrible.

ActionScientist says

A very important book by one of the truly wise men of the psychiatric profession, or in Storr's case vocation. I've collected all his books and read parts of them a few times. In a real sense Storr is my chosen guru teacher on field of psychiatry, of which I am both highly critical and pragmatically involved. In turn he compares the guru characteristics of both Jung and Freud.

What I learned, fundamentally, from this book is to constantly check in the mirror and recognise my own tendency towards gurdism ... which is pretty much part and parcel of being a charismatic writer. The sub-title "Saints, Sinners and Madmen" pretty much covers the symbolic spectrum (though I'd also add Angels to the list before Saints), at least in terms of male gurus. Comparative literature about women gurus would be useful to this being.

Caroline says

This book is a fascinating study of gurus – the good, the bad and the ugly. Storr was a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, and writer of some excellent books.

Gurus covered include:

Jim Jones
David Koresh
Georgi Gurdjieff
Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh
Rudolf Steiner
Carl Jung
Sigmund Freud
Ignatius of Loyola
Paul Brunton
Mother Meera.

Storr also mentions some politicians as having strong guru characteristics, e.g., Hitler, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle and John Kennedy. Other examples of gurus that he mentions include Wagner (a bad guru) and Cardinal Hume (a good guru).

I found this book very interesting, certainly I have learnt a lot about what makes a guru, and what makes them attractive to people.... but have a few issues with it. Particularly that Storr doesn't really discuss or

differentiate between good and bad gurus, or at least does this in a very cursory fashion. Yet this to me would seem a vitally important issue.

All in all a fascinating read. I shall definitely be picking my gurus with caution in the future. At least mine tend to live in books, which makes them a lot more manageable.

In the book Storr details various aspects of gurus and their followers, which I roughly outline here.....

(view spoiler)

Rick says

The author profiles Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Jim Jones, David Koresh, and G. I. Gurdjieff as self-deluded narcissists who shamelessly exploited their followers. He also profiles Rudolf Steiner and Paul Brunton as mystics with weird ideas who were given to self-delusion. Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Ignatius Loyola,

who have had an outsized influence upon psychiatry and Roman Catholicism, are profiled as well. He even compares Jesus Christ with Loyola. While some gurus have been destructive, like many dictators, some have also managed to produce works beneficial to society. Sure, there have been plenty of abusers of power throughout history, but I come away from this book thinking that Storrs is chiefly concerned about those who espouse "strange" (i.e., non-materialist) ideals and manage to gather a following. I know some self-absorbed people who need help, but I'm not sure if Storrs has answers for them.

Bec says

Storr goes into detail about the childhood and life story of men he considers gurus, both evil and benevolent. The author is a psychiatrist or perhaps a psychoanalyst, and not a sociologist, but still I found it strange that he examined all aspects of the gurus' lives and never mentioned gender as a possible factor in the social development of these men. All of the people Storr examines are men, save for the last 9 pages briefly mentioning a woman who actually does not fit any of the patterns Storr develops in the rest of the book. I'm not saying there are not women who seek power over others or who are narcissistic megalomaniacs, but it seems to me that patriarchy might have something to do with cults based on relationships of disparate levels of power and control. Otherwise he had interesting insights, but this omission was disappointing.
