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Barbara Vine's the Minotaur: The Maze of Asperger's Syndrome

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The Minotaur: The Maze of Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's Syndrome And Autism

Mind's turned on and tuned out

A mystery no one will find out

Fascinated and focused on a distraction

No one can interpret or foretell my reaction

Sometimes seems gifted sometimes dumb

All emotional bridges somewhat numb

Family bonds are the only ones that reach me

Stuck in an alternate reality

Posted by Johnaster on Saturday, May 23, 2009.

<http://www.wrongplanet.net/postt99571.html>

The story of the Minotaur which arises from Greek mythology is well known: the minotaur is the offspring of Pasiphaë and a white bull, a gift from Poseidon to Minos, King of Crete, a sign of his approval of Minos's rule. Minos was to have sacrificed the bull to Poseidon, but instead, he keeps it because it is such a beautiful creature. Poseidon then punishes Minos by having Pasiphaë fall in love with the bull—the creature that is born from their union is the Minotaur. In order to keep the Minotaur, King Minos has Daedalus, inventor and master architect build the maze built. In order to punish Aegeus, King of Athens, for the

death of his son, Androgeus, Minos demanded a tribute, in which fourteen young people from Greece would be released in the maze where Minos hoped that they would become lost and eventually eaten by the Minotaur. Theseus, who had fallen in love with Ariadne, Minos's daughter, volunteers to end the tributes by killing the Minotaur. He goes to Crete as one of the sacrificial victims, slays the Minotaur, then uses a skein of thread, given to him by Ariadne, to find his way out again.

At the center of Barbara Vine's novel, *The Minotaur*, lies the mystery of the Cosway family. The title of the novel recalls the Greek myth with all of its attendant associations, preparing the reader for a tale involving perhaps illicit love, a labyrinth, betrayal, sacrifice and murder. In addition, the novel's gothic setting prepares the reader for this strange family with dark secrets hidden in the past, as well as the murder that occurs in the last section of the novel. The labyrinth which houses the story's minotaur operates on at least three levels in this novel: the physical labyrinth, the library Great-grandfather Cosway had constructed in the center of the house; the twists and turns of the story, through which the narrator tries to navigate a confusing maze of jealousy and intrigue; and at the center of it all, the Minotaur.

What the reader does not expect to find in the middle of this labyrinthine narrative, however, is the story of a man with Asperger's syndrome, a condition not well understood today, let alone at the time of the novel's plot, in the mid-1960s. At the end of the novel, the reader

may attach the term *minotaur* to John Cosway, John Cosway, whose mental condition is a maze-like puzzle. John, far from the monster in mythology, has been cast as a monster by his mother, Julia Cosway, and her daughters, Ida, Ella and Winifred. Another daughter, Zorah, the result of Julia's love affair with Dr. Lombard--who also treats John with schizophrenia drugs by Julia's orders--is the only member of the family who treats John with respect, perhaps indicating their common bond as "outsiders." Through the course of the narrative, the reader learns that there is more than one maze in this book, and more than one monster.

The narrative begins when Kerstin Kvist encounters Ella Cosway, her daughter, and her granddaughter, many years later, in another city far from England. Their encounter brings back memories of the year she spent with the Cosways and the tragedy that occurred at the end of that year. Kerstin, a young Swedish student, fresh out of college with an English degree (and a "humble nursing qualification") had been hired by the Cosways to be a sort of companion/nurse for John. Kerstin had learned of the request from a mutual friend, and encouraged by the fact that her lover was currently living in London, she agreed to take the position. In writing this novel, Vine, and her heroine, Kerstin, is very much aware of the 19th century novels with similar plots—the young woman goes to the large estate, unaware of the dangers around her, she learns a horrible secret, her life is threatened, and so forth. Often in these novels, the young heroine must find her way through some type of

labyrinth or maze: dark passageways that seem to lead nowhere and in which she is trapped and helpless to find her way out again without the help of a hero.

When Kerstin first takes the job, she is intrigued by the idea that the house has a maze. However, as she looks around the grounds and inside the house on her arrival she does not see it: “There was no sign of a maze in this part of the grounds, only grass and ancient oak trees and holly. . . .The interior of the house had disappointed me, but I had faith in the maze. I was sure I was about to find it” (13, 19). For several days afterwards, she continues to look, only to be disappointed:

How much of the lawns, shrubberies, copses, and parkland I walked over were part of the Lydstep land, I had no idea at the time. These grounds were pleasant and pretty enough, but I had been looking for a labyrinth and I hadn’t found it. I was struck by the strangeness of that in itself, that a maze that by its very nature is a puzzle, should also be a puzzle to find. (20)

This passage, I think, sets the tone for the rest of the novel—the entire Cosway family, as Kerstin will find, is a puzzle.

Kerstin stumbles onto the truth of the house’s maze when she learns of the library at the heart of the house. After hearing about for a few weeks, Zorah finally takes her for a tour. Kerstin learns that the library was built by Great Grandfather Cosway, but that it had been kept

locked to keep John out. In the middle of the library/maze, which Zorah and Kerstin reach after walking through the many twists and turns of the bookshelves, sits a bronze figure “of a young man holding a book spread out on his outstretched hands. At his sandaled feet, also in bronze, lay two discarded volumes, one with Homer engraved on it, the other with Plato. The book in his hands, however, was real, paper and ink and leather, and when I approached I saw it was the Bible, open at the Book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha” (116). Zorah comments “God knows why but the young chap is supposed to be Longinus, the one who wrote about the sublime, not the one who put his spear into Christ’s side. He’s rejecting Homer and Plato in favor of Holy Writ” (116). It is ironic that Longinus holding the Bible should be at the center of this maze—the purveyor of what is the beautiful specifically in writing—what is proper and properly proportioned to create beautiful writing. At the center of the Cosway family maze sits John, the epitome of confusion to the rest of his family, and yet, left to his own devices—without being drugged into a zombie-like state—capable of highly logical, mathematical thought. Perhaps this embodiment of Longinus, who seems to symbolize balance and proportion, foreshadows the ending of the novel, in which all is set to rights for John.

The relationships within and around the Cosway family can be described as a confusing maze of jealousy and betrayal. Kerstin gradually learns the secrets of this family: of Julia’s love affair with Dr.

Lombard, which produced Zorah; Ida's early relationship with Eric Dawson, the rector of the local parish who is, when the narrative begins, engaged to Winifred, Ida's younger sister; Ella's ongoing love affair with Felix Dunsford, an artist new to the town of Windrose, who Kerstin compares to Lord Byron; and Winifred's engagement to Eric, while also having an affair with Felix. Of course, Ella is jealous of Winifred, but when Ida discovers Winifred's betrayal of Eric, she is angry. Her anger simmers just beneath the surface, however. Kerstin notes the resemblance of Zorah to Dr. Lombard and then realizes her role in the family. Zorah had left long ago, married a wealthy man who soon died, and became the family's source of income. Since John had been left everything in his father's will, in the form of a trust, Julia was completely dependent on both John and Zorah for everything. This situation was becoming more unbearable to her when Kerstin joins their family.

As Kerstin gradually unearths the family's secrets, she also begins helping John to awaken from his drug-induced state. After Julia falls down the stairs one evening and breaks her leg, accusing John of having pushed her, she must stay in the hospital for several days. Kerstin, who has been opposed to giving John a sedative before sleep every night, tries to administer the drug, but John won't take it. She decides to just let him be, and thus begins his emergence as a human being. He begins to read again, to speak in complete sentences, and although he doesn't "become normal" as Kerstin had hoped, he becomes himself—the self he

was meant to be without drugs. As Kerstin discovers, John is not schizophrenic, but does have a condition that she does not fully understand. She notes his symptoms, but has no name for them. John is a mathematical and linguistic genius, but has no interest—even to the point of distaste—for contact with other people. He is happiest when alone with books, paper, and a pen. When touched, John reacts violently. Early in Kerstin’s stay, he becomes agitated and retreats behind the sofa in the drawing room, where he hid himself away for hours. Although Kerstin was shocked, Julia told her to just let him be. We now could call John autistic, with a condition called Asperger’s Syndrome. The medical description of Asperger’s includes what is called “social impairment disorder,” the symptoms of which are “eye contact difficulties, difficulty in recognizing and reading facial expressions and body language, inability to develop and maintain peer relationships, difficulty in relating and interacting with others. Also included is a list of symptoms which includes “limited, stereotypical and abnormal interest patterns and aberrant and stereotypical movements, such as flapping,” in addition to “an absence of language, self-help and cognitive delays, a lack of environmental curiosity, and significant occupational and/or social impairment” (Autism Spectrum Disorders 84). John’s symptoms have probably worsened because he was both drugged for years and isolated within the narrow confines of his house and grounds. He was also denied access to the one room in which he felt happy, the library.

Asperger's was once confused with schizophrenia because doctors could not pin down the symptoms. It was not until 1944 that a medical student named Hans Asperger was able to sufficiently describe the common symptoms after having worked with a group of boys in Vienna. Unfortunately, because of WWII, his work was not translated into English until 1981. And so men like John Cosway, while they may have been identified as having autism, were not completely understood. We now know that autism is part of a broad spectrum of disorders, Asperger's being only one in a wide array of conditions grouped under the name PDD (pervasive developmental disorder). People with Asperger's are thought to be higher functioning, but their social skills can vary widely. John's inability to connect with human beings is a common symptom of autism. He is more interested in objects than in people. He is also obsessive-compulsive, carrying small objects around with him in his pockets and laying them out in a certain order by his bedside table every evening. Although he was violently opposed to being touched, left to his own devices he was not a violent individual. As he begins to awaken from the effect of the drugs, his behavioral quirks do not change, but he begins to express himself in ways that surprise Kerstin—he insists, for instance, that he would like new glasses, which Julia denies. Some weeks after Winifred announces her marriage to Eric, John asks Kerstin if she will marry him. Julia is appalled and wants to

know how Kerstin has managed to manipulate him. But Kerstin later understands this request in the light of his illness:

As a high-functioning autistic, he had simply expressed a desire, as he always did, and because he knew nothing of tact or discretion or that this request is always made in private, was without normal inhibitions, had no shyness or care for the usages of the world, he had expressed it in the presence of three other people. At that time, I had never had a shock like it. . . .The awful silence was broken by Winifred, whose pent-up excitement burst out of her in a shriek of laughter and the worst question she could have asked. 'Marry you? Are you mad?' (241)

The more John wakes up, the more difficult he becomes. Despite everyone's hopes, in particular Winifred that without the drugs, John would become "normal," it would not happen. "John could only express his true feelings, egocentric, indifferent to others' sensibilities, insensitive, isolationist, for this was Asperger's unchangeable nature" (247). The longer John remained in the house, the more desperate Julia becomes to rid herself of him. She fears that he will spend all of the family's money on trivial things and leave nothing for her to live on. Her cage has been opened and the minotaur has escaped.

Although the catalyst for Winifred's murder is her love affair with Felix, the motive and timing of her murder goes far deeper. Julia Cosway had been trying for years to rid herself of John, her only son, who was left everything in his father's will: the house, the money, everything. If Julia was to live, she would live on John's trust. Zorah, the child of her illicit affair with Dr. Lombard, cannot abide her mother or her father, and as Kerstin learns, takes care of the family only because of John. As I pointed out earlier, Zorah is the only member of the family to see John as a human being and not a monster. She sees in him an ally against their mother and sisters. Although it is Winifred who is murdered, John is the real victim. On the night of her murder, the night before her wedding to Eric, she is on her way out the door to see Felix for what Kerstin later assumes will be her last meeting. John, Ida, and Julia are all in the drawing room. Before Kerstin goes upstairs, she sees John gazing at the vase, transfixed. From her bedroom she hears a horrible crash, followed by wails and screams. When she runs into the drawing room, she sees Winifred, lying dead on the floor, her head a mass of blood, having been smashed by the vase. John rolls on the floor wailing, Ida crawls on the floor, picking up shards of glass, her hands bloody, and Julia crouches on the sofa, her hands also bloody. Kerstin notices that no blood is on John's hands. He hides in the library until the police come—they find him at the center of the labyrinth, a huddled mass.

At first it seems that perhaps John was guilty of the crime, but because Kerstin had been keeping a daily journal of her time at Lydstep Old Hall, when it came time for questions, she had the details the police needed to drop the charges against John and turn their attention to Julia and Ida, the true culprits. In the end, John was released from the hospital, eventually to find a home of his own with Zorah. Julia died in a fire, which Kerstin suspects was started by Ida, who had once confessed to her that she “would do anything for a change.” After the fire, John and Kerstin stand in the ruins of the labyrinth, all the books turned to ash and mud. The burned out house and ruined labyrinth, although they symbolize the death of the Cosway’s lifestyle, also symbolizes a new beginning for John. Although it may be mixing mythology, it is in the burned out labyrinth library that John is, in a sense, reborn, the minotaur dead, the phoenix can now arise.

While Vine’s novel is a gothic mystery on one level, in using the minotaur and the labyrinth as the foundation of the narrative, she opens up the more complex mysteries of what it means to be fully human—in this novel, those family members with fully functioning psyches act in monstrous ways towards John whose mental state has been compromised by years of neglect and abuse. Before Kerstin joined the family, John had only been able to rely on his half-sister, Zorah, to see him as a human being. Kerstin, in the role of Theseus, follows a thread of clues that eventually leads both herself and John out of the maze.

However, I don't want to oversimplify. I think that rather than give us a straightforward answer, Vine's novel merely leads us into and out of a labyrinth that leaves us with more questions.