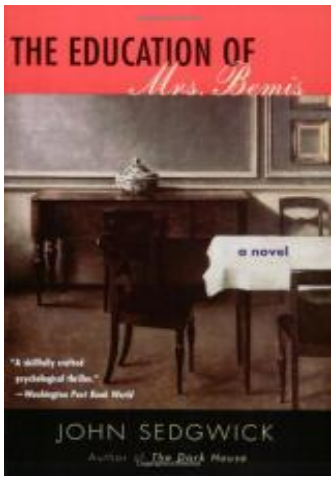
The Education of Mrs. Bemis

by John Sedgwick



About the Book

The patient is a 76-year old widowed white woman with a history of depression...referred by Gerald Faulkes, M.D., of the Boston City Hospital (BCH) emergency room where she was taken after being found completely disoriented in a Boston department store...Patient agreed to be brought to Montrose for diagnosis and treatment. "I have failed everyone and now I'm failing myself."

Who is Mrs. Bemis? What happened to her? Can she be cured? And what does she have to do with a drowned man who is found after his body bumps against a skinny-dipping college student? These questions haunt fledgling psychiatrist Dr. Alice Matthews, who is about to break all the rules to try to cure the nearly catatonic Boston matron in John Sedgwick's riveting portrayal of two women-and their "education."

Dr. Alice Matthews is the newest and youngest staff member at the once prestigious Montrose Psychiatric Hospital. A mistake in judgment regarding a suicidal patient has shaken her confidence, so the case of Mrs. Madeline Bemis is more than a challenge. It might make or break her career. Determined to get through to the uncommunicative old lady, she begins to investigate Mrs. Bemis outside of the therapeutic setting. With the help of a local police detective, she follows a twisted trail that leads back in time to the World War II era, a woman's tragic choices, and perhaps to a contemporary case of murder.

As for Mrs. Bemis herself, once a beautiful Boston debutante, she has kept her secrets for over fifty years. Now, her memories reveal a chilling set of circumstances that have prompted more than one breakdown. Can an untested doctor really cure a lifetime of mental illness? Or will Dr. Matthew's approach lead to Mrs. Bemis's irrevocable retreat into the darkness of her own mind?

A combination of riveting psychological thriller and fine literary fiction with a Jamesean sensibility, John Sedgwick's unforgettable novel bridges half a century and two women's lives. In it, the fates of Madeline Bemis and Alice Matthews

are interwoven as they enter into a relationship as patient and doctor...and ultimately as two friends. The drowned man at the center of the mystery is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of a lifetime of psychological distress by a woman out of touch with her feelings. And what ultimately happens to Mrs. Bemis in Sedgwick's powerful, uplifting work becomes a shining testament to compassion and the ability of the heart to heal.

Discussion Guide

1. What does the title of the book mean? Consider that Mrs. Madeline Bemis says, about her time in the home for unwed mothers in Golden, Colorado: "It was my college, my graduate school. I earned a Ph.D. in misery. Saw it, felt it, ate it, slept it. A useful thing to know in this world, I suppose. All the suffering in it." (p. 324). Is this the key to the title? Why is a knowledge of suffering useful? (It might be interesting to consider here that in Buddhism, the Buddha said, "All I teach is suffering and its end.")

2. What would you say is "The Education of Alice Matthews"?

3. There are some dandy villains in this story. Who would you choose as the most villainous? If personal growth comes from our encounters with difficulties, how do the story's villains push both Mrs. Bemis and Dr. Alice Matthews to change?

4. The author bases his depiction of Mrs. Bemis's depression partly on Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery. What was Mrs. Bemis's trauma? What circumstances contributed to her depression? Why do you think keeping secrets is so harmful, and revealing them so cathartic?

5. It is said, "The rich are different." How does Mrs. Bemis's social class make her different? In what ways, do you think, did her social status and wealth help or hurt her?

6. Why is Alice Matthews so drawn to Mrs. Bemis? She herself tries to answer this question, so you might what to look at what she says, and then think about what she doesn't say.

7. In this story, women badly misjudge the men they choose. Why do you think they made such poor choices? Do you think Alice Matthews has a future with Detective Frank LeBeau, i.e., is he a better choice?

8. The author says in his "A Note on Psychiatry" at the end of the book: "As Irvin D. Yalom makes clear, the psychiatric effort is not solely the patient's journey, but the psychiatrist's as well." Dr. Matthews clearly represents Yalom's point of view. What are the opposing ones, represented by the other psychiatrists in the novel? What are the risks, as well as the obvious rewards, of Yalom's approach?

9. Discuss Brendan Hurley. How would you solve the mystery of his death? Look at Mrs. Bemis from his perspective. How does his perception differ from her own? What does she contribute to his tragic life?

10. Since Mrs. Bemis's mother also spent time in the Montrose Psychiatric Hospital, do you think Mrs. Bemis's mental problems were hereditary, learned behavior, or both?

11. Why doesn't Mrs. Bemis contact her real son? How would you evaluate her mental health at the novel's end?

Author Bio

John Sedgwick is the bestselling author of 13 books, including BLOOD MOON; WAR OF TWO, his acclaimed account of the duel between Hamilton and Burr; two novels, and the family memoir IN MY BLOOD. A longtime contributor to *GQ, Newsweek, Vanity Fair* and *The Atlantic*, he wrote the first national expose of the exploits of Whitey Bulger in *GQ* in 1992.

Critical Praise

"An absorbing and completely captivating story of an upper class girl growing up into the Second World War and the vivid passions of a young resident psychiatrist struggling to reach her patient. A richly peopled, deftly surprising and highly satisfying novel."

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