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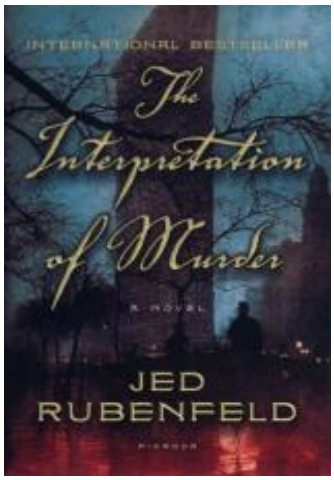
The Interpretation of Murder

by Jed Rubenfeld



About the Book

In this ingenious, suspenseful historical thriller, Sigmund Freud is drawn into the mind of a sadistic killer who is savagely attacking Manhattan's wealthiest heiresses

Inspired by Sigmund Freud's only visit to America, **The Interpretation of Murder** is an intricate tale of murder and the mind's most dangerous mysteries. It unfurls on a sweltering August evening in 1909 as Freud disembarks from the steamship George Washington, accompanied by Carl Jung, his rival and protégé. Across town, in an opulent apartment high above the city, a stunning young woman is found dangling from a chandelier --- whipped, mutilated, and strangled. The next day, a second beauty --- a rebellious heiress who scorns both high society and her less adventurous parents --- barely escapes the killer. Yet Nora Acton, suffering from hysteria, can recall nothing of her attack. Asked to help her, Dr. Stratham Younger, America's most committed Freudian analyst, calls in his idol, the Master himself, to guide him through the challenges of analyzing this high-spirited young woman whose family past has been as complicated as his own.

The Interpretation of Murder leads readers from the salons of Gramercy Park, through secret passages, to Chinatown --- even far below the currents of the East River where laborers are building the Manhattan Bridge. As Freud fends off a mysterious conspiracy to destroy him, Younger is drawn into an equally thrilling adventure that takes him deep into the subterfuges of the human mind.

Richly satisfying, elegantly crafted, **The Interpretation of Murder** marks the debut of a brilliant, spectacularly entertaining new storyteller.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the use of the title, **The Interpretation of Murder**.

2. The author's portrayal of women is noteworthy: Is Nora still a victim when she is empowered by a sympathetic listener? What are Clara's motives for the events in the novel? How are Betty the maid, Susie Merrill, and Greta depicted? Do these characters reflect the turn-of-the-century society, or do they represent a more timeless portrayal of women?

3. Dr. Stratham Younger, a thirty-three-year-old Harvard graduate who teaches at Clark University and who is the narrator of the book, insisted at age seventeen that all great art and scientific discoveries were made at or near the turn of a century (Michelangelo's *David*-1501; Cervantes's *Don Quixote*-1604; Beethoven's symphonies-1800; Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*-1900, etc.) Discuss this phenomenon.

4. Is Younger the right man for the job of trying to unravel the attempted murder of Nora? Discuss psychoanalysis versus interrogation.

5. Consider the role of class conflict in the book: Jung's feelings of shame over his obvious wealth; Jung versus Freud; Acton versus Banwell; Chong versus Leon; Malley and Betty, etc.

6. What role does psychological transference and sexual attraction play in the book?

7. Younger asks, "How can human beings be loved if we carry within such repugnant desires?" Freud thinks that Nora wants to sodomize her father. Is this ultimately true?

8. Discuss the author's mix of fact and fiction. How has this device been used in previous New York novels, such as **The Alienist**, **Ragtime**, **Dreamland: A Novel**, **Paradise Alley**, etc.

9. Younger is obsessed with solving the riddle of **Hamlet** in the book. Discuss his analysis of "to be or not to be" in terms of Freudian/Oedipal theories. What does Younger finally decide is the correct interpretation?

10. Younger says, "Some people feel a need to bring about the very thing that will most torment them." How does this describe the characters in the book?

11. When he boards the ship back to Europe, Freud says that "America is a mistake... A gigantic mistake." What does he mean?

Recommended Further Reading:

The Alienist Caleb Carr
The Historian by Elizabeth Kostova
The Rule of Four Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason
Ragtime E.L. Doctorow
Forever: A Novel Pete Hamill
Dreamland: A Novel Kevin Baker
Underworld

Don Delillo

The Freud Reader Sigmund Freud

Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria Sigmund Freud

The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung Sigmund Freud, edited by William McGuire, translated by Ralph Manheim and R.F.C. Hull

Author Bio

Currently the Robert R. Slaughter Professor of Law at Yale University, **Jed Rubenfeld** is one of this country's foremost experts on constitutional law. As a Princeton undergraduate, he completed his thesis on Freud. At the Juilliard School, he studied Shakespeare. Rubenfeld lives in New Haven, Connecticut, with his wife and two children.

Critical Praise

"This is a bold page-turner that propels us from the star with with a driving plot and intriguing characters, but also with ideas --- a whole history of ideas. It's a richly motivated thriller that will make you reconsider the mysteries of Freud and Hamlet. Here is a novel that you'll only want to put down in order to think more about the book."

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