

# The Strange Case of the Mad Professor: A True Tale of Endangered Species, Illegal Drugs, and Attempted Murder

Peter Kobel

Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2013, 288 pp. (hardback), \$26.95.  
ISBN-13: 9780762773770.

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Anyone in physical anthropology in the 1960s–1980s likely had some contact with John Buettnner-Janusch or BJ as everyone called him. Those young colleagues that never witnessed the BJ presence at AAPA meetings or in the field missed a real character in the profession. The American Association of Physical Anthropologists was small then, a few hundred members, but even today with big attendance, if BJ were around, he would be obvious and draw a crowd. BJ had a profound, lasting influence on the field with his introductory textbooks (*Origins of Man* [1966] and *Physical Anthropology: A Perspective* [1973]), the founding and development of the Duke Primate Center, training major figures in the field (Bob Sussman, Peter Nute, for example), serving as an NSF panelist, serving for four years as editor of the *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology*, and establishing (with others, including his wife, Vina) a biochemical approach to primate and human evolution, past and present. Kobel's book focuses on some of this, but it is really about BJ's fall and his personality.

I first encountered him as a student at the 1972 AAPA meeting in Lawrence, KS. BJ participated in a large symposium on human evolution and at the closing of the session I remember him bellowing out from the back of the auditorium, "I refuse to let Sherry (Washburn) have the last word." By far the best dressed person in the house, he strolled down to the front of the auditorium and, without notes, ended the session with a quote in German by Wittgenstein (1973: 209). It is as true today as then. "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence." He might have also quoted Mark Twain, "The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject and it is probable that if they continue we shall soon know nothing at all about it." BJ was certainly not opposed to research or interpretations, but he clearly thought many in the field were over-speculative. In many cases he was correct. A few months later, I met him again when he came to the University of Michigan to give a talk. I was in charge of putting his slides in a carousel and he admonished me about getting fingerprints on them, even before I loaded them in the tray. Later, my advisor, Milford Wolpoff, encouraged me to send a draft of my dissertation improvement grant to BJ for a preliminary review, since he was on the NSF panel. A few weeks later I received a hand written letter starting out "Dear Sonny Boy." He called me a bumpkin and disparaged me for leaving out umlauts and the grave/acute accents in my grant for work in Eu-

rope. Later he apologized for the rough words, saying he had had a bad day. BJ was always friendly after that and I always sought him out at the AAPA meetings. He was easy to find with his flashy ties, expensive suits, and blond hair. But, my experiences are minor in comparison to the main characters in the book. I will leave the reader to find them in Kobel's book, but there are rich details about his academic life at Yale, Duke, and NYU, and the good and bad times with familiar names like Ian Tattersall, Elwyn Simons, Cliff Jolly, Alison Jolly, Sherwood Washburn, Peter Klopfer, Richard Wiggins, Alison Richard, Bob Sussman, and Sidney Mintz.

As reported in various places in the book, BJ was always recognized as having a brilliant mind, but he was volatile, capricious and brutal sometimes; other times kind and caring. And these could change faster than the weather. Quoting Peter Klopfer, BJ was described as "peremptory, uncompromising, unpredictable, unreasonable and arbitrary" (p. x.). This was a comment about BJ's 'qualifications' as a chairman, long after his tenure at NYU ended. His venom increased with his court cases and he was especially hard on his prosecutor, in correspondence with his friends, calling her among other things a "Nazi whore" and the federal judge "a lunatic" (p. 138). Without giving it all away, BJ was involved in and orchestrated a project to use his graduate students and NYU laboratory to manufacture drugs. They also used him, so it was a mutually crazy operation. As nutty as it sounds, he did not try to cover his tracks or even be secretive about what he was doing. He claimed the drugs (LSD and methaqualone) would be used for experiments on lemurs, but there were no lemurs and not even that much drug production that is documented. About half of the book covers this period of his life. The other half is about his time at Yale and Duke and his life with Vina. They were married for 27 years and when she died in 1977, everyone always said BJ lost his rudder and brake.

Kobel traces BJ's ascent and fall from the earliest days ("Rather than playing with the neighborhood kids outside, he preferred to listen to opera... Inevitably he began to annoy or alienate many townspeople," p. 6) to the fall ("BJ stood up to plead guilty, admitting that he had made the chocolates himself, inserted the poisons into them, put them in Godiva boxes, and mailed them," p. 201). The story of how he moved through life is well-traced by Kobel and I do not want to give anything more away in this review. The book is a good read, for the dwindling few who knew BJ

and for all the young scholars entering the field. The picture of BJ in his NYU office on p. 75 is worth the price of the book. Whether you knew BJ or not, this is an interesting book about one of the real characters in biological anthropology.

#### REFERENCES

Buettner-Janusch, J. 1973. Discussion. *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 17: 209.