

## References

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JAMES R. MERIKANGAS, M.D.  
Washington, D.C.

***The Interview Room: A Novel*, by Roderick Anscombe, M.D.** New York, St. Martin's Press, 2005, 320 pp., \$24.95.

Dr. Paul Lucas is a tormented soul. The protagonist of Roderick Anscombe's third novel, *The Interview Room*, suffers from posttraumatic nightmares replaying the fatal car accident that claimed the life of his toddler son only a year ago. His lovely wife, Abby—a social worker who declares she is not ready to surrender her grief—has become remote and secretive. His chairman calls to give him a heads-up: Craig Cavanaugh, the grandson of a superwealthy financier (he's on the hospital's board of trustees and has donated its Cavanaugh Pavilion) will be admitted to Paul's unit at the Sanders Institute, the forensic facility run by the hospital.

Craig's crime is simple. He's a Harvard undergraduate who's been stalking Natalie Davis, a teaching assistant for Craig's creative writing class, and he's violated a restraining order. Before he heads to Sanders Institute to interview Craig, Dr. Lucas meets Natalie—who looks a bit like Abby and is just a little flirtatious—to hear her side of the story. He then proceeds to Sanders, and his sessions with Craig begin in Interview Room One. The sessions are filled with tension, and it's never clear who's interviewing whom; their interactions are reminiscent of those between Clarice and Dr. Lector, and there are moments when it seems Craig has the upper hand and Dr. Lucas just might crumble. Finally, Craig's commitment hearing comes, and the judge agrees to release him—after all, he's only suffering from an adjustment disorder with mixed emotional features—on condition that he continue in outpatient therapy with Dr. Lucas.

From here, all hell breaks loose. Craig, now free in society, is able to violate every boundary. He deftly weaves his way in and out of Dr. Lucas' life, and the therapy sessions are a series of mind games. Although Dr. Lucas is proclaimed as the world's expert on lying, it isn't clear how he will conquer Craig or vindicate himself in a series of concocted plots. The story becomes one of murder, infidelity, infatuation, and intrigue.

A reader opens a novel with a set of expectations; mine were shaped by Anscombe's first novel, *The Secret Life of Laszlo, Count Dracula* (1). Anscombe's rendition of the Dracula tale is written as the diary of a Paris-trained physician, a secret serial killer, who returns to the Hungarian countryside to assume his legacy as Count Dracula. While the title might lure the vampire crowd, there is nothing supernatural here, and the story is told with calculating, lyrical prose and meticulous detail to tone, character, and setting. *The Interview Room* is not as elegant a work; the writing is more clipped and less detailed, and everything about this book moves at a faster pace designed to entertain. Anscombe is a gifted, versatile writer whose literary voice glides in a variety of genres.

As a quick read with a self-propelled plot, *The Interview Room* is the perfect "vacation read." That's not to say, however, that the novel is fluff. Its author, Roderick Anscombe, is a forensic psychiatrist at Bridgewater State Hospital, and the voice of Dr. Lucas lends insights unique to thriller fiction. His portrayal of the stalker's tenacity is chilling. Worth the sleep you'll lose staying up to finish it.

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DINAH MILLER, M.D.  
Baltimore, Md.

## HISTORY AND SOCIETY

***The Story of the Stone (The Dream of the Red Chamber, vol. 1: The Golden Days)*, by Cao Xueqin; translated by David Hawkes.** New York, Penguin Classics, 1974, 544 pp., \$16.00 (paper).

I cannot recommend this book as a "good read"; it is not a page turner. I had it on my summer list for vacation reading, but it took patience and discipline to make my way through volume one. Volume two eroded my resolve, and as of this writing I doubt I shall complete the five-volume collection. So this review can report only my first steps into a novel that is an elaborate tapestry of life during the Qing dynasty (1644 to 1911), when the Han people of China were conquered and ruled by the Manchu of the North. *The Story of the Stone* is better known in China as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. It is by all accounts the most famous Chinese novel and has earned a place in the great literature of the world. One is told that if you want to understand modern-day China you must read this 18th-century novel.

Mao Zedong boasted that during his lifetime he had read it through from cover to cover five times. Amid his ruthless cultural purges, the "Great Helmsman" allowed *The Story of the Stone* to survive. He claimed that this was because it was the best description of the demise of feudalism. But as I struggled through the seemingly endless and nuanced descriptions of a refined and exotic culture, most of it devoted to a celebration of momentary beauty, I wondered if Mao was not a closet aesthete. The novel describes the decline of a great feudal family, but the writer lingers wistfully over the beauty of its vanished splendor. "All is insubstantial doomed to pass, as moonlight mirrored in the water, or flowers reflected in a glass." These are the lyrics of a song in the novel describing star-crossed lovers, but it captures the spirit of inspired resignation that impelled the author, Cao Xueqin, who was himself born into one of the great families of the Qing dynasty that had fallen into collapse. Scholars tell us that he wrote this classic while living in poverty and trying to reconcile himself to the loss of the world he reconstructed in his novel.

An example that conveys some sense of what the Occidental reader encounters is the description of the visit of Yuan-chun, a daughter of the family who has risen to the exalted status of concubine to the Emperor. To welcome this august personage on her brief visit, the family builds a new garden on