Kendall’s 7 super achievers obsess, because of a personality disorder?

By Glenn Altschuler

When a friend predicted that someone would soon write his biography, sex researcher Alfred Kinsey proclaimed, “Nonsense! The progress of science depends upon knowledge. It has nothing to do with personalities.” According to journalist Joshua Kendall, Kinsey could never acknowledge that “validation for his particular sexual tastes” and his obsessive-compulsive personality disorder were the principal drivers of his scholarly work.

In “America’s Obsessives,” Kendall, the author of biographies of lexicographer Noah Webster and Peter Mark Roget, provides case studies of the creator of Roget’s Thesaurus and Peter Mark Roget, seven superachievers—Melvil Dewey, Charles Lindbergh, Estée Lauder, Ted Williams, and Kinsey—each of whom he argues, was afflicted by internal pressures they son espoused and the psychological disorder they were responsible for their “extraordinary external achievements.”

Kendall is a gifted storyteller and his book is full of fascinating details about numbers. Heinz, he indicates, was cursed—and blessed—with all of these traits. Thinking about an effective and enduring slogan for Manhattan’s Third Avenue El, to people of all ages and races “off the train and headed to all of the number seven, jumped ad for “21 styles of shoes,” presence and “alluring significance Sterling drew the psychological influence he had “its source” in alienation against his childhood Anglican tutors. He suggestion that Jefferson’s choice of Sally Hemmings for his mistress “is entirely consistent with [his] character disorder” cries out for some discussion of the pervasiveness of sexual intercourse between owners and their slaves in the United States. Skepticism is the appropriate response as well to Kendall’s claims that Heinz’s “addiction to making quotidian life easier” for his mother led him to develop mass-produced processed food; Dewey’s “desire to bring more women into the library business was rooted in part out of his own out-of-control sexual desire”; “equality was anathema” to Lauder, “as a good obsessive”; and of Williams, a devoted fisherman, his “closest bonds were with his flies.”

Kendall says he admires the ways in which his obsessive innovators solved problems and the attributes they brought to their crafts. In “these tense economic times,” he writes, “America could certainly benefit from a new generation of obsessive innovators.” It’s clear, however, that he doesn’t approve of how the men and woman he has put on the couch lived their lives. His book reminds us as well of Oscar Wilde’s warning that “biography lends to death a new terror.”

Glen C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.