

Shaken and stirred

The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves

By Siri Hustvedt
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AT THE 2008 Adelaide Writers' Week, Siri Hustvedt shook. Not a nervous twitch or slight hand tremor that betrays stage fright. Her body convulsed with such force that she rattled the podium to which she clung. The audience looked on in confused embarrassment. How could the beloved author of eight books react this way to a crowd? Why didn't her husband, Paul Auster, or the moderator, J. M. Coetzee, do something?

This was not the first time Hustvedt's body betrayed her. In the new, erudite and moving exploration of her mysterious ailment, *The Shaking Woman*, she chronicles the shudders that ripped through her body from the neck down at her father's memorial service, leaving only her voice and consciousness untouched.

At the university where her father taught for 40 years, Hustvedt began to speak about him and lost complete control of her body. Her mother described the event as "looking at an electrocution".

Anyone who has read Hustvedt's intriguing essays, including those in *A Plea for Eros*, understands that she is an intellectual searcher. While her own medical enigmas bookend *The Shaking Woman*, it also functions as an introduction to major areas of thought in psychology, neurology, psychoanalysis and mental illness, as well as forays into literature.

It serves as a companion piece to her most recent novel, *The Sorrows of an American*, whose protagonist (a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst) is

a kind of imaginary brother to Hustvedt.

In that novel, she also makes use of her father's real journal entries, muddying the space between fiction and non-fiction.

Hustvedt had been immersed in studies of the brain and mind for years, reading and researching obsessively, before she first shook. Case studies fascinated her. She volunteered as a writing teacher at a psychiatric clinic. Having suffered one seizure many years earlier and as a life-long migraineur, she had attempted to understand the brain's many yet-unexplained disorders.

After her first shaking episode, to her surprise, others followed. She experienced these only when speaking in public, often when her talk referred to her father or her research. Once, after she gave a lecture on narrative medicine (while shaking), a friend commented that listening to her had been "like watching a doctor and a patient in the same body".

Hustvedt writes: "Indeed, I had been two people that day — a reasonable orator and a woman in the middle of a personal quake. Entirely against my will, I had demonstrated the very pathology I was describing."

From the history of hysteria, hallucinations and epilepsy to descriptions of doubles in literature, synesthesia, Stendhal syndrome and the usefulness of writing in the treatment of psychiatric patients, Hustvedt shows a passion and deep understanding of mind-brain issues and is unafraid to champion out-of-favour theories or question the seemingly decided. An essayist in

the true sense of the word, she is unafraid to begin at the first, apparently obvious questions ("Who are we, anyway? What do I actually know about myself?"), the ones that open whole new lines of thought.

Equal parts memoir, popular science, writer's notebook, criticism, journal, medical mystery and literary trove (she's as adept at discussing William James as Henry James), *The Shaking Woman* feels much richer than its mere 200 pages. Readers will recognise the moving, unadorned style that marks her bestselling novel *What I Loved*. Any time her "obsessive" research threatens to overwhelm, she deftly turns back to her own journey or recounts the fascinating tales of the men and women she has met through her attempt to reconcile the mind, brain and body.

The Shaking Woman defies category, making it an always surprising, often delightful, stimulating read that creates more delicious questions than it answers. It holds wonderfully condensed histories and thoughtful ruminations on the act of dreaming, reading and how to live with a chronic disease that feels as alien as it does familiar.

Hustvedt's search is far more rewarding than any simple diagnosis. Her greatest gifts as a writer come in her contagious curiosity, relentless pursuit of truths, admirable vulnerability, measured but easy prose and ability to expand the mind of her reader. *The Shaking Woman* is a feat, an open-hearted and open-minded exploration about what it means to be human.



Siri Hustved suffers from shudders that rip through her body.