

Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode



Strangers to Ourselves. Stories of Unsettled Minds

By Rachel Aviv. Harvill Secker. 2022.
£18.99 (hb). 288 pp.
ISBN: 9781787301689

Rachel Aviv's *Strangers to Ourselves* is in many ways an extraordinary book. On the surface, it presents case studies on mental illness, interwoven with her own experience of anorexia nervosa. The book opens with a prologue describing Aviv's time as an in-patient on an eating disorders unit when she was aged just 6 years old, and ends with an epilogue devoted to a fellow patient (Hava), who Aviv met on the same unit many years before. Contrasts between their subsequent lives, and in their mental health outcomes, are sensitively woven through the book, hovering on the horizon, and movingly revealed in the epilogue.

The book's strength lies in the engrossing way in which it reveals the complexity of mental distress, the impact of diagnosis and treatment on the individual, and in illuminating often incomprehensible experiences lived through by the featured protagonists. Each detailed account features a range of viewpoints and evidence, layered carefully, that connect slowly like a 1000 piece puzzle. This is achieved via detailed, empathic and sensitive research by the author, who deep-dives like a curious detective into the lives of Ray, Bapu, Naomi, Laura and Hava. At the end of each chapter, I felt I knew them all personally, and deeply.


Aviv shares much of her own experience, and her careful negotiation with the friends, family, clinical and support staff of those featured is evident. It is clear that these relationships have been developed over time and provide opportunities to fact-check and reflect. The investment in these relationships, and the commitment to the truth of each story, provide nuanced insights into the experiences, lives and concerns of those under scrutiny. At times these challenge what we understand by mental health, mental distress and mental illness, but in a gentle and perceptive way. I sensed an unspoken contrast with the regulated and pressured settings that staff often operate within, and the formulaic, outcome focused methods that have become commonplace in mental healthcare.

The importance of history and context underpin the scrutiny of individuals that is presented. The history of psychiatry is never far away; in the evolving diagnostic categories in the DSM, the battle between psychoanalytic and biological factions, the rise of psychoactive medications and the role of insurance companies (in the USA).

The role of culture and different healing practices is also explored, for example in the case of Bapu, a married Indian woman, with two children and a devotee of the Hindu god Krishna. Bapu was diagnosed with schizophrenia and repeatedly

left the family home to travel to temples on a quest to fulfil her devotion, eventually becoming destitute and homeless. She endured brutal psychiatric treatment including being chained to the bars of a cell in Kilpauk Mental Hospital, administered antipsychotics and given electroconvulsive therapy, which was then a standard treatment for a range of conditions in India, often performed without anaesthetic or muscle relaxants. Bapu chronicled her experiences in many journals that provides rich experiential material so that she feels present within the story even though she is deceased. Here it becomes clear that Bapu was aware of the fine balance between her religious devotion and mental instability. In an unexpected twist, towards the end of her life Bapu was recognised in her community as a healer with special powers that gives credence to some of her previously misunderstood and sanctioned beliefs and behaviours. Aviv deftly weaves in the influence of such experiences on the wider family, as her son Karthik and daughter Bhargavi reflect on Bapu's life, and their own life choices. Thus, the book provides further evidence of the perpetuating consequences of mental health problems, in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

Strangers to Ourselves reveals how biopsychosocial factors combine and manifest differently, how individuals exercise agency idiosyncratically, and dare I say, how fate intervenes and psychical experiences present in ways that cannot fully be understood. And I was reminded that recovery is a fluid concept, and ultimately uncertain.

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Don't Turn Away: Stories of Troubled Minds in Fractured Times

By Penelope Campling
Elliott & Thompson. 2022.
£16.99 (hb). 304 pp.
ISBN: 9781783966509

Dr Campling is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist who previously ran the Leicester service for people diagnosed with personality disorder. This memoir of her career is wide in scope and also acts, in part, as a call to arms to improve the state of the UK National Health Service today.

It is a book that takes in the past 40 years of psychiatric practice in the UK, beginning in the early 1980s with the reader thrust into Dr Campling's first weekend on-call in an isolated Victorian asylum, and ending in our current era of purported global connectedness, electronic notes and video conferencing. This is a story of old brick buildings giving way to new structures imbued with hope. But the familiar patterns set in and things get worse. Forty years on from when she began her career, Dr Campling concludes that things in some respects are still the same. The referral culture can favour exclusion criteria, clinicians battle with a sense of beleaguering and moral injury, and the working conditions are pushed to the hilt. All this while the waiting list continues to expand.

So, what happened? And where do we go from here? The clue is helpfully in the title and in the deeply thoughtful and compassionate way with which Dr Campling writes.

There are moving chapters here based on her time on in-patient wards, in therapeutic communities, forensic settings, young people's units, and even within the brightly lit and noisy interiors of intensive therapy units as the COVID-19 pandemic rages. Best of all is the segment towards the end where Dr Campling sees her therapy patients, who have suffered from COVID-related isolations, under a makeshift awning in her back garden. Both the patients and Dr Campling are freezing cold but value the warmth of human

contact. In this way she prioritises the quality of our relationships with each other over the shifting sands of our institutional settings. And it is these relationships, with both their positive and negative aspects, that she encourages us not to turn away from. *Don't Turn Away* is a fine book and is accessible for the seasoned psychiatrist and general reader alike.

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