and inspiring, challenging psychiatrists to become more involved with the wider contextual milieu in which we operate.

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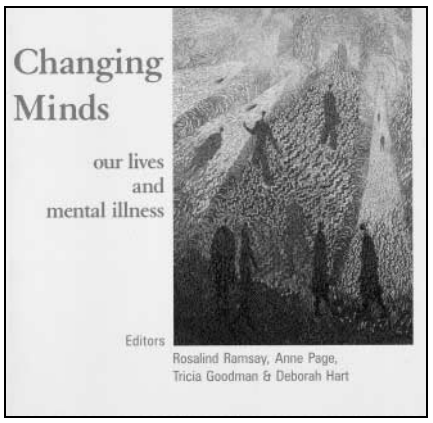
Changing Minds. Our Lives and Mental Illness

Edited by Rosalind Ramsay, Anne Page, Tricia Goodman & Deborah Hart. London: Gaskell. 2002. 160 pp. £10.00 (pb). ISBN 1 901242 88 9



This book takes its title from the Royal College of Psychiatrists' anti-stigma campaign 'Changing Minds: Every Family in the Land'. Its contribution to that campaign is to allow people to speak for themselves about their experiences of mental illness. These are first-hand accounts by ordinary men and women doing their best to wrestle the demons of postnatal depression, obsessive–compulsive disorder, schizophrenia and the rest.

Barry describes his anxiety while contemplating a holiday boat trip with his family:

> 'We walked around for what seemed like hours waiting for me to pluck up courage, then I took a tranquilliser and waited for it to have an effect. Eventually we went on the trip, but of course I felt ill and never enjoyed myself'.

Jamie is aware of his obsessions, yet unable to control them:

> 'I had become completely preoccupied with my left and right and which should be black and which white. . . . As I walked along I had to chant "Black, white, red". . . . Black was left, white right and red the centre of my head'.

Kay, herself a doctor, finds metaphors for her own depression:

> 'I was a wraith-like alien in a world filled with normal people. Nothing mattered; food, appearance, money, reputation, image were all of no importance. I was hollow, devoid of thoughts or character'.

Some manage better than others. Some get good professional help. Others do not.

No one reading their stories could accuse any of these individuals of being weak-willed, of feigning illnesses or of being a danger to society – just some of the thoughtless taunts used to marginalise people with mental health problems.

The personal narratives – and in some cases, poems – are accompanied by commentaries from health care professionals, who pick up key points about diagnosis and treatment, and amplify issues such as effect on the family, unemployment and isolation.

The strength of the book is that it gives a voice to many different people – 30 in all. Its weakness is that it does not give any one of them the time or space to tell the whole story. As a compendium, it therefore lacks the power of, say, Kay Redfield Jamison's account of her lifetime struggle with manic depression in her book *An Unquiet Mind* (Jamison, 1997). Even in short form, however, the personal testimony is powerful medicine.

As a radio and TV broadcaster, I have made something of a speciality of interviewing people with health problems and believe that such story-telling can be beneficial. It gives the narrator a way of shaping and controlling his experience, itself a form of therapy. It gives the viewer or listener – here, the reader – a chance to draw close to another human being and empathise with her difficulties.

It is hard to stigmatise someone when you feel you know them.

Jamison, K. R. (1997) *An Unquiet Mind*. London: Picador.

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https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.184.1.94 Published online by Cambridge University Press