



Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness

By Gail Hornstein PhD

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In a Victorian-era German asylum, seamstress Agnes Richter painstakingly stitched a mysterious autobiographical text into every inch of the jacket she created from her institutional uniform. Despite every attempt to silence them, hundreds of other patients have managed to get their stories out, at least in disguised form. Today, in a vibrant underground net-work of “psychiatric survivor groups” all over the world, patients work together to unravel the mysteries of madness and help one another re-cover. Optimistic, courageous, and surprising, *Agnes’s Jacket* takes us from a code-cracking bunker during World War II to the church basements and treatment centers where a whole new way of understanding the mind has begun to take form.

A vast gulf exists between the way medicine explains psychiatric illness and the experiences of those who suffer. Hornstein’s luminous work helps us bridge that gulf, guiding us through the inner lives of those diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar illness, depression, and paranoia and emerging with nothing less than a new model for understanding one another and ourselves.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Hornstein, a professor of psychology at Mount Holyoke, investigates personal testimonies of madness for what they can teach us about mental illness and its treatment. The author spent several years attending meetings of survivors' groups, such as the Hearing Voices Network in the U.K., whose members hear voices but reject the notion that they are mentally ill. In addition to these stories, Hornstein presents many forms of personal expression by those suffering from mental illnesses, including archived video recordings, writings through history and the artwork of the Prinzhorn collection (of which the eponymous jacket is an example), the basis for the modern understanding of outsider art. Hornstein concludes that mental illness is primarily based in trauma, as opposed to the dominant view of biological and hereditary origins. Behind the psychiatric profession's attachment to such views she sees, as do other psychiatric dissidents, the profiteering influence of prescription drug companies. A wealth of compelling characters includes the eccentric and the heartbreakingly resilient. Despite some repetition of narrative detail, the fascinating avenues Hornstein pursues and the humanity and thoroughness of this exploration make a serious contribution to critiques of contemporary psychiatry. (Apr.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Fed up with medical professionals who overmedicate and don't listen to patients diagnosed as mentally ill because they hear voices, voice hearers are prominent in the psychiatric survivor movement. Hornstein, with 30 years' experience as a psychologist and a fascination with the movement and other efforts by the mentally ill to speak for themselves, here offers a totally engrossing look at their testimony. She switches between accounts of developments in Britain, with its Mental Health Testimony Project, and incipient efforts in the U.S. She is candid in noting that these are not case studies but individual portraits. Hornstein intersperses historical accounts of voice hearers trying to communicate their experiences, including Agnes Richter, a German woman who stitched messages all over a jacket she wore, messages that were considered indecipherable. Hornstein argues for the need to try to decipher or listen to the narratives of people who are considered mad. She challenges treatments, including psychiatric drugs, that assume mental illness is a matter of "chemical imbalance." Readers will appreciate this highly accessible and amazing look at mental illness. --Vanessa Bush

Review

"*Agnes's Jacket* is an amazing psychological adventure story. Hornstein, an academic psychologist with the skills of a first-rate journalist, enters the world of the truly "mad" and comes out with profound lessons about her profession and herself. In a revolutionary break with therapeutic tradition, she says we need to listen to the voices these disturbed patients hear. But first we need to listen to her!" **Barbara Ehrenreich, best-selling author of *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America***

"Riveting, revolutionary, and important—not to mention exquisitely written—*Agnes's Jacket* tells us what we should have been doing all along." **Joanne Greenberg, best-selling author of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden***

"*Agnes's Jacket* is compelling and beautifully done and will, thank goodness, open people's eyes." **Susie Orbach, author of *The Impossibility of Sex: Stories of the Intimate Relationship between Therapist and Patient***

"*Agnes's Jacket* is a useful, passionate, and well-informed book about the many meanings of madness,

distinguished by its understanding of what madness is and feels like to those who experience it." **Jay Neugeboren, author of *Imagining Robert* and *Transforming Madness***

"Gail Hornstein attacks the stigma attached to mental illness with enormous originality and imagination. The madness narratives she has discovered document with startling clarity the experience of those who've suffered at the hands of orthodox psychiatry. She has brought into the light a true literature of protest."

Patrick McGrath, author of *Spider* and *Trauma*

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