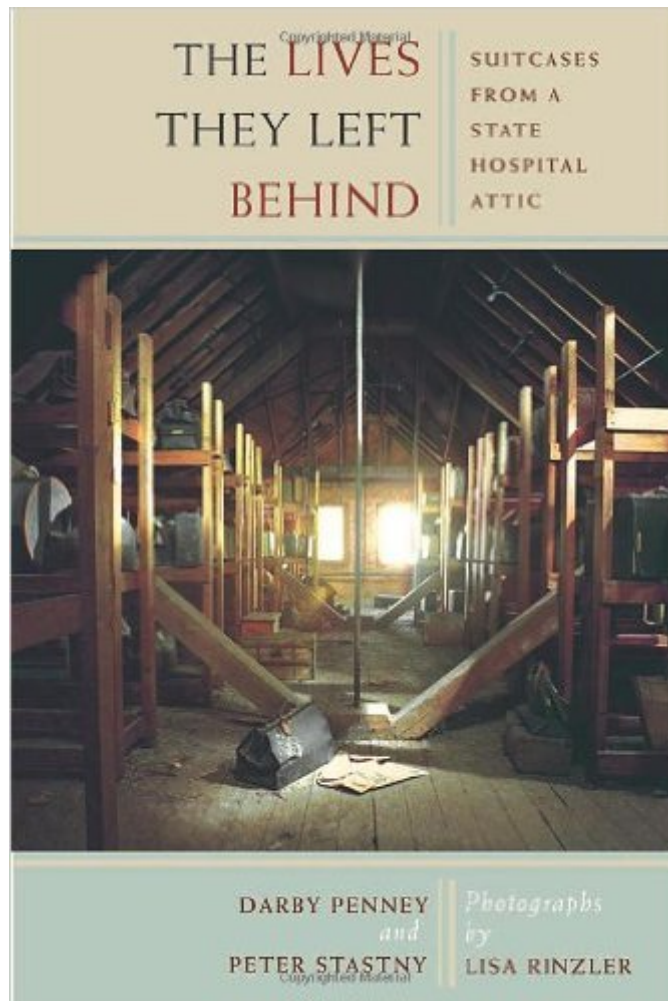


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The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From A State Hospital Attic



Synopsis

The Lives They Left Behind is a deeply moving testament to the human side of mental illness, and of the narrow margin which so often separates the sane from the mad. It is a remarkable portrait, too, of the life of a psychiatric asylum; the sort of community in which, for better and for worse, hundreds of thousands of people lived out their lives. Darby Penney and Peter Stastny's careful historical (almost archaeological) and biographical reconstructions give us unique insight into these lives which would otherwise be lost and, indeed, unimaginable to the rest of us. • Oliver Sacks; Fascinating. . . . The haunting thing about the suitcase owners is that it's so easy to identify with them. • Newsweek When Willard State Hospital closed its doors in 1995, after operating as one of New York State's largest mental institutions for over 120 years, a forgotten attic filled with suitcases belonging to former patients was discovered. Using the possessions found in these suitcases along with institutional records and doctors' notes from patient sessions, Darby Penney, a leading advocate of patients' rights, and Peter Stastny, a psychiatrist and documentary filmmaker, were able to reconstruct the lives of ten patients who resided at Willard during the first half of the twentieth century. The Lives They Left Behind tells their story. In addition to these human portraits, the book contains over 100 photographs as well as valuable historical background on how this state-funded institution operated. As it restores the humanity of the individuals it so poignantly evokes, The Lives They Left Behind reveals the vast historical inadequacies of a psychiatric system that has yet to heal itself.

Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Bellevue Literary Press; Reprint edition (January 1, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1934137146

ISBN-13: 978-1934137147

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars • See all reviews • (246 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I was gravely disappointed by this book. What could have been a unique, enlightening, and fascinating piece of work was simplified beyond belief, full of opinions instead of research, and really did far less justice to the individuals profiled than the author appeared to believe. And...ok, this is an extreme pet peeve of mine...the editing was terrible. What is it lately about editing that has become so difficult? And we're not even talking about true editing, just simply making certain there are no typos and that form and grammar are correct. This was so poorly done it was painful to read. I had looked forward to this book for some time, so I was very disappointed when I got through the first ten or so pages and realized it really wasn't for the thoughtful reader who wants solid research behind a story. No, it was a quick read for a non-critical thinker that likes to be hand-fed polemics. Sorry.

I bought this book primarily thinking that it would be an even-handed exercise in sociology and amateur archaeology. As someone who really enjoys exploring abandoned buildings and postulating on the things people "leave behind" to be forgotten and then found again, I was really excited about the idea of finding out more about the lives of actual mental patients during the period of widespread institutionalization. Overall, my reaction to this book was mixed. First of all, the authors of this book take a very strong anti-asylum tone. While it stands to reason that conditions in the asylums at the time were far from what would be considered acceptable today, no comparison is made nor information given as to how Willard compared to other asylums at the time. Furthermore, the authors shed very little light on the condition of psychology as it existed in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Other than arguing that a culture prevailed which encouraged a maintenance of the status quo in order for the hospitals to exploit the free labor of the patients, little insight is given (and even this argument is weakly made). Another problem that I found with this book is that very little information is given on how the details of the lives of these people were acquired. While some of the information is explicitly drawn from the case files as well as interviews with workers at the asylum, the narratives are filled with holes in which the authors posit a number of intriguing, but unsupported theories. An example of this may be seen in a description of someone as being "close to her family" due to the fact that she had personal phone numbers in her possessions. Likewise, on several occasions the book posits that a patient may not have been popular or easy to get along with, due to the frequency of her changing address. While certainly one possibility, such assertions are made continuously on a whole variety of subjects with what appears to be scant grounding. Generally, the portrayal of health care the authors seek to portray is one which is callous, cold, unsympathetic, and deliberately exploitative. Generally, the people analyzed by the authors are portrayed as being

generally normal, ordinary people- who through some quirk, a high degree of emotional stress, or even sinister machinations- were involuntarily warehoused in a sort of prison which only worsened their condition. The symptoms of the patients are presented in a curious, detached sort of way, and at no time do the authors raise any questions with regards to what sorts of conditions the patients may actually have had, or that they were genuinely suffering from serious mental disorders. While some of this may certainly be true, the positions of the authors- that people were incarcerated for decades in mental hospitals simply for becoming upset in public or trying to talk with the president-- seems unlikely. When the man in question is arrested by the Secret Service and sent to a mental hospital for trying to see the president, the authors postulate that the Ukrainian man was just misunderstood and didn't realize that one does not simply walk into the White House to meet the president. The fact that he refers to himself as Jesus Christ in his interviews is not seen to be a sign of mental disorders, so much as an unusual way of expressing his personal innocence. While this is all very psycho-analytical, it does very little to explain how a handful of doctors-- faced with overcrowding and deteriorating facilities-- would have been unable to see the misunderstanding and let him go instead of keeping him locked up for 30+ years. Furthermore, the book is compounded by a number of factual errors. For example, in describing the arrival of a Ukrainian national to the hospital, the authors refer to the armies of tanks which fought in the Ukraine in 1940 after the Germans had pushed past Leningrad (for the record, the Germans did not invade until 1941 and Leningrad is in Russia, on the opposite side of the country from the Ukraine). Likewise a half-French, half-Italian woman is described as coming from countries from which there were "few immigrants to the United States." Overall, this book is an interesting look at the lives of people held in almost permanent sequestering inside a mental hospital. However, given the ideological bent of the writers, one cannot help but feeling as though the tragic lives of these people are being filled in or "colored" in order to make a case for the elimination of in-patient mental health care.

I was so disappointed..I would like to profess this by saying, that I looked very much forward to reading this book, and was extremely exited, when it first arrived in the mail. However. Halfway through the first chapter, I started getting a strong sense, of an anti-psychiatry agenda. Which is fine, but this is not what I bought the book for. A couple of chapters in, it started getting really distracting. All of the sudden, the book seemed to be more of a soap-box for the authors, and the stories they were supposed to tell are interrupted by their constant agenda. I mean, I know asylums wasn't the perfect solution, and I know a lot of people suffered in them, but you have to take history into consideration; psychiatry wasn't a very developed field at the time and the doctors were

grasping for straws, trying to help very sick people. I refuse to believe, that every doctor, nurse, and caretaker at this hospital were as oblivious, cruel and negligent, as this book tries to make them appear. In a lot of the chapters, the authors write things like "If they had only bothered to listen.." or "If they had only cared..", which is just an enormous assumption to make, about all the people who worked there and the work they did. I am constantly made aware of how incredibly presumptuous the authors seem to be. "Oh, she wasn't sick at all, she just had a quirky personality", type-comments. I'm sorry, but they didn't know these people, so it seems a bit arrogant to me, to suppose things about people you've never met. I am so annoyed, because the concept of the book is - to me - genius. These writers had a brilliant opportunity to do something great, to dive into the complicated lives of people who suffered loss and tragedy, and finally give them a voice. Instead they chose to focus on their own voices. This final point is especially offending to me. Also, the editing is horrible. Typos everywhere. I am so sad, that this book left me so disappointed, because initially it seemed to be everything I could wish for, from a good book. Unfortunately, I have now fought myself through seven chapters, and I am strongly considering leaving this book in the trash, since I can't really see myself giving it to anyone - it is simply too poorly written, factually wrong and biased. Not cool. Extremely let down.

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