

Agnes's Jacket. A psychologist's search for the meaning of madness

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Review

This book is about the author's personal and scholarly journey into the world of the Hearing Voices Network and how it has affected her understanding of mental distress as a professor of psychology in the US. It is also about the ideas themselves, ideas which have come from people with experience of psychosis and which have become a major challenge to traditional medicine and psychology.

The book begins and ends with a description of Agnes Richter's jacket which is part of the Prinzhorn collection of art by asylum inmates at the University of Heidelberg. Agnes Richter was detained in hospital for nearly 25 years, from 1893 when she was 49 years old until she died in 1918. During that time she took apart and re-made her asylum uniform into a jacket, into which she stitched a massive array of words, not yet fully deciphered. This iconic artefact provides a reference point from which Gail Hornstein explores the narratives of mental patients, especially in the UK. In particular she explores the way in which those devalued voices have challenged the traditional medical view that they are simply 'the ramblings of insanity'.

The book focuses on a number of different people, several of whom took part in the British Library's Mental Health Testimony Project. These video recordings were of particular interest and value to Hornstein who has spent much of her career studying the writing of mental health patients. Indeed she has compiled a very useful *Bibliography of First-Person Narratives of Madness in English* which can be downloaded from her website – www.gailhornstein.com. Throughout the 26 chapters of the book the author focuses on particular aspects of her studies over the last decade. There are chapters about specific people who she has met or viewed at the library, there are chapters describing particular events she attended and there are others through which she shares her thoughts and reflections. What links all these is the paradigm shift that is taking place within mental health through people challenging the established medical knowledge about psychosis.

Many of the people Hornstein meets are concerned with countering the stigma and discrimination they experience due to their diagnoses and other people's perceptions of them, but beyond this what those connected to the Hearing Voices Network have also been doing is to challenge their doctors' knowledge about them and their so-called illnesses. The HVN started as a result of the work of Marius Romme and Sandra Escher in Maastricht. In the mid 1980s Romme, a psychiatrist was asked by one of his patients to work with her in a way that respected her own understanding of her

voices. Rather than treating them as auditory hallucinations that needed to be suppressed, she wanted to be able to discuss the voices with him. The changes that have evolved from that time have challenged the medical orthodoxy in relation to psychoses to such an extent that while the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization persist in re-writing their Kraepelinian manuals (DSM and ICD) they are increasingly discredited, although not yet disempowered.

Hornstein's outsider perspective of the HVN and of the mental health service users' movement in the UK is particularly interesting. As an American psychologist, she is surprised by the extent to which the HVN has been supported by the NHS to bring this different explanation for voices to the attention of professionals and service users. At the outset of her journey Hornstein is not aware of similar groups in the US, but with her awareness heightened she soon finds a group called the *Freedom Center*, which works in much the same way as the HVN groups in the UK. These groups do not try to interpret what people say in order to diagnose or assess, rather they provide a space where people will listen and engage with each other helpfully.

This is an academically interesting book to read for anyone studying mental health, but as well as that it is an enjoyable and well written story about discovery and learning. Hornstein's own enthusiasm and feelings often come through, like when she describes how she managed to uncover the true identity of John Custance, author of *Wisdom, Madness and Folly: The Philosophy of a Lunatic*, and how she went on to meet with his son and discover what it had been like to live with him. She discusses her fears when delayed on a train because someone had been killed on the track. She expresses her wonderment when finally left alone with Agnes's jacket in a sanitised cellar in Heidelberg. For many reasons I have enjoyed reading this book and I would like to commend it to others.