

Book Review: The Meanings of Madness Eleanor Longden

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

Gail Hornstein. New York: Rodale Books, 2009. £29.95

Unusually for such a prestigious academic, Gail Hornstein, Professor of Psychology at Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts, is less concerned with the theories, models and philosophies of madness than by the testimonies and experiences of those designated 'mentally ill'. Her new book, *Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness* follows this tradition by taking as its opening premise the intricately stitched jacket of a seamstress incarcerated within the Hubertusberg Asylum in 19th century Germany. The words that Agnes Richter embroidered into her institutional garment form a mysterious autobiographical text, 'a needle and thread narrative', which defies translation by contemporary scholars and historians. As Hornstein writes: "For me, Agnes Richter's jacket precisely captures the fundamental conundrum of madness, an experience rich with symbolic meanings that are indecipherable by ordinary means."

Throughout the book, Hornstein invites the reader to share her extraordinary journey as she attempts to unravel the meanings of mental distress: its penalties, its rewards, and the various ways in which people have tried to understand this most absorbing of human mysteries. The pages are filled with a host of colourful and compelling characters, from renegades, revolutionaries and activists, to pioneering psychologists, psychiatrists and members of the Hearing Voices Network self-help groups. An ongoing theme is the

vibrancy and resilience of psychiatric dissidents and survivors. Just as Agnes fought for the right to tell her story through her painstaking stitches, Hornstein shows how generations of subsequent patients have resisted attempts at silencing and suppression.

From trauma and recovery, spirituality, and outsider art to the pernicious, profiteering influence of the pharmacological industry, *Agnes's Jacket* provides an enthralling, imaginative and, at times, shocking exploration into psychiatric systems past and present. Impeccably researched over the course of several years, the result is a profound, original and extremely important piece of work. Hornstein's humility, grace and radiant intelligence are laced through every page, as is the wit, wisdom and insight of the numerous people who share their personal stories with her. As Patrick McGrath recommends it, *Agnes's Jacket* "is a true literature of protest". This book is too full of wisdom, hope and humanity to keep to yourself. Buy it, read it, absorb it, then give it someone you really love.

