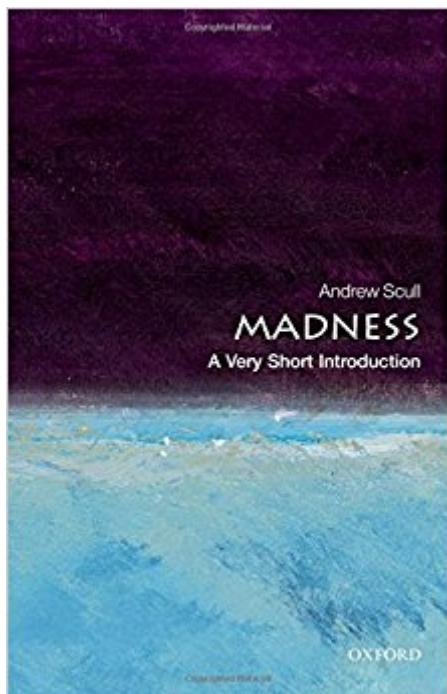


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Madness: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Madness is something that frightens and fascinates us all. It is a word with which we are universally familiar, and a condition that haunts the human imagination. In this Very Short Introduction, Andrew Scull provides a provocative and entertaining examination of the social, cultural, medical, and artistic responses to mental disturbance across more than two millennia, concluding with some observations on the contemporary accounts of mental illness. He shows that through the centuries, in poetry and in prose, in drama and in the visual arts, madness has been on display for all to see. He also describes how a whole industry has grown up, devoted to its management and suppression. Perhaps most important, he conveys how madness profoundly disturbs our common sense assumptions; threatens the social order, both symbolically and practically; creates almost unbearable disruptions in the texture of daily living; and turns our experience and our expectations upside down. Throughout this fascinating history, many fascinating and arresting pictures illuminate the overall portrait of madness in its various contexts.

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Customer Reviews

Andrew Scull is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Science Studies at the University of California, San Diego. He is past president of the Society for the Social History of Medicine.

Given the small space of these short introductions, the history of madness presented in this book feels thorough and cohesive, especially with regard to perspectives on madness, and the history of

the insane asylum. However, I give it 4 out of 5 stars because it spends almost no time discussing what "madness" in all its forms actually is. For example, it mentions schizophrenia in a few "case studies," but doesn't go into detail about the condition itself. As mentioned above, this book focuses more on the history of madness and its cultural and scientific perception. However, I did enjoy the material presented, and felt that it was written in an organic, understandable, and interesting way. I only wish the book discussed madness itself in greater depth, and discussed what constitutes a "mad" individual more than just in passing, vague terms.

This book is an excellent examination of how mental maladies have been perceived and treated in western culture over the past 400 years. It describes how mental illness has been portrayed in the arts and the social stigmatisation of sufferers over that time. Of particular interest to me was the evolution of proposed causes and treatments as understanding of the body developed over the years. The underlying assumptions with respect to the cause of mental illness has links to religious beliefs which I found particularly fascinating. It also takes a brief but critical look at the financial incentives behind proposed pharmacological treatments in the last few decades. I would certainly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the history of western culture.

I highly recommend this study, which concentrates a larger historical scope, from the origins of the treatment of madness in Biblical times right up to the present, than one would normally expect to find between the covers of such a short book. The Oxford "Very Short Introduction" series is generally very good, but a number of the authors have deliberately limited their scope in order to write their books; the nevertheless very fine Peter Singer book on Hegel is a perfect example of this. Andrew Scull's main madman's progress is from the Eighteenth Century, the era of the roomfuls of shrieking mad in "Moral Lazar Houses," such as famous Bedlam, that we see in the movies, for example (anachronistically) in The Nun's Story with Audrey Hepburn, (though the nun does not guess what she is doing), to our time, when the "Reagan Revolution" has substituted drugs for treatment centers, or even therapy, and left masses of homeless on the streets of San Francisco and thereby created so much resentment of that man - a sense of which author Scull does not lack - who ruined life on the streets for sane and madmen alike. People who have never lived in the fair-weather capital of the homeless, yet can accuse us of being "San Francisco liberals," cannot understand how we feel as a result of what we are looking at on the streets every day. Though only a boy in the 1960s, two of the men in my family worked at DeWitt Mental Hospital in Auburn, California, and, fascinated and repulsed, I reluctantly joined my father a time or two while he drove

the inmates around the campus, giving the more capable of them a chance to work. My uncle was a male nurse there, and then Reagan's "decarceration" movement (horrid term!) shut the place down. At the time the argument on the lips of the masses was that these institutions were abuses, where people did dreadful things to disenfranchise their own family members. Much later, hearing this same argument after decades, having endured hundreds of situations with Reagan's "sidewalk psychotics" I realized that there is a reply to this claim... now I ask "You mean there was a time when mentally ill people went from the safety of their family home, to the safety of an institution, without ever having to live on the street for a time in between?" But the Repugs just repeat their political catechism. In San Francisco there is probably no single political issue on which the populace is more in agreement than about the apocalyptically tragic effects of Reagan's "decarceration" of the insane. Scull observes that biobabble has replaced psychobabble (for just another moment "bipolar" might still be with us, but I loved it that Scull's "Further Reading" hints at the way this term plays into the designs of the psychopharmacology industry). Informed people will find it no surprise that the culmination of the book is Big Pharma, called that by Scull, which is now the most profitable industry of all time, and which, as Scull clearly and succinctly outlines, dictates far more medical and even governmental policy than is good for anyone except its own greedy self. For in psychotherapy as in every other kind of medicine, American doctors have allowed their discipline to let the treatment of symptoms suffice where once there was an actual search for a cure. Big Pharma and even the doctors are now in a clear conflict of interest: they are motivated merely to treat the symptoms of the sick, not to cure them. Or, maybe it is naïf to think that Big Pharma is really in any conflict about its interest. The American masses are arguably more betrayed in that trust in their healers than in any other walk of life. The argument that the cure will somehow fall into place if the psychological state of the patient is normalized through drugs is still evidently carrying the day, even though it renders quite glaring the hard-hearted Republican notions of "let the sick show some character and heal themselves." The task is no easier, even though certain illnesses such as hysteria and homosexuality have been "disappeared" from "the official lexicon" during the last two decades of the 20th century, though nevertheless "the number of psychiatric illnesses [has] metastasized." I would like any person in America to walk the streets of the San Francisco Mission or Tenderloin (or the "Soma") after ten o'clock any night to see whether they wouldn't apply the term "hysteria" to much of what they witness, and whether they wouldn't think it merits psychiatric treatment. Scull's mastery of the material seems to me admirable, for it is not merely historical or academic. He describes the way the treatment of the mad has morphed over the centuries right into our own time, how the houses of screaming mad have been transformed into a

steady state of public and private madness absorbed into our very lifestyles, when government policy affecting many disciplines, not just psychotherapy, make it possible to infer that our world is far more shepherded and narcotized and pandered and "entertained" than very many of us are willing to realize, and how the nation has been driven into a political and cultural limbo where more and more people are affected and less and less is overtly done, until the fabric of our society is one big low-security mental institution. J.S. Bach may have been correct when he said in his Cantata 25 that "Die ganze Welt ist nur ein Hospital," but we shouldn't accept this state of things. Reading this book you may get some sense of how your own job or profession fits into the general picture of America as a hospital. I came to this shocking realization years ago, for just as my father drove patients around to participate on the campus, I now drive people around in my cab, and hear the varieties of genuine psychosis they express, to which I can only respond with distracting humor. This book helped me realize I am not wrong to believe that not only have we not gotten anywhere, the problem has spread everywhere, and I meet very few people in a week who aren't politely insane. Scull says "In California... prisons and jails have become the single largest purveyors of mental health care." And the morphing of professions within my own observation is consistent with this: that uncle of mine, who had been a male nurse at DeWitt, became a career guard at Folsom Prison. In practice, while we have told ourselves we have "decarcerated" the mad, we have only incarcerated some of them, and live elbow-to-elbow with the rest of them every day. I'm not just making some kind of "personal message" here. You will understand America a lot better if you read this book. As a people we really are in bad shape mentally, and we all need to be able to witness the situation from as great a degree of awareness as we can achieve.

The Very Short Introductions are just short enough to be a quick read and cover just enough information about the topic to keep it interesting. I recommend these titles.

Verk good

I'm pretty fussy when it comes to books. Sorry if this sounds arrogant: but being fairly well read - I don't like wading through a lot of rhetorical fluff. This book only has about 2 chapters of it (insane people had it so hard, here's a bizillion examples to oversell the point), but the rest is substance describing the world view/mental framework under which madness (or mental illness) was viewed. Well worth reading.

Andrew Scull approaches an enormous and compelling subject with remarkable clarity and concision without ever slipping into perfunctory analysis. That he is a leading scholar in the history and sociology of mental illness is immediately apparent, yet his account is wonderfully accessible and engaging for all. He is adroit in his articulation of the many paradigmatic shifts that have occurred in the understanding and treatment of mental illness. Nor is this a Whiggish account of uniform progress. He is appropriately robust in his handling of the pseudo-scientific Freudian mumbo-jumbo that engulfed psychology and psychiatry for far too long. The current hegemony of pharmacological approaches is also treated to a far from eulogic assessment. Perhaps the most appealing quality of Andrew Scull's excellent book is that it is mercifully free from the jargon and depressingly mechanistic theory-laden approaches that have frequently infected studies in the history of medicine.

I love the short introduction series, but this one missed the mark for me. It is a history of the (bad) treatment of mental illness. It is such an unpleasant part of history that it was quite upsetting. Maybe I didn't read the blurb closely enough.

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