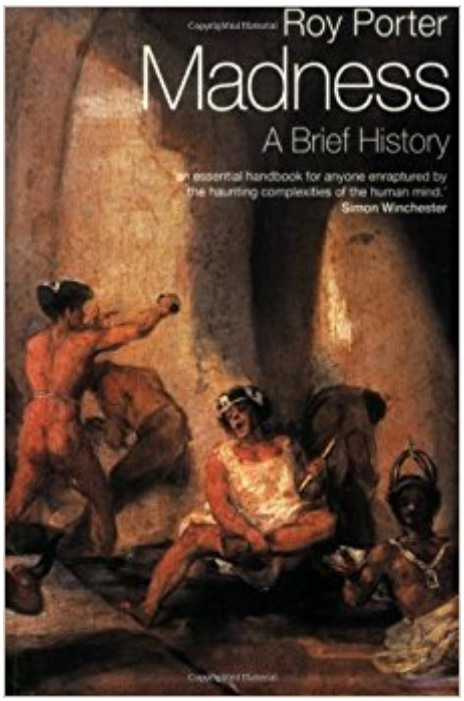
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Madness: A Brief History



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Synopsis

Looking back on his confinement to Bethlem, Restoration playwright Nathaniel Lee declared: "They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me." As Roy Porter shows in Madness: A Brief History, thinking about who qualifies as insane, what causes mental illness, and how such illness should be treated has varied wildly throughout recorded history, sometimes veering dangerously close to the arbitrariness Lee describes and often encompassing cures considerably worse than the illness itself. Drawing upon eyewitness accounts of doctors, writers, artists, and the mad themselves, Roy Porter tells the story of our changing notions of insanity and of the treatments for mental illness that have been employed from antiquity to the present day. Beginning with 5,000-year-old skulls with tiny holes bored in them (to allow demons to escape), through conceptions of madness as an acute phase in the trial of souls, as an imbalance of "the humors," as the "divine fury" of creative genius, or as the malfunctioning of brain chemistry, Porter shows the many ways madness has been perceived and misperceived in every historical period. He takes us on a fascinating round of treatments, ranging from exorcism and therapeutic terror--including immersion in a tub of eels--to the first asylums, shock therapy, the birth of psychoanalysis, and the current use of psychotropic drugs. Throughout, Madness: A Brief History offers a balanced view, showing both the humane attempts to help the insane as well as the ridiculous and often cruel misunderstanding that have bedeviled our efforts to heal the mind of its myriad afflictions.

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Customer Reviews

No branch of medicine faces as much popular skepticism as psychiatry. In this readable yet rigorous little book with a global slant, Porter (social history of medicine, University Coll., London; The Greatest Benefit to Mankind) addresses that controversy by recounting the history of mental illness from antiquity to modern times. A wealth of facts and literary references illuminate how people went from believing that supernatural forces cause mental illness to their reliance on more rational and naturalistic explanations, culminating in today's combination of the medical and psychosocial models. Porter also discusses topical issues, including the relationship between lunacy and creativity; the drive to institutionalize, which peaked in the mid-20th century; the rise and demise of psychoanalysis; and the development of the antipsychiatry movement. This book combines the appeal of history as narrative with the intellectual stimulation derived from cogent analysis. Less comprehensive than Edward Shorter's A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac but more academic than Alex Beam's Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America's Premier Mental Hospital, it will engage both general readers and psychiatry students with its sparkling prose and a well-annotated bibliography. Highly recommended. Antoinette Brinkman, M.L.S., Evansville, IN Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.
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Medical historian Porter authoritatively traces how Western culture has explained and treated insanity. Holes bored in 7,000-year-old skulls indicate the earliest assessment of madness as spirit-possession. The ancient Greeks and medieval and Renaissance philosophers influenced by them replaced possession with irrationality as the cause of madness and exorcists with physicians as its curers. The Enlightenment stressed folly as the mark of madness; romanticism reacted by considering genius akin to madness. Asylums arose to secure the insane for their own good, and newly emergent psychiatry developed several ostensibly successful asylum strategies. As asylums became overloaded with incurables, however, disillusionment induced underfunding. Freud and his spawn came to psychiatry's rescue, but madness persists despite a century of psychoanalysis and of listening increasingly to what the insane say about their conditions. New drugs quash symptoms but have undesirable side effects, including dependency. Meanwhile, the medical profession is divided about the legitimacy of psychiatry. An ideal introduction to its subject, and a timely supplement to Robert Whitaker's superb Mad in America [BKL D 15 01]. Ray OlsonCopyright Ã Â© American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is a good read and at the end he has a "further reading" section with suggested books and brief comments on those books relevant for each of the chapters in his book. Porter takes a look both from a cultural perspective (i.e. what religion or different thinkers thought about madness) and then, as he moves in the modern period, also from a medical perspective. He also covers the asylum system, then the development of psychology in the late 19th century with Freud and then some into the 20th century. One thing he did mention but did not cover at all was "animal magnetism," which is a subject I think was popular at one point in history. Also understandably not covered but helpful to know about are any foreign cultures' views on madness, in particular the views on madness of other spiritual traditions (not just of other well-known religions but also indigenous spiritual healing tradition's views that are not religiously institutionalized).Pretty much, I think scientists still don't have a great understanding of the mind-brain and perhaps will continue like this until physics becomes more advanced and scientists stop viewing people as just consisting of a material body and embodied mind, i.e. the mind is just the brain. That said, I am not a doctor/medical researcher and it does seem medical science research is perhaps making at least some progress when it comes to mental issues.Two other books I found around this subject but have not read yet but might be of interest to other people is * Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind * by George Makari and * The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present * by Eric Kandel. (Edit: I have now read * Soul Machine * it is a very good book.)I do find this subject of the mind and brain to be very interesting and really hope scientists can make progress of this stuff soon. The world is really in need of this.

For a little book Roy Porter knows how to pack in the information. I purchased this book while taking a course about the history of psychology. It really came in handy when it came time to write my final paper. While it is not the most comprehensive book on the market, it is full of useful and well-researched information. Another book that pairs well with this would be Edward Shorter's A History of PsychologyÃ Â A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of ProzacWhat I liked most about Porter's book was how easy it was to navigate and thumb threw. I could quickly find the information I needed, or use it as a jumping off point. If you're studying psychology and want to know more about its mad history I recommend this book. It's entertaining and easy to read.

Very fast shipping and awesome product! Very happy.

Great read and doesn’t sound like an academic or historian wrote it which is what I was looking for.

This book is full of helpful information, but it manages to avoid being overly "jargoned." The layperson can get a good understanding of the history without being overwhelmed.

Good book. Not very extensive (it does say "Brief History" in title, but still). Arrived in time, in great condition.

Blessedly concise, readable and accurate

This book provides good, brief readable coverage of the history of mental illness, with interesting and illuminating examples and illustrations.

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