

BOOK REVIEW

Eyes Without Sparkle: A Journey Through Postnatal Illness

By Elaine A Hanzak, Radcliffe Publishing, Oxford, England. 2005, 248 pages, ISBN: 185775655X

There are now nearly a dozen memoirs written about postnatal depression or psychosis. *Eyes without Sparkle* stands out as a unique volume that would entice a wide audience, for the book is more than an account of distressed parenthood or what it is like to be a new mother and depressed. Buried inside the book is a voice that is eager to tell health care professionals what patients really need and long for. Instead of angry accusations (which are by no means uncommon in writings of such genre), the voice is calm, confident, and well-meaning.

The book can be roughly divided into three parts. It begins by retracing the lived experience of modern motherhood – from the positive pregnancy test, to the euphoria of expectancy, and finally the incessant and exhausting hassles of motherhood. A cascade of postpartum and neonatal complications led Hanzack progressively into a psychotic illness that necessitated inpatient treatment. The second part of the book is a vivid account of what it is like to be a patient in the modern NHS psychiatric service – through the lens of the patient-author whose observation was not only sharp but poignant. Hanzack's recovery was closely tied to a major lecture to health professionals, which forms the last part of the book. In the lecture, the author elegantly articulated what patients really yearned for. Using personal photos, the author narrated not only her illness, but also what were missing in contemporary health care services.

To someone who is not particularly interested in perinatal mental health or motherhood, the first part of the book can appear to be over-tedious. But it is nonetheless a very accurate portrait of distressed motherhood. It is interesting that another memoir on postnatal depression by Brooke Shields depicted more or less a similar picture – decompensation that came out insidiously and inconspicuously of the day-in-day-out chaos of early motherhood – petty, trivial but deeply exhausting, if not damaging.

But contrary to the memoir by Shields, *Eyes without Sparkle* takes the readers to the inside world of a psychiatric inpatient unit. To many mental health professionals, this part of the book could produce an "out of body experience" – potentially unquiet, but definitely revealing, reflective, and thought provoking. Although the author suffered

from postnatal depression, her experience is more or less generalizable to patients who are admitted for other problems.

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I like in particular how she challenged long held clinical prejudices. For example, the cogent reminder that the current vogue in community psychiatry has overlooked the fact that a really distressed patient actually longs for an inpatient stay: "when your usual world is so very threatening you do need escape and refuge to enable you to begin to survive again. Care in the community may have its place but I think sometimes the hospital environment is invaluable." I also like her caution of support group, of how she learnt the best way to cut her wrists after listening to a story told by another sufferer in one meeting. Hanzack also pointed out how stressful it was for sufferers and their carers to attend ward rounds and case conferences that put them in systematically unequal power relationship. Few of us are aware that our taken-for-granted practice can actually be terrifying and menacing.

Eyes Without Sparkle is also punctuated with reminders of therapeutic skills that are now regularly absent in major psychiatric textbooks. For example, prescribing exercise, giving little "thought" cards, and "a squeeze or pat of the hand and straightening of the bedclothes can be just as useful as a drug." To this end, the book is an invaluable to anyone who is willing to accept that ~~to heal~~ healing is more than RCT, EBM, DSM or ICD.

My only critique of the book has to do with the rather small fonts. The book is also slightly long for sufferers or carers who want a quick and succinct guide to postnatal depression. These limitations notwithstanding, I would strongly recommend this book to all health professionals who would like to re-discover their hearts in the healing business.

Reference:

Down Came the Rain: A Mother's Story of Depression and Recovery. Brooke Shields. Michael Joseph. 2005.

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