

Book Reviews

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Ordinarily Well: The Case for Antidepressants. Edited by Peter Kramer. (ISBN 9780374280673) Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2016. 310 pp.

A book that does exactly what it says on the tin, this accessible history of antidepressants combines clinical anecdotes with analysis of research findings to make a case for the ongoing use of antidepressants. Each chapter opens with a new development in the use of antidepressants with a matched patient anecdote. The narrative journey follows both the author's own transition from septic to prescriber, and the development of antidepressant prescribing practice. The controversies surrounding antidepressants and suicidal ideation as well as efficacy concerns are explored in depth suitable to the wide target audience, but the author has staked his ground from the outset and it is clear that the emphasis is on the benefit of antidepressant use.

Those who have read Dr Kramer's previous book *Listening to Prozac* (1993) may be interested to read about the fallout from that book and Dr Kramer's experiences since that time, detailed in the introduction. Following that book he became a controversial figurehead for psychiatry and a reluctant target for those who opposed the use of antidepressants. The writing style is similar to that book – lighter than an academic text and somewhat autobiographical, and he remains a self-deprecating, even at times, charmingly insecure narrator.

The book's central thesis is that antidepressants truly work ordinarily well, that is, better than placebo. It begins with a grim depiction of the experience of those with depression before the development of antidepressant medications, and an emphasis on the seriousness of the illness and the necessity of adequate treatment, is sharply maintained throughout the book. The focus on depression as a serious illness sets up the central idea that in order to be acceptable, antidepressants need only work ordinarily well against illness.

Subsequent chapters focus on individual agents or clinical problems like recurrence, making each chapter an easy stand-alone quick read as well as part of a developing story. Breaking down the design and reporting of studies like STAR*D, combined with some unreported research findings, Dr Kramer sets out the case for antidepressants. The policy and prescribing developments discussed are centred on practice in the United States, but the clinical scenarios are more generally relevant. Dr Kramer presents his own views on matters such as prescribing medication for mild

depression (a 'do') and continuing antidepressants for all post-recovery (a 'don't'), with reference to a variety of research, but the tone of his advice is more conversational than sermonising. One criticism of the book is that it arguably does not lend sufficient weight to the concerns expressed by those who read media coverage of studies reporting links between antidepressants and suicidal ideation.

Some of the reflective anecdotes don't reflect Irish prescribing practice and may seem sentimental to a clinician reader, but most are vivid descriptions and provoke some reflection on one's own prescribing practice. The concise history of antidepressant discovery is well drawn, with new light cast on some key names that will be familiar to psychiatry trainees, such as Roland Kuhn.

Some readers may find the layperson explanations of research terms tedious, but the short chapters (some only a page) and light tone make for easy reading. The notes, index and glossary are well composed and adequately detailed for a non-academic text, but research is not referenced throughout the book.

For trainees, there is a lot to glean from the book. The research discussions help put into context some statistical terms and methods required for exams and journal clubs, as well as nearly a lifetime of prescriber decisions and experience detailed in the clinical sections. It's likely that doctors in psychiatry will like this book, which is for us, a catalogue of successes involving the treatments we regularly employ. It would be interesting to hear the views of non-biological mental health professionals or those with differing experience of medication use. The book lives up to its title and presents a convincing, as well as entertaining, case for antidepressant use.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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Review of 'Shine On, Irish Writers for Shine' by Dr Clodagh Power.
Edited by Pat Boran; (ISBN 978 1 906614 46 1 paperback,
978 1 906614 47 8 hardbound) The Dedalus Press: Dublin,
Ireland, 2011.

Foreword by Miriam O'Callaghan
Introduction by Pat Boran

Pat Boran, one of Ireland's most noted literary figures, has curated this wonderful collection of Irish prose, poetry and short plays in support of Shine. His eloquent introduction emphasises that the point of the book is not to be therapeutic but to help raise awareness of Shine's work. He describes how, during the initial phases of the book's development, he and John Saunders, CEO of Shine, agreed that the anthology should not be limited to writing about mental health, *per se*, but should, through a broad collection of contemporary Irish literature, present mental ill health as inseparable from the important issues that matter to us as a society. This decision, to my mind, is key to the real gift of this book: it chronicles some of the most significant emotional and psychological experiences of life, forging a familiarity and commonality that transcends the sometimes indistinct boundaries between mental illness and well-being.

This is a book to dip in and out of. The contributions are assembled in alphabetical order according to the authors' surnames and comprise a combination of new and previously published works. I found it somewhat disconcerting, initially, to jump from poem to short story to diary excerpt to stage scene; but my pace was necessarily slowed by the need for reflection and digestion after many of the pieces. A remarkably impressive list of contributing authors includes Colm Toibin, Kevin Barry, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Gabriel Rosenstock, Michael D. Higgins, Colum McCann and Paul Durcan. The breadth of the collection encompasses love, grief, regret, adjustment, ageing, self-doubt, addiction, guilt, fear, kinship and so on. The alphabetical order means that, as in life, there is sometimes a jarring juxtaposition of themes and emotions. An extract from Mike McCormack's 'Solar Bones' describes a son recalling his father's descent into decrepitude due to grief and illness while the next page contains 'Good Vibes', a short, playful verse that delights in life's accidental moments of fun. Universal themes are explored from disparate and sometimes opposing views. A childhood memory is a source of guilt and secret shame in 'The Aviary' while Dermot Bolger clings to the memory of a former girlfriend which evokes for him moments of the greatest intimacy and love. For the author of 'The Notebook of Maeve Maguire', memory serves as comfort upon receiving news of her father's death while a character with dementia in the same piece serves to question the reliability of memory at all.

Appropriately, there is no shying away from darker or more sensitive subject matter. Philip Casey's 'Cruelty' is an extraordinarily succinct indictment of the lifelong ramifications of childhood trauma. Ireland's erstwhile asylum system and the secrecy and silence that accompanied it are regularly referenced. Paul Durcan contemplates suicide while Pdraig J. Daly mourns a friend who took his own life. Emigration, addiction and emotional isolation are explored, though never gratuitously;

as Pat Boran writes, 'the contributions, though typically gentle and careful, are charged with that urge to break the silence', an uncomfortable but necessary feat in a country struggling to understand how to process and come to terms with many aspects of its past.

If I had a criticism of the collection it would be the relative absence of recovery themes and the lack of reflection upon the capacity for growth and learning as a result of emotional or psychological adversity. Treatment is occasionally mentioned, most notably in 'Leaving St. Elizabeth's' which portrays a nightmarish experience of electroconvulsive therapy and 'Black Dogs' in which the protagonist is undergoing therapy. But I would have been interested in a perspective of what recovery entailed, what was learned from the process, whether it affected a new understanding of the self or had an impact on a person's sense of mastery or future outlook.

Hope is by no means absent, however. Gabriel Fitzmarice writes:

That after last night's thunder comes the rain,
Things that were will spring to life again

Thanks to the craftsmanship and generosity of some of Ireland's finest writers, 'Shine On' is a body of work that reminds us of the capacity that we have to empathise with one another, assist in each other's distress and share in their joy. In an extract from Lia Mills' diary, written as she awaited surgery for oral cancer, she reflects that 'whatever fears, worries or wild ambition we harbour, we go through the same motions'. There is hope in this, indeed.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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Journey Through the Brain: A Colouring Book. Edited by Harold G Coward (pp. 51 of 218; ISBN 9780791499917) SUNY Press: New York, 1985

Colouring has long been known as a way to unwind and entertain. However, its benefits extend far beyond just passing the time in primary school classes. Swiss Psychiatrist Carl Jung is well known to have used the drawing and colouring of Mandalas – circular patterns from Eastern traditions – as both a diagnostic and therapeutic device. Based on the fact that unconnected