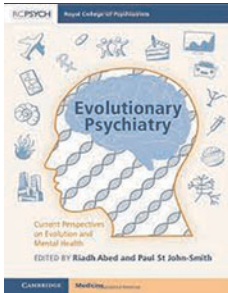


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboade



Evolutionary Psychiatry: Current Perspectives on Evolution and Mental Health

Edited by Riadh Abed and Paul St John-Smith
Cambridge University Press, 2022.
£49.99 (hb). 338 pp.
ISBN 9781316516560

Despite occupying central importance in biology, evolution is neglected not only in mainstream medicine and psychiatry but also in medical education, research and the development of clinical applications.

The evolutionary perspective asks important and ‘ultimate’ questions about why we as a species are vulnerable to mental illness, above and beyond the ‘proximate’ questions currently posed in mainstream psychiatry as to ‘how’ we become unwell. The evolutionary perspective thus examines our long-evolved systems and traits relating to mood, cognition and social behaviour in the context of our development as a species and in the context of the modern and increasingly unnatural environments in which many of us reside.

Riadh Abed and Paul St John-Smith have been leading lights in the rapidly developing new discipline of evolutionary psychiatry and have over the past decade made multiple important contributions to the field, including the publication of numerous papers on evolutionary aspects of major psychiatric disorders and the establishment of the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Evolutionary Psychiatry Special Interest Group.

They have now added another vital contribution to the field in publishing this multi-author textbook, which should be essential reading for anyone working in the area of mental illness – whether that be in clinical, research or academic zones, and whether they have an interest in evolution or not.

Abed and St John-Smith have contributed to several of the chapters and edited the entire volume, which includes chapters from all of the world’s leading thinkers in this field. The reader will benefit from a collection of curated chapters from a wide variety of experts.

After the introductory chapter (by Abed and St John-Smith) and a review and critique of the current (flawed) biopsychosocial model (by Adam Hunt), the next two chapters (by Derek Tracy) focus on hominin evolution, thus enabling the foundations of this text to be firmly set from the beginning.

Nikhil Chaudhary and Gul Deniz Salali then have a chapter on hunter-gatherers and mental disorders, before two chapters from Randolph Nesse, the world’s leading evolutionary psychiatrist. In the first of these, Nesse provides a general overview of mental disorders from an evolutionary perspective and in the second he writes about anxiety disorders from an evolutionary perspective.

Thereafter there are individual chapters on depression, suicide, schizophrenia, eating disorders, substance use disorders, childhood trauma, neurodevelopmental disorders, maternal influences and dementia. The authors are too many to mention in this review but include many other thought leaders in this field, such as


Martin Brune, C.A. Soper, Robin Dunbar and Agnes Ayton, along with new emerging researchers and clinicians such as Markus Rantala and Annie Swanepoel.

The final three chapters focus on everyday and clinical applications of evolutionary thinking, including chapters on psychopharmacology and on clinical care (the latter chapter by Alfonso Troisi).

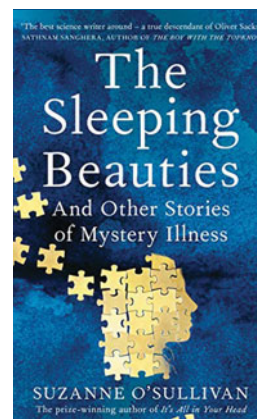
The only criticism that one could level at this volume is that it might have benefited from additional stand-alone chapters on research implications for the evolutionary perspective and perhaps even a chapter on how educational inputs can be developed at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

There is no doubt that the evolutionary perspective has endless potential to enhance how we conceptualise mental health and illness and this perspective will likely generate multiple new research questions and clinical applications.

And there is no doubt that this textbook will be the go-to volume for anyone interested in this field.

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The Sleeping Beauties: And Other Stories of Mystery Illness

By Suzanne O’Sullivan.
Picador, 2021.
£16.99 (pb). 336 pp.
ISBN: 9781529010558


The Sleeping Beauties: And Other Stories of Mystery Illness by Wellcome Prize-winning neurologist Suzanne O’Sullivan explores the mass psychogenic illnesses that have gripped the world in recent times, starting with the resignation syndrome affecting refugee children in Sweden, from which the book derives its name. The book is a part travelogue, part confessional monologue and part apologue written in a high-literary fashion invoking Milton’s lost paradise, the sleeping princess of Brothers Grimm, the witches of Salem and other allegorical stories. These not only serve to raise the artistic calibre of the writing but also bring home a vital point: mass behavioural epidemics transcend spatio-temporal boundaries.

Sleeping Beauties is a masterclass in creative non-fiction where O’Sullivan gives us vivid portraits of her patients, their families and her travel companions. As the book progresses O’Sullivan turns reflective, and as a true scientist, questions the validity of her own science. After her explorations into different societies and their approaches to psychological phenomena O’Sullivan asks the ultimate question: what, if any, is the culture-bound syndrome of the West? Or is Western society and Western medicine so perfect that it has none?

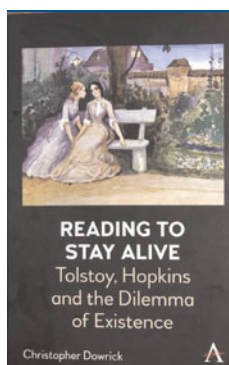
In answering this question, O'Sullivan produces the best chapter of the book titled 'Normal behaviour' and one that I believe all junior doctors, regardless of specialty, should read during their early clinical years.

She writes, 'the more I reflect on it, the more the story seems to be universal, a story of lost love'; between medicine and empiricism, between cure and care, between do-no-harm and always-do-good. 'The duende', she writes, 'comes and goes,' – as indeed she rightly reflects that the science we swear by now will not be considered science in 50 years; although its practice, and its broader implications on societal evolution will cohere.

In my view *Sleeping Beauties* is a book that should have been written by a psychiatrist. However, failing that, psychiatrists should be reading it, especially those who hope to navigate the field of behavioural science in all its forms – from psychiatry to psychology to academic neuroscience – within the boundaries of Western medicine.

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Reading to Stay Alive: Tolstoy, Hopkins and the Dilemma of Existence

By Christopher Dowrick Anthem
Press. 2022. £80 (hb). 140 pp.
ISBN 9781785278914

This book is a mixture of personal rumination and credo, academic literary criticism and occasional medical schemata. These are used

to convey Dowrick's belief and mission that literary fiction is particularly well-suited to counter our most hazardous self-harms. Or put simply, people can be deflected from suicide by reading the right novels.

Clinicians will agree with much of Dowrick's core belief that most suicides can be responses to perceived cumulative personal loss. Equally valuable is his iteration that anything that restores such losses will be therapeutic. And it is here that Dowrick invests his particular interest in the therapeutic influence of literary fiction.

His thesis is sometimes true: that literature *can* catalyse a change or enlarge one's personal view and thus one's experience. Literature does this by opening the door to find an exit from our subjectivity.

Dance, art, music, craft, exercise, gardening also all offer therapeutic possibilities to escape our subjectivities and thus expand and change our experience. They are all potential therapeutic portals. Dowrick only fleetingly alludes to this, thus eluding its importance.

There are other caveats. Literature is certainly not only therapeutic – how else do we account for the frequent suicide of its practitioners? Koestler, Hemingway, Plath, Woolf, Bettelheim, Primo Levi, Hunter S. Thompson and David Foster Wallace are just a few who have taken their own lives. Insight can cut both ways, as many psychiatrists have found for themselves.

What about the nature and quality of this book's writing? What are its assets and weaknesses? Christopher Dowrick is a veteran general practitioner and esteemed mental health academic; he previously worked in social work and psychotherapy. His writing conveys both ardent, even missionary, commitment to his project and assiduous academic framing and phrasing.

Dowrick's compassionate intelligence – and his evident love of both literature and caring for others – fuel all this. His 'human condition' questions and thoughts are deep and wide. Yet his academic deference and dense referencing will make this, for some, difficult to assimilate. They will find that such devoted scholarship does not make for an easy read.

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