

Book Review / Compte rendu

Aviv, R. (2022). *Strangers to ourselves: Unsettled minds and the stories that make us*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ISBN: 978-0-374-60084-6, 277 pages.

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Aviv, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, explores the roles and inadequacies of stories in accounting for and shaping the lives of people “unsettled” by crisis and mental distress. Through six evocative case examples, including her own experience of being diagnosed with anorexia at age 6, she highlights the complexities and centrality of narrative meaning making by clients and professionals when they address mental health concerns. Such stories made out of distress not only implicate the identities of clients and professionals but also change with different medical and cultural developments. This is a book that will interest and perhaps perplex counsellors who have embraced narrative ideas and practices.

RÉSUMÉ

Rachel Aviv, rédactrice au *New Yorker*, examine les rôles et les lacunes dans les histoires qui forment la vie de personnes « déstabilisées » par des crises et par la détresse mentale. Par six exemples de cas évocateurs, y compris sa propre expérience, car elle a reçu un diagnostic d'anorexie à l'âge de six ans, l'auteure montre les complexités et la place centrale du sens du récit fait par les clients et les professionnels face à des problèmes de santé mentale. Non seulement ces histoires de détresse concernent les identités des clients et des professionnels, mais aussi elles changent avec différents développements médicaux et culturels. Ce livre intéressera et rendra peut-être perplexes les conseillers qui ont adopté des idées et des pratiques narratives.

Psychiatrists know remarkably little about why some people with mental illnesses recover and others with the same diagnosis go on to have an illness “career.” Answering the question, I think requires paying more attention to the distance between the psychiatric models that explain illness and the stories through which people find meaning themselves. Even if questions of interpretation are secondary to finding effective medical treatment, these stories alter

people's lives, sometimes in unpredictable ways, and bear heavily on a person's sense of self—and the desire to be treated at all. (Aviv, 2022, p. 24)

Strangers to ourselves is an engaging exploration of mental health concerns that fits well in a new genre of journalism taken up by authors such as Johann Hari (2018) and David Morris (2015). Central to this new genre are the first-person mental health experiences of the authors and their journalistic probing of the adequacies of contemporary psychiatric knowledge and responses to their distressing experiences. Rachel Aviv, a writer for popular magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, narrates her own complex story of refusing to eat at age 6 when her parents were separating and the debates that set off among the health professionals responding to her (e.g., could a 6-year-old be diagnosed with anorexia when diagnostic criteria suggested otherwise?). Aviv's book is premised on the notion that the stories used to make sense of distress shape the lives of those responding to it, including those of helping professionals. Six evocative case studies (Aviv's included) detail the changing complexities involved in matching meaning with distress as identities, relationships, symptom transformations (including medication side effects), and radical changes in "treatment" unfold over time.

After an initial chronicle of her own mental health experiences in early life, Aviv recounts the psychiatric trajectory of Ray, a medical professional whose treatment history begins at an elite psychoanalytic hospital, just as a biological revolution is ushered in by the publication of the third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Thus, Ray is thrust into two very different "correct" versions of how his depressed mood is to be understood and treated. Ray eventually opts for the neurotransmitter version, feeling unsatisfied with the psychoanalytic account and treatment central to his status as a hospitalized mental health patient who presumably had character flaws. Ray eventually sued the hospital on the basis that it was providing substandard care to him (standard care then understood as pharmaceutical care). His successful lawsuit became much discussed in medical schools and can be linked to an era in which depression became almost exclusively understood and treated as a biomedical issue. The elite psychoanalytic hospital later closed. Ray's posthumous and unpublished memoir detailed his unresolved contemplation of three explanations for his depression: a neurotransmitter problem, a lack of adequate fathering, and loneliness.

Aviv draws on her journalism training as she interweaves her rich case examples with relevant literature, patients' memoirs and interviews, and cultural details of possible chronological influence on the people involved. This is evident in her story of Bapu, an Indian woman of Brahmin caste, whose psychotic experiences have overlaps in spiritual mysticism (her self-documented accounts of these experiences went on to be well received as published works). Mental health practice

at the time of Bapu's initial psychotic experiences was also undergoing some transformations, retaining aspects of British colonial medicine as well as spiritual traditions for transcending suffering. Over her life, Bapu experienced a range of mental health treatments, including electroconvulsive therapy, and considerable periods of estrangement from her children and family prior to turning to Buddhist spiritual practice. Returning to her premise regarding the inadequacies of a single story to account for mental health, Aviv writes the following about Bapu's history:

Bapu's illness wasn't located in her mind so much as in the space that she shared with three generations, the problems of one generation morphing into the conditions of the next. Her illness didn't have one etiology, or one cure, or even some essence that could explain why she had failed to be the mother and wife that her family had wished her to be. (2022, p. 115)

Aviv recounts three further complex case studies, each raising compelling dilemmas of understanding and treatment. Naomi is an African American woman who was raised in Chicago's public housing "projects" and who has survived stints of homelessness (including a lengthy stint where she and her sister stayed in libraries during the day), foster care, and eventual transient relations in her adult life. During a psychotic break, Naomi accidentally killed one of her sons while trying to end her own life, and Aviv follows her story through incarceration and the mental health treatment she received while a prisoner. Naomi's prison time involved more time at a library, where she began linking her circumstances to the history of America's Black population, circumstances she talked about in the prison therapy groups in which she participated. Naomi was released following 16 years of incarceration. From her conversations with Naomi, Aviv opined:

Psychiatric insight can save a life—a person about to leap off a building, convinced she could fly, needs to know that her brain is not properly functioning. But a constricted view of insight may also blind doctors and family members to certain beliefs—a relationship to God, a new understanding of society and one's place in it—that are essential to a person's identity and self-worth. (2022, p. 172)

Strangers to ourselves recounts two more similarly evocative case examples (a Harvard graduate who cycled through a number of diagnoses, including borderline personality disorder, and a range of psychopharmaceutical treatments before electing to stop taking medication; a patient whom Aviv met during her own treatment as a child and again years later and who had taken on a "career" as a psychiatry patient and died prematurely). Aviv reflects profoundly on the complexities of how people respond to emotional distress, including how their responses transform relationships with others, including helping professionals.

For therapist readers who seek case studies that detail the application of particular approaches to practice, this book will come up short. Aviv is not a therapist but a journalist with her own mental health experiences, prompting her to focus attention on cultural, institutional, and very human biographical details seldom showcased in clinical books that narrate interesting case examples and successful treatment. The people's lives she chronicles feature twists and turns that are, at times, political, spiritual, economic, and invariably complex. *Strangers to ourselves* was absorbing enough for me to devour it in one read, and it raised many dilemmas for me to reflect upon, leaving me to agree uncomfortably with Aviv: "I find myself searching for the gap between people's experiences and the stories that organize their suffering, sometimes defining the course of their lives" (p. 26).

References

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About the Author

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