

Women of the Asylum

Jeffrey L. Geller

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Jeffrey L. Geller : Women of the Asylum before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Women of the Asylum:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Highly Reccomend this BookBy BookwormWonderfully written book on a very difficult subject. I was expecting it to be a boring treatise on mental illness, but was very pleased at how readable it is- it doesn't sensationalize the topic, but is very educational on the events in the world that helped to form and shape the systems that dealt with "difficult women." I recommend this book highly.13 of 13 people found the following review helpful. The background alone more than pays for the bookBy R. M. SteeleI bought this book to do research about asylum life and it does an excellent job with that by telling real stories that are gripping and compelling. But what has fascinated me even more is that the book puts the stories into context of the time period. There are 4 time periods 1840-1865, 1866-1890, 1891 - 1920 and 1921 - 1945. Jeffrey Geller put together a concise yet rich historical context of each time period to set the stage for the personal stories that are to come. From a sociological and woman's studies perspective, these overviews of the time periods are fascinating. I read the first one a couple times. They are incredibly well researched with references cited. I was in the middle of reading this book and even took it on the airplane with me to finish where I might ordinarily take a compelling fiction book. Well done. This book is a great investment and I would recommend it to my girlfriends to make them appreciate how far women have come.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great book from a genealogical standpoint.By tenkan5I bought this book because while doing family research we found our great-great grandmother was committed to an asylum by her husband in 1854. She stayed there 40 years! This book verified that such things happened to many

women. The sheriff took her there and she never came home again.

Twenty-six first-person accounts by women placed in asylums from 1840 to 1945 provide a chilling study of women in psychiatric institutions, chronicling involuntary imprisonment by male family members, as well as voluntary commitment, social conventions, and attitudes toward women and insanity.

From Library Journal A collaborative effort between psychiatrist Geller and Harris, a clinical psychologist, feminist, and author of *Women and Madness* (1972), this compilation of excerpts from 26 firsthand accounts written between 1840 and 1945 by women confined in asylums are a testament to human endurance. In the patriarchal society of 19th- and early 20th-century America, it was easy to get women out of the way by having them declared "insane." The women were confined against their will, betrayed, degraded and beaten, raped, starved, robbed, punished, force-fed, and treated as unpaid labor. These heroic accounts tell of their struggles to hold on to their sanity and dignity within a brutalizing system. The editors' introduction places the accounts within a historical context. In view of women's ongoing struggles with both the medical and psychiatric establishments, this is a timely and important book. Recommended for all collections.--Lesley Jorbin, Cleveland State Univ. Lib., Ohio Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist In four sections corresponding to consecutive chronological periods within their 105-year overall coverage, editors Geller and Harris present excerpts from 26 accounts of asylum stays of from six weeks to 28 years. They preface each section with an explanation of the role of women and the general state of psychiatry during the period covered. They note that throughout the time their book spans, the accepted causes of and treatments for psychiatric illnesses in women were different from the male equivalents. Indeed, although many women published accounts of their asylum stays before 1908, it took a man's account published that year, *A Mind That Found Itself*, by Clifford Beers, to make a definite impression on the public. The 26 excerpts range from broad, altruistic views to detailed accounts of individual experiences. Some of the latter are appalling, for several of the women, obviously sane, were railroaded by husbands who had tired of them, by family or relatives who wanted their land or money, or by others with equally ulterior motives. Once freed, a few of the women devoted themselves to improving the lot of their imprisoned sisters. William Beatty From Kirkus s A hundred years of first-person reports from women committed to mental institutions that seem no less distressing in the 20th century than in the 19th. Geller (Psychiatry/Univ. of Massachusetts) and Harris (*Down from the Pedestal*, 1994) have excerpted accounts from the speeches, journals, reports, and books of well-known and unknown women who found not asylum, but degradation, injustice, deprivation, and even torture in the ghettos for the mentally ill where they were confined. The testimonies begin with Elizabeth Stone in 1840, committed because her religious views differed from her family's, and end with actress Frances Farmer in 1943, committed by her mother to an institution where ice-cold baths and sadistic attendants were the order of the day, much as they had been 100 years before. Early accounts make clear how women were subject to the whims of fathers, husbands, and even brothers, with no legal or moral recourse. One author points out an Illinois law that permitted a man to "put his wife into an Insane Asylum without evidence of insanity." As society's views of women changed, so did the diagnoses that justified the asylum. "Brain strain" and "nervous prostration" were early favorites, when women were considered too frail to bear the burden of both domesticity and education. The forthright Phebe Davis, an inmate in a Utica, NY, asylum from 1850 to 1853, offers an eloquent commentary on such misguided thinking. St. Paul said a woman must not speak a loud word, she reports, but "that was only his opinion and who cares for the opinion of one lovesick old bachelor, and he had been dead for centuries." One carp: The editors have condensed the writings, but left no indication of where or how many cuts were made. Worthwhile if only for Phebe Davis's pungent observations, but also for framing historic patterns of abuse of the mentally ill. -- Copyright 1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.