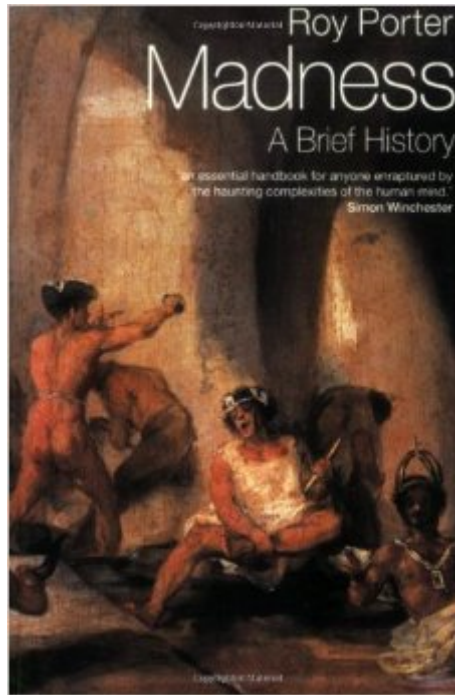


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Madness: A Brief History



Synopsis

Looking back on his confinement to Bethlem, Restoration playwright Nathaniel Lee declared: "They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me." As Roy Porter shows in *Madness: A Brief History*, thinking about who qualifies as insane, what causes mental illness, and how such illness should be treated has varied wildly throughout recorded history, sometimes veering dangerously close to the arbitrariness Lee describes and often encompassing cures considerably worse than the illness itself. Drawing upon eyewitness accounts of doctors, writers, artists, and the mad themselves, Roy Porter tells the story of our changing notions of insanity and of the treatments for mental illness that have been employed from antiquity to the present day. Beginning with 5,000-year-old skulls with tiny holes bored in them (to allow demons to escape), through conceptions of madness as an acute phase in the trial of souls, as an imbalance of "the humors," as the "divine fury" of creative genius, or as the malfunctioning of brain chemistry, Porter shows the many ways madness has been perceived and misperceived in every historical period. He takes us on a fascinating round of treatments, ranging from exorcism and therapeutic terror--including immersion in a tub of eels--to the first asylums, shock therapy, the birth of psychoanalysis, and the current use of psychotropic drugs. Throughout, *Madness: A Brief History* offers a balanced view, showing both the humane attempts to help the insane as well as the ridiculous and often cruel misunderstanding that have bedeviled our efforts to heal the mind of its myriad afflictions.

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Customer Reviews

Roy Porter died way too young. His books on medical history are a must-read for those who enjoy learning, and need to know how medical and scientific changes came about. I am one person who really feels that understanding medical and social history is the only way that we can avoid the mistakes of the past, and work towards making the future as equitable in treatment and understanding towards those with mental illness as we can. Porter's book is small and a quick read. He doesn't dash through, but this is not a textbook. Nor does it cover every possible scientific and social input on what 'makes' madness and what different centuries did to deal with those with mental conditions. If the reader is looking for a first look into the history of mental illness, he cannot go wrong with reading this concisely written book. It will not answer all the questions...in fact, it raises more questions. But Porter not only gives enough information and color to this particular problem, he also gives a wonderful bibliography/reference to refer to if the reader wishes to read about any particular time or problem. I did go looking for several of his recommended books, and I have not been disappointed yet. It is of great interest that I read about the early 18th century, when so many of the great philosophers impacted the view with which scientists and physicians (and family too) viewed mental illness. Porter emphasizes that the great humanitarian changes made in the care of those mentally ill occurred then...

Roy Porter died recently at the age of 55, but produced over eighty books on a wide range of subjects, from the Enlightenment to the English treatment of insanity in various historic periods. It would not be surprising if this polymath has other manuscripts awaiting publication, but *Madness: A Brief History* (Oxford University Press) was his last production before his death. It is a remarkable work especially for its brevity, taking in prehistoric concepts of madness and ranging all the way into current psychiatric controversies in less than 250 clear, well-researched pages. There have been fashions of treatments for the mentally ill, and just a bit of scientific justification for them most recently, but one of the points of his treatise is to show that we aren't any closer to true definitions of madness than Polonius was: to "define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?" His own lack of definition enables this brief overview to take in a great deal of territory. Porter examines the imposition of madness by the gods in Homer. By the time of Hippocrates (around 400 BCE) madness was a medical, not moral or magical, matter. But supernatural explanations for insanity were advanced again, along with the angels and demons sanctioned by the Christian church. Around the Renaissance, the concept arose that madness was a special sort of inspiration. (There remains folk wisdom that geniuses are not at all far removed

from the insane.) Families had originally had the responsibility for lunatic progeny, but the surplus wealth of urban areas encouraged families to buy such services. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in England, confined lunatics were largely in private asylums under what was literally called "the trade in lunacy."

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