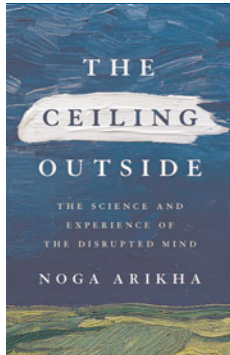


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode



The Ceiling Outside: The Science and Experience of the Disrupted Mind


By Noga Arikha
Basic Books. 2023. £10.99 (pb). 304 pp. ISBN 9781529385489

This book is a healthy reminder that psychiatry is not just technology and clinical methodologies. The keynote is that ‘pathology is not the whole story’ of the person. As a historian of ideas and a humanist philosopher, Noga Arikha weaves into her narrative, concerning how the loss of memory affects us, her own experience of her mother’s dementia alongside observations of case conferences held at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. The title is taken from one of her mother’s sing-song elliptical statements ‘the ceiling inside, the ceiling outside’. Arikha’s stance arises from the position that our consciousness emerges through our dynamic and ever-changing embodied relationships. If we merely consider a person’s ailment in isolation, we cannot hope to treat them effectively and compassionately.

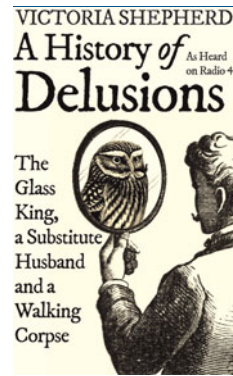
She calls on a wide range of historical commentators and contemporary neuroscientists to marshal her arguments. She has an extensive knowledge of psychiatric history, alongside the work of Oliver Sacks and Antonio Damasio. As the book is primarily aimed at a lay audience she explains in a clear and cogent manner how psychiatrists and neurologists see different symptoms and disorders. This is amplified by observations such as the fact that the term ‘hallucination’ was coined by Sir Thomas Browne in 1646, long before it was used by Esquirol.

A recurrent question arises for her: ‘to what extent am I not my brain?’ As its faculties are disrupted, how does this affect our sense of self? Considered from the understanding that consciousness arises from our relationships and embodied brain, this poses existential questions that become particularly potent as we observe our relatives and patients suffering from dementia and becoming increasingly distant from us, while retaining flashes of their old selves.

Much like John Berger’s book on the work of a general practitioner in the 1960s, *A Fortunate Man*, this is a book full of reflections on how we practise our craft and its wider implications for those with whom we work. I was particularly impressed by the discussions Arikha observed held between the neurologist and psychiatrist as they considered each of the cases. At times they were unable to come to a clear diagnosis and I was left wondering what would be the ‘care pathway’ for those who were left undiagnosed even after such erudite deliberation. In my opinion this book provides valuable insights for both patients and psychiatrists at all levels of ongoing learning.

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A History of Delusions: The Glass King, a Substitute Husband and a Walking Corpse

By Victoria Shepherd One World Publications. 2022. £16.99 (hb). 352 pp. ISBN 9780861540914

Shepherd has reimagined the clinical case history in this book, but it is not a book on the history of delusions. Indeed, her topic is delusions and her approach is the case history format, focusing on individual cases. But what she does is not a formal history of the nature and narrative of delusions. She describes unusual and false beliefs, and she sets these beliefs in the social context of the individual and supplements the account with the circumstances of the clinician who described the case, revealing what we know about him and then drawing out what the social and political contributions were. This is an advance on the traditional clinical method.

This approach is most successful when she discusses Capgras syndrome, describing Capgras and Reboul-Lachaux’s original case, Madame M. We learn as much about Madame M as we do about Joseph Capgras, who trained in Toulouse and gravitated to psychiatry under the influence of his uncle, an asylum doctor in the Paris area. Shepherd recounts the initial presentation at a meeting of the Société Clinique de Médecine Mentale, and in true journalistic style, she informs us of Capgras’ dramatic flourishes at the meeting, of de Clérambault’s interventions at the meeting, and of the importance of the social context of Paris in the years after the First World War to the concerns that Madame M expressed.

Shepherd discusses the case of James Tilly Matthews, who was admitted to the Bethlem on 28 January 1797 and was treated by John Haslam and described in Haslam’s *Illustrations of Madness*. Although the content of Matthews’s abnormal beliefs is interesting, unlike Capgras’ description of Madame M, the case has not gone on to influence psychiatric thought or practice. Furthermore, Shepherd discusses the melancholic delusions of Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, but there is little evidence that Burton had any delusions, except if an interest in, or even a preoccupation with, astrology was to be regarded a delusion. Nor is there much evidence that Francis Spira, one of her other cases, held any recognisable delusion aside from being severely depressed and dying from inanition.

Shepherd’s account of King Charles VI of France’s delusion of being made of glass is convincing and fascinating. She gives a detailed account of the development of the King’s malady and sets the delusional belief firmly in the context of the rise to prominence of glass-making and the enthralling symbolism of glass during Charles’s reign. Shepherd allies the content of Charles’s delusions with the equally important fact that the content of delusions can and does incorporate new technologies as they arise. This aspect of the content of delusions – the pathoplasticity – is further explored in her description of Napoleon and the rise and rise of Napoleonic delusions of grandeur.

There is much to commend Shepherd’s book. Even though it deals with the surprising and the truly bizarre content of delusions, it treats the individuals she describes with respect. There are minor issues that you would expect from a psychopathologist: she