



Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America's Premier Mental Hospital

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Its landscaped ground, chosen by Frederick Law Olmsted and dotted with Tudor mansions, could belong to a New England prep school. There are no fences, no guards, no locked gates. But McLean Hospital is a mental institution—one of the most famous, most elite, and once most luxurious in America. McLean "alumni" include Olmsted himself, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, James Taylor and Ray Charles, as well as (more secretly) other notables from among the rich and famous. In its "golden age," McLean provided as genteel an environment for the treatment of mental illness as one could imagine. But the golden age is over, and a downsized, downscale McLean—despite its affiliation with Harvard University—is struggling to stay afloat. *Gracefully Insane*, by *Boston Globe* columnist Alex Beam, is a fascinating and emotional biography of McLean Hospital from its founding in 1817 through today. It is filled with stories about patients and doctors: the Ralph Waldo Emerson protégé whose brilliance disappeared along with his madness; Anne Sexton's poetry seminar, and many more. The story of McLean is also the story of the hopes and failures of psychology and psychotherapy; of the evolution of attitudes about mental illness, of approaches to treatment, and of the economic pressures that are making McLean—and other institutions like it—relics of a bygone age.

This is a compelling and often oddly poignant reading for fans of books like Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (both inspired by their author's stays at McLean) and for anyone interested in the history of medicine or psychotherapy, or the social history of New England.

Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America's Premier Mental Hospital Details

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From Reader Review Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America's Premier Mental Hospital for online ebook

Cameron says

After watching a television show depicting ghost hunters in an "insane asylum" I found my curiosity increased about the history behind some of these institutions. By far, this is the book I enjoyed reading the most. The author focuses on the McLean hospital, part of the Harvard medical system and a temporary home to some of the rich and famous. A little teaser, the author of *Girls Interrupted* spent time at this hospital. The book focuses on the history of the hospital. Yet it is evident that the author spent additional years learning more about the patients who stayed there and he includes numerous additions from these sources. He is able to pull the story of the hospital together intertwined with stories of the patients and employees resulting in a book that I recently described as a "delightful read". A quote opening Chapter 2 states "Crazy people much more pleasant than I expected." At times I found myself cheering and other times devastated by the loss and I believe the author did a great job of depicting the plight of mental illness in a small segment of that population.

Nicole says

A work of non-fiction cataloging the history of the famous McLean Hospital, a psychiatric facility located in the Boston suburbs, this was a pleasure to read. Especially since I grew up a couple miles from the hospital (had even volunteered there as a young adult), I felt protective of this fine institution and all that it represented. It always seemed a staple of mental health treatment which was well known in the psychiatric circles but otherwise seemed to be a "secret" to others outside of the nearby community. Turns out Beam's novel revealed that this hospital was even more well known than I had suspected, just that this reputation existed a little above my pay grade. The novel catalogues the hospital's 200 year history from its humble beginnings to its heyday in the 1900's as a facility providing excellent treatment for those who could afford it. The listing of the rich and famous who sought treatment within its walls is extensive and author Beam does a great job juxtaposing the historical background of the hospital with its evolving treatment modalities, as well as information on some of its more well-known residents. The hospital, much like many psychiatric hospitals across the country, has faced challenges in how it administers care in a changed health care environment and this stepwise progression is depicted nicely by Beam. For those with any training in psychology, medicine, or psychiatry this is a very well researched piece of medical history that is engrossing and factual. Readers without some of this background should not be intimidated by the subject matter or mental health terminology since Beam is able to provide good explanations for all without alienating. Highly recommended.

Ann-Marie says

Most, maybe all of us who have suffered through mental illness have wished for a place to retire from the cares of the world for a while, to live slowly, to be gently cared for while we fight the demons back to the nether realms where they belong. Today, if we are lucky, and I have been, we receive the right combination of drugs, counselling, and loving support from our families to recover on our own. For many years, McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, was the very best our country had to offer the emotionally fragile and neuropsychologically damaged. It did it very well. If you could afford it.

"Gracefully Insane" not only does a wonderful job describing the history of the hospital, but it shares stories of the people who worked there, the patients who passed through, and the ones who came to stay and never left.

It takes us through the elegant 19th century, when most other asylums were wretched prison-like establishments, through the 20th, when breakthroughs began to be made (not all of them for the best) in the treatment of the mentally ill.

One of the most unfortunate changes in the 20th century was the effect of managed care, and insurance company policies limiting treatment.

Hospitals such as McLean have struggled with severe financial restrictions and can no longer be asylums in the true sense of the word, retreats from the stresses and dangers of the outside.

I found myself wishing there had been a McLean for me when I needed it.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in American history, history of medical and mental health treatment, and just a look into the alternative to the Victorian practice of locking crazy Auntie Mildred in the attic.

Marie says

It's probably more of a 3.5...not the most organized book. It is all over the place and choppy (expect more a collection of short stories and it shouldn't bother so much), but it's an interesting glimpse into what used to be one of the most prestigious mental institutions for the wealthy and talented. It's the subject of many famous books/films and housed many famous individuals, *Girl, Interrupted*, Sylvia Plath/*The Bell Jar*, Ray Charles, James Taylor, many Harvard educated intellectuals...and a host of others. It also covers the evolution of psychiatric science from the days of lobotomies to the current drug-pushing, managed care marketplace. Quick read.

Cat says

Beam's "Gracefully Insane" is rich in anecdotal history, but poor in other areas. Makes for a light, enjoyable read, but Beam rarely teases out the interesting insights that arise from his excellent access to the inner workings of America's "Premier" mental hospital.

This book will make you think about the (troubled) history of psychiatry/ treatment of mental illness, and Beam's portrait of this institution caused me to shed no tears for the fall of this fabled refuge for blue blooded loons.

Reading interviews with "graduates", its hard not to question the assumptions that underlied McLean's very reasons for existence. Few of the individuals profiled within seem like they were ever a "danger to self or others". Indeed, when a rash of suicides hit McLean a couple of decades ago, the staff were singularly unprepared to cope. Perhaps this is because the "inmates" were not as bad off as one might suppose?

Makes an interesting companion piece for Goffman's "Asylums".

Miriam says

The history of McLean Hospital, one of the most famous mental institutions in the US. It's biggest problem is that it reads like a who's who of the mental hospital.

Rachel says

What I liked best about this book is that Alex Beam does not simply mock the wealthy, upper-class persons who were the patients at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts. Instead, he places these patients' and doctors' lives into a social and historical context. The result is a compassionate and generally respectful look at patients' suffering and struggle to overcome mental illness. He includes sections on Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and James Taylor (the pop singer).

Andrea says

It took me over three months to read this book! To be honest it may have to do with the fact that I was also reading several other books at the same time. Anyhow being from Boston made this book extra special for me since this is the location for that famous McLean Mental Hospital. The rich history of the facility and the treatment of mental health was fascinating. I also found some of the famous patients like Sylvia Plath and the Taylor (James, Livingston, and Kate) family to be very interesting, Having read *Girl Interrupted* and seen most of the movie gave me a very vivid image of what McLean Hospital looked like on the inside and out. Susanna Kaysen's troubled years at McLean Hospital were the basis for writing about her experiences while at McLeans. Maybe it is my curiosity for mental health disorders that made this book so fascinating for me but I think not everyone would feel the same. I have heard some reviews in which people called Beam's writing nothing more then name-dropping-gossip, I happen to disagree. Working in health care I have learned a lot about mental health and the stories contained in this book and others like it help to take away some of the stigmatism related to mental health while exploring the difficulties of treating it.

Kirsten says

The story of McLean hospital, one of the most famous mental hospitals in the US. Sometimes it seems as though anyone who's anyone spent time in McLean; throughout the 20th century it was famous for catering to the rich and famous with the utmost discretion. Among its "alumni" are poet Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath (who based her novel *The Bell Jar* on her experiences there), James Taylor and his siblings, Susanna Kaysen (who wrote about her experiences in *Girl, Interrupted*), John Nash, and Ray Charles, just to name a few.

In many ways, the history of McLean is the history of the last century of mental health care, although McLean as whole has been a kinder, gentler place than most mental hospitals. There are still stories of brutal, though well-intentioned, treatments: insulin shock therapy, icy hydrotherapy, electroshock therapy (with much higher levels of electricity than today's electroconvulsive therapy). Only a handful of lobotomies were ever performed at McLean, however, and the main emphasis was on milieu therapy -- the theory that providing structure and a relaxed, comfortable environment would go farther to help patients than any invasive procedure.

Of course, the milieu therapy led to a lot of long-term residents at McLean. In the heyday of psychoanalysis, the intake period was 40 days -- the actual treatment usually didn't start for weeks. This kind of treatment has fallen by the wayside in recent years, as health insurance and rising healthcare costs make it impossible for

patients to afford more than the usual five day stay, and in turn, McLean is now a ghost of what it once was. It's easy to feel sort of nostalgic for the "old days" of psychotherapy, particularly since insurance and an overloaded system mean that many patients are diagnosed, given drugs, and only receive a very limited amount of talk therapy, if any at all. On the other hand, there's little evidence that McLean's milieu therapy was any more effective than the current methods, particularly in the case of psychotic patients. Still, one wishes somewhat for a happy medium -- no six month hospital stays, but enough time to offer a little caring and patience. As this book makes clear, however, this luxury was only ever available to the very rich, even when it was considered the best treatment for what ails you.

Taryn Stockfisch says

I picked this book up because I knew about Olmstead and his stay at McLean from "The Devil in the White City," but I knew nothing about McLean beyond that. I found this a fascinating read. I've been working in the mental health field now for two years, which is a marked transition from my English background. However, I think it was that combination that allowed me to be so engrossed. The writing was familiar, and it made the content very accessible. There were many aspects of mental health that I was not aware of prior to this book, plus it offered up many a tidbit about authors I've enjoyed. I generally don't write reviews of the books I read, but this book calls for an exception. I would read it again in a heartbeat.

Erin says

This book was great. I sort of expected it to focus more on the various messed-up therapies common in the days when McLeans was started, but it kept that to a minimum. I found myself saddened that in the current age of "treat 'em and street 'em" therapies, a place like McLeans is having to change what made it essentially the best mental hospital in New England: a place where the mentally ill could take their own time to get better. I was also extremely entertained to learn how many famous people passed through its doors.

I've never been to McLeans, seen the grounds or anything, so I think I'll always picture it the way Olmstead imagined it: sprawling grounds, sparse living facilities (so residents of one ward didn't have to see residents of other wards necessarily), dairy farm, and all the other things that went into making it a universe unto itself.

Videoclimber(AKA)MTsLilSis says

I just couldn't get into this book. I was expecting more about what went on at the hospital. I wanted to know about how the patients were treated and what happened to them. This book was not about that. Most of the book was about the hospital building itself and its location and how it changed throughout time. There were a few small mentions of who stayed there, but not enough to hold my interest. I guess this could be of interest to those who want to know about hospital buildings, but don't look here for patient treatment, because you won't find it.

Ronald Koltnow says

Gracefully Insane was Boston Globe journo Alex Beam's first non-fiction book (few know that he had written a couple of novels before this). It may be his best. Using the country club setting of McLean Psychiatric Hospital as a springboard, Beam traces the history of the treatment of mental patients. In olden times, lunatics were chained to walls, frightened to near death, and dunked in water until they lost consciousness. Then came insulin and electro-shock therapy. McLean was a center for milieu therapy, a way of making the filthy, yet insane, rich feel at home. The Mayflower Madcaps played golf, socialized, and went on their loony way. Beam gives us case histories and portraits of the patients and the doctors; Can you tell which was the most in need of psychiatric care? As the years progress and the Back Bay eccentrics are replaced by drug-addled brats, the book loses some steam. Yet, this is a fascinating look at how little we understand mental illness and why we will never know what works effectively on those who suffer from it.

Rachel says

While it covers fascinating material, it feels disjointed and choppy in many places. It sort of reads like a research paper that has been expanded into a book, meaning that there are often stories that seem irrelevant to the overarching history of McLean. This means, though, that the really interesting topics that get broached to fill pages, like famous patients or antiquated methods of psychoanalysis don't get covered in the depth I'd like to see, because this book isn't really about them. It sort of tempts your reading palate and then takes it away to talk more about the administration staff and filing habits of the mental hospital.

So, you get a little bit of everything interspersed with comparatively boring information about a mental hospital whose history isn't even described in the amount of detail with which the other topics are covered. It's a bit odd, but informative all the same.

William Nist says

This year I have read two books chronicling the history of two major American Mental Hospitals--Bellevue and McLean. This book is about McLean Hospital outside of Boston. The two hospitals could not be more different. Bellevue is a public hospital taking all cases while McLean was a hospital for the affluent affiliated with Harvard.

McLean offered the rich and famous a genteel, gracious milieu for healing and restoration. The grounds were filled with mansions and gardens (even a golf course), housing the residents in comfortable suites instead of wards. McLean did offer all the innovations in psychiatry that rolled out over the decades (gruesomely detailed), but the tone was always one of elite professionalism. Many famous residents included Sylvia Plath (who committed suicide), James Taylor and Ray Charles.

Of course, about 40 years ago, the mental health field turned away from this type of mental institution, when the era of psychopharmacology began. These residential hospital are now rare, and Mclean also had to adjust. It has sold off most of its 250 acre campus, and now visits are for a week or so instead of lifetime!

The history is fascinating because it is both a social history and the history of a medical specialty. The book offers a condensed biography of all the major characters administrating this institution.

Read both books together for a comprehensive look at the American Psychiatric establishment since the early 19th century.

Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America's Most Storied Hospital
