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Crazy: A Father's Search Through America's Mental Health Madness



Synopsis

Former Washington Post reporter Pete Earley had written extensively about the criminal justice system. But it was only when his own son-in the throes of a manic episode-broke into a neighbor's house that he learned what happens to mentally ill people who break a law. This is the Earley family's compelling story, a troubling look at bureaucratic apathy and the countless thousands who suffer confinement instead of care, brutal conditions instead of treatment, in the "revolving doors" between hospital and jail. With mass deinstitutionalization, large numbers of state mental patients are homeless or in jail-an experience little better than the horrors of a century ago. Earley takes us directly into that experience-and into that of a father and award-winning journalist trying to fight for a better way.

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Customer Reviews

Suffering delusions from bipolar disorder, Mike Earley broke into a stranger's home to take a bubble bath and significantly damaged the premises. That Mike's act was viewed as a crime rather than a psychotic episode spurred his father, veteran journalist Pete Earley (Family of Spies), to investigate the "criminalization of the mentally ill." Earley gains access to the Miami-Dade County jail where guards admit that they routinely beat prisoners. He learns that Deidra Sanbourne, whose 1988 deinstitutionalization was a landmark civil rights case, died after being neglected in a boarding house. A public defender describes how he "not always happily" helps mentally ill clients avoid hospitalization. Throughout this grim work, Earley uneasily straddles the line between

father and journalist. He compromises his objectivity when for most of his son's ordeal -- Mike gets probation -- he refuses to entertain the possibility that the terrified woman whose home Mike trashed also is a victim. And when, torn between opposing obligations, he decides not to reveal to a source's mother that her daughter has gone off her medications, he endangers the daughter's life and betrays her mother. Although this is mostly a sprawling retread of more significant work by psychologist Fuller Torrey and others, parents of the mentally ill should find solace and food for thought in its pages. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

[A] clarion call for change and justice, and an enthralling portrait of a father who refused to surrender. (Bebe Moore Campbell) Takes readers on a harrowing personal journey... (Senator Pete V. Domenici [R-N.M.] and Nancy Domenici)

I found two problems with this 361-page book. First, it was written in 2006; and there have been many advances in mental health care in the intervening years. Second, the book has a somewhat narrow focus, i.e., relatively mild mental illness and its intersection with our criminal justice system. That said, it is an excellent introduction to the way that we deal with mental illness in America. The book is written from a personal perspective. The author was a reporter for The Washington Post. His college-age son was arrested for breaking into a house in New York, using the bathtub and generally damaging the property. Although mental health experts said that this event was the result of a bipolar condition of the brain, criminal charges were brought against the author's son. Pete Earley tried to get psychiatric help for his son but he soon discovered that he had no power to determine the medical treatment of his adult son. In the meanwhile, the criminal proceeding worsened. Earley then decided to conduct an investigation of the circumstances that confronted him. His search for knowledgeable authorities led him to Miami, and Dr. Joseph Portier, Judge Steven Leifman, Rachel Diaz, Judy Robinson and Tom Mullen. He describes the experiences of those persons, and then follows the actual experience of approximately eight inmates of the Miami mental health program. The descriptions are explicit. Earley offers the opinion that much of the present problem originated when the federal courts adopted a policy of "deinstitutionalization" which closed large mental health hospitals and unleashed many mentally ill persons into an environment that provided no mental health care. Earley argues - convincingly - that mentally ill persons do not belong in the criminal system, but there is no other place for them because the mental hospitals

have been closed. The book repeatedly refers to the cause of mental illness as being a "chemical imbalance" in the brain, whereas the existing policies were developed under the assumption that mental illness was brought about by environmental factors. After the publication of this book, there have been additional studies that indicate neurological deficiencies as causes of mental illness. In fact, my attention to this book was brought about by an article in USA Today in which the National Institute of Mental Health stated that "mental disorders are biological disorders involving brain circuits." Pete Earley's comment was, "For too long, psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry have focused on finding ways to alleviate symptoms of severe mental disorders . . . we need a cure." I agree.

Pete Earley is an amazing writer and researcher. He interviewed over 100 people for this book and really dug deep to discover a lot of dirty secrets and history about the way the mentally ill are treated in America. People with mental illnesses are all around us and more often than not, we just try to ignore them. I think it's important for everyone to know and try to understand what the mentally ill go through and how the system is very broken when it comes to helping them. Mental illness can strike anyone. Very interesting and sad, yet inspiring book.

A times, it seems we have lost the notion of the father-son bond. Earley shows how strong and committed it really is. I felt this book because I know the trauma and frustration that he has endured, and ultimately the learning he accomplished for us all. But, it took a long to finish because it struck so close to home. For those who have a loved one who suffers from a brain disorder, Crazy is a must read. For the rest, you gain a glimpse into the dysfunction of the America's mental health care, legal, and street-living cycle, and know dehumanization and abandonment of people, our people, some of whom had the world at their feet. This is much broader than the media-visible and concerning VA. You have to firmly implant 60 million people in your mind and ask yourself, What are we doing? At a time when atmospheric climate seems to be the preoccupation of this Administration, you have to wonder why they declared May Mental Health Awareness Month and then there was nary a peep during the Mental Health Awareness Week. For those of us who participate in NAMI and care for our loved ones, we have little time to wonder. Our patience tested. Political Correctness exhausted. It is plain that only a grassroots endeavor has legs. Crazy is clearly part of our arsenal and a clarion call for access to residential life, employment, learning, and treatment. We need to climb out of the hole we have dug and think, design and act creatively. According to one of my support group members, "You yanks do this very well." We'll see.

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