

Book review From September 2010 issue of Perspectives, the newsletter of the BC Association of Social Workers (posted with permission)

After her Brain Broke: Helping my Daughter Recover Her Sanity

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Bridgeross Communications (2010)

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Not so many years ago psychiatric practitioners were exposed to theories that attributed the cause of mental illness to faulty parenting, examples being the “schizophrenogenic mother,” and the autism-inducing “refrigerator mother,” whose demeanor psychologist Bruno Bettelheim compared to those of the guards at Nazi concentration camps. Fortunately, these curious hypotheses were eventually debunked and replaced with our current understanding, that an illness such as schizophrenia is brought about by an interaction between a biological vulnerability and stressors early in development, such as prenatal insult. It’s interesting to note, however, that a book published as recently as 1980 (the required text for a BSW course in family therapy I was taking) claimed that the “double-bind hypothesis [referring to erratic maternal behaviour] has grown into one of the most scientifically respectable theories of schizophrenia-producing family interaction.”

Why the history lesson in this review of *After Her Brain Broke*, a memoir by Vancouver author Susan Inman? It’s because, as Inman points out, parent-blaming still occurs in psychiatry, undermining both parental confidence and the relationship with psychiatric care-providers. One example: after the author’s 15-year-old daughter Molly is hospitalized for a psychotic episode Inman is informed that the attending psychiatrist has been told that “your family is dysfunctional” and “shouldn’t be around Molly too much,” a pronouncement that, not surprisingly, “knocks the breath” out of her. Later in the hospitalization the mother is chastised for not “encouraging [Molly’s] independence” (“individuation” I seem to recall from my family therapy jargon), this with a 15-year-old girl certified to a psychiatric ward.

In this slim volume, Inman recounts the harrowing experiences that parents must go through to try, ultimately, to understand and manage mental illness, a condition that in Molly’s case manifested with a range of challenges including psychosis, mood swings, severe OCD symptoms and anger at parents that she could only see as interfering. Along the way the family struggles with waiting lists, a lack of knowledge about support groups and resources, the fact that the most promising evidence-based approaches to treatment are not always available, and the reality that medications only provide a partial answer. Indeed, it is sadly the case that while the pharmacotherapy of HIV/AIDS has made great strides in a relatively short period of time, the newest drugs available to treat schizophrenia still are ineffective in up to a third of cases and come with significant side effects, such as weight gain and the creation of type II diabetes.

As someone who works in the field and also teaches social work students, I read with interest Inman's concerns that many potential "helpers," such as graduates in counseling psychology, have little or no knowledge of what are called "serious and persistent" mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, and how without this grounding their attempts to help may go awry. Inman also suggests that the UBC School of Social Work's curriculum is lacking in this respect. Is this a fair criticism? All I can say, as someone who interviews new grads who are applying to work in psychiatry, is that local professional schools do not seem to be providing potential employers with applicants conversant with best practices in mental health.

In sum, this book is important reading for social workers, particularly students and new grads, to help understand the family perspective, and to help consider the family as a member of a team that should be working in unison to promote the recovery of individuals like Molly. The book also provides food for thought concerning the adequacy of training in social work and allied professions, and whether the skill-set of new grads is sufficient for the challenges they will encounter.