

Book Review

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In the Jaws of the Black Dogs: A Memoir of Depression

by John Bentley Mays. HarperCollins Publishers,
New York, N.Y., 1999. \$24.00.

In the first pages of *In the Jaws of the Black Dogs: A Memoir of Depression*, author John Bentley Mays writes, "There are a great many books about depression. This is not one of them. It is pain *written*, not *observed*, a testament transcribed from wounded flesh to paper in the clearing, before the black dogs' inevitable return" (p. xii–xiii). The black dogs are the metaphor for chronic depression from which Mays has suffered for most of his life. This brutally honest account illuminates many aspects of his dark disorder.

John Bentley Mays hardly fits the stereotype of a mood disorder patient. He was an art critic for the *Toronto Globe and Mail* for 18 years and wrote a popular column on urban life for 7 years. He then joined the *National Post* as a cultural correspondent. He was honored with a National Newspaper Award and 4 National Magazine awards. An avid music lover, he collaborated with Christopher Butterfield and created the libretto for the critically acclaimed opera *Zurich 1916*. He is also the author of *Power in the Blood: An Odyssey of Discovery in the American South*. Despite this external achievement, however, the internal pain of depression lurked, waiting to pounce.

Mays begins his compelling story in childhood. He grew up in an idyllic rural South, where he felt nurtured and protected from his parents' unhappiness by the land and his relatives. He then lost his alcoholic father, possibly to murder, when he was 7. His mother succumbed to lung cancer when he was 11. Forced to live in the hated city, he was marred by these tragedies during his youth, heightening the acute sense of being alone.

He first thought of suicide as a child, but made his first attempt in 1968, as a graduate student. In one of many insightful passages, Mays speaks of the depressive patient's fascination and even reverence of suicide, comparing the depressive mind to the totalitarian state and "... its ultimate power over us: the *right to judicial murder*. Suicide is capital punishment under another name" (p. 51). Floundering around, undiagnosed but very intelligent, he took up studies in New York, Ireland, and South Africa. He tried to hold fast to his Anglican beliefs, but found himself increasingly drawn to fascist ideas, both those of the Edwardian South and of South Africa. His depression and self-loathing brought on a hunger for clean lines of power and ultimate authority over himself and everyone else. Eventually a professor helps him see that he is in the clutches of a "nervous

breakdown"; thus began a long battle for recovery from an illness that Mays feels cannot be cured. Awareness of his diagnosis, however, seemed enough to propel him forward in spite of setbacks with both psychoanalysis and drugs. He begins to enjoy sex, abandons his fascist leanings, takes on a sort of "campy" eccentricity, marries, and decides to write.

Though insightful and at times profound, this is a very difficult book to read. Written in highly stylized, sometimes poetic language, it often seems as if the author uses this tone to keep the reader from getting too close to any of the happier moments of his life. For instance, after pages and pages of detailed descriptions of self-loathing and hollow masturbation rituals, when he finally gets to real, pleasant human interaction, Mays cloaks these experiences in analytical hindsight, and the reader is left never knowing how he acted, how others reacted, or exactly what happened. He tells us much but shows us little.

Mays is severely critical of most of the popular literature being published about depression. He accuses it of offering false hope and setting up the depressed patient for feelings of failure, since there is no real happy ending. But much of what Mays presents is so abrasive and hopeless, his version of reality hardly seems to more accurately approximate truth. Of course, Mays's intention is to write a memoir of depression, not an autobiography of his life. He succeeds so well, I found myself remembering dark, painful episodes of my own depression and feeling a bit sick and angry as a result.

Depression affects each sufferer in various ways, and no one person's story can be used as a template to understand them all. Many of the popular works on depression give me a cleaner, more prismatic context in which to view my disorder, whereas this book put me so close to the black dogs that I felt their very breath on my neck. Still, Mays's book offers an insightful reflection on how chronic depression affected one man, and it should be read by anyone who wants to know how it feels to be cloaked in total despair. It is a thought-provoking, jarring record of a depressive life endured, mastered, and sometimes enjoyed.

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