

Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression

edited by Nell Casey. *William Morrow, New York, N.Y., 2001, 299 pages, \$23.00.*

I grant that it is uncommon for reviewers to share their thoughts on books that have been in print for 4 years. However, I also confess that it is *not* uncommon for this reviewer to sometimes attend to the tyranny of the urgent, while the seductive book slides further and further beneath a pile of unread journals, personal correspondence, scattered bills and professional letters, and yes, the occasional parking violation. Thus it was that, a full 2 years from the intended season, I read this anthology—and fell so hopelessly for its variety and subtlety of expression of the untellable, the incomprehensible experience of mental illness, that I bring you this summation.

Unholy Ghost is a collection of 23 essays by persons who are writers by trade and depressives (or family members of depressives) by fate. In the manner of (and containing an excerpt from) Styron's classic memoir *Darkness Visible*, the book comprises pieces that are unrelated, but not disjointed, as each offers a unique perspective on what the inner life of depression truly is. I have pored over research articles, labored over textbooks, and memorized sections (yes) of the DSM-IV, but never have I encountered documents that framed the stories of my own patients so well as some found here. Consider the title phrase, borrowed from Jane Kenyon's "Credo": "Pharmaceutical wonders are at work/but I believe only in this moment/ of well-being. Unholy ghost,/you are certain to come again."¹

For the clinician, this book is a mine containing rich ore, and much of the work has been done in helping him or her to grasp the patient's inner life. The interplay between medical illness (heart surgery) and depression, the struggle of a pregnant mother with the risk of teratogenicity of pharmaceutical therapy, the relation between pain and depression, the special characteristics of unipolar versus bipolar depression, ethnic and cultural contextualization of mental illness, the experience of hospitalization and electroconvulsive therapy, the influence of childhood events on adult psychiatric health and illness—they're all here and faithfully rendered. To hear Darcey Steinke say, "I felt like I'd been found incompetent and fired from my own life" (p. 64) or listen to David Karp report that "my mind made a choice each day about how to torment my body" (p. 143) is to be granted a special window into the soul of depression by those unfortunate enough to have lived it, gifted enough to report it, and courageous enough to undertake such an enterprise.

The sections are modular, and thus, each demands little of the busy practitioner's time. Woe to the reader, however, who starts this book without adequate time. He or she will soon be drawn inexorably to it, and it will be the journals, the letters, and yes, the traffic violation, which end at the bottom of the heap.

REFERENCE

1. Kenyon J. *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*. Saint Paul, Minn: Graywolf Press; 1996

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