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BOOK REVIEW

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The loony bin trip

Edited by Kate Millett

London, UK: Virago Press Ltd. 1990. 316 pp.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Kate Millett, who died last year, wrote some powerful books. *Sexual Politics*, published in 1970, made a significant contribution to feminist thinking and is considered a classic. *The Loony Bin Trip*, written in the early 1980s, makes a similarly important contribution to discourses on oppression and control, but in the context of madness and medicine's and western society's responses to it. In essence, it is Millett's autobiographical account of her experiences of extreme mood states, hospitalisation, psychiatric medication and her desire to live her life free from the latter and from the mental health system.

With a vivid and poetic prose style, often conveying her own inner dialogue, Millett tells the story of how one summer she decided to stop taking the lithium medication that for years gave her debilitating mental and physical side effects. This decision would have been strongly discouraged by psychiatrists, given her diagnosis of manic depression and their belief that without lithium (one of the most widely prescribed so-called mood-stabilising drugs), she would become ill and could pose a risk of harm to herself and/or others. In Millett's words, and reflecting the views of the psychiatric establishment as she encountered them, “An unsound mind like mine must be tranquilized and occluded with a drug; left to itself it was tainted, unstable” (p. 12).

I was interested to note that *The Loony Bin Trip* was first published while I was a medical student, at the time that I was gaining my very first experience of clinical psychiatry. I am curious, though, that it is only now, over 25 years later, that I have been introduced to this book. In fact, it was suggested to me by a friend who had himself come off long-term lithium. Perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised that it wasn't recommended by the psychiatrists training me, since it is more likely to be associated with books written by the so-called anti-psychiatrists. This is a real pity because, though it is a critique of psychiatry and the mental health system, Millett's writing offers an insight into the energy, elation, irritability and paranoia of hypomania and the “inarticulate anguish” (p. 280), grief and sense of shame of bipolar disorder, in a way that no standard psychiatric textbook can. It is a powerful subjective account of mental phenomena—of thought processes, sensory perceptions and emotions. As she describes her struggle to cling on to sanity—“hanging on to your marbles for dear life” (p. 241)—we are able to glimpse the terror of losing control, a form of suffering many of us can only imagine. For me, equally powerful is her experience of the responses of those closest to her and the response of the mental health system to what they interpret as a relapse secondary to stopping lithium.

Millett describes how she tries to evade the clutches of psychiatry, initially successfully, before finally, when on a visit to Ireland, she experiences “a terrifying captivity” (p. 218). Her experience of being involuntarily admitted is one of horror. We are left in no doubt how such experiences—the isolation, the boredom, being

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forced to take mind-altering drugs, the sense of injustice and powerlessness, and the brutal control of the "guards" (nurses, p. 218)—can actually drive one mad. Even though Millett is describing her experience of in-patient psychiatric care in Ireland and psychiatric care in America well over 35 years ago, reading her story is still a stark reminder of the harm psychiatry and the mental health system are capable of. Although no doubt she will be accused of telling only one side of the story, to me this was about her subjective truth and not necessarily the objective facts. However, as it happens, I do find much of her account entirely believable. For a psychiatrist this book will make uncomfortable reading, which is perhaps why it is not on a psychiatric trainee's recommended reading list.

Today, a better known autobiographical account of manic depression is that of Kay Redfield Jamison (who prefers to use this older term for what is now usually referred to as bipolar disorder). In her memoir *An Unquiet Mind* (1995), she also describes her relationship with lithium and her struggle to accept that she needed it in order to stay well. It is interesting to compare the differing conclusions Millett and Jamison come to with regard to taking lithium and psychiatric treatment in general, reflecting in part differences not only in their experiences of psychiatric care, but also in their perspectives on mental illness. It is remarkable that, despite the devastating consequences for Millett of coming off lithium, she nevertheless made a further attempt several years later. However, it is particularly noteworthy that she could only do so by keeping quiet about it. Clearly, Millett had learnt that for her to seek the support of friends, family, and the psychiatric establishment was to make failure almost inevitable. Of course, this will not be everyone's experience. Indeed, my friend who came off lithium did so with the support of his psychiatrist. But he also told me how utterly hellish it was knowing that he was observed for the slightest sign of a recurrence of illness, and of the immense effort it was to try to appear normal and not give rise to any suspicions of relapse. (Coming off lithium should not be undertaken lightly. It can certainly cause distressing mental and physical effects, sometimes mistakenly interpreted as a relapse.) Millett had recognised the dangers of being monitored and evaluated in the context of a culture of medicalisation, coercion, and control. Whilst taking lithium she felt she was on parole, with her family and friends acting as parole guards.

It is difficult to read *The Loony Bin Trip* without asking questions, uppermost questions for me being: How do I understand mental disturbance? Is it pathology or a way of coping, of survival? To what extent is mental distress precipitated and perpetuated by socio-cultural responses, including systems of helping? How much are freedom and autonomy essential ingredients for mental health, and infringements on them precipitants of mental illness? While I will continue to question, I also continue to believe (a belief reinforced by reading Millett's book) that paternalistic systems of care that follow from narrow medical frameworks of understanding, can oppress and crush the human spirit, are ethically questionable, and fail to provide the kind of relationships and environment that facilitate healing.

And what do people need to heal? For Millett, writing *The Loony Bin Trip* was part of her recovery, or an effort, as she put it "to recover myself, my mind, even its claim to sanity" (p. 313). She also concludes that "the human condition is helped best by being respected" (p. 315). This is a powerful message, as is her recognition of the role of fear. Millett concludes her remarkable story by urging us to:

> *stop being afraid. Of our own thoughts, our own minds. Of madness, our own or others'. Stop being afraid of the mind itself, its astonishing functions and fandangos, its complications and simplifications, the wonderful operation of its machinery – more wonderful because it is not machinery at all or predictable.* (p. 316)

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