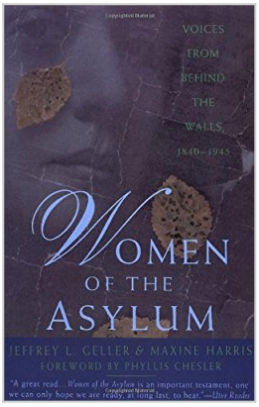

Women of the Asylum: Voices from Behind the Walls, 1840-1945

By Jeffrey L. Geller

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The 26 women who tell their stories here were incarcerated against their will, often by male family members, for holding views or behaving in ways that deviated from the norms of their day. The authors' accompanying history of both societal and psychiatric standards for women reveals the degree to which the prevailing societal conventions could reinforce the perception that these women were "mad".

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal
A collaborative effort between psychiatrist Geller and Harris, a clinical psychologist, feminist, and author of Women and Madness (1972), this compilation of excerpts from 26 firsthand accounts written between 1840 and 1945 by women confined in asylums are a testament to human endurance. In the patriarchal society of 19th-and early 20th-century America, it was easy to get women out of the way by having them declared "insane." The women were confined against their will, betrayed, degraded and beaten, raped, starved, robbed, punished, force-fed, and treated as unpaid labor. These heroic accounts tell of their struggles to hold on to their sanity and dignity within a brutalizing system. The editors' introduction places the accounts within a historical context. In view of women's ongoing struggles with both the medical and psychiatric establishments, this is a timely and important book. Recommended for all collections.
--*Lesley Jorbin, Cleveland State Univ. Lib., Ohio*

From Booklist
In four sections corresponding to consecutive chronological periods within their 105-year overall coverage, editors Geller and Harris present excerpts from 26 accounts of asylum stays of from six weeks to 28 years. They preface each section with an explanation of the role of women and the general state of psychiatry during the period covered. They note that throughout the time their book spans, the accepted causes of and treatments for psychiatric illnesses in women were different from the male equivalents. Indeed, although many women published accounts of their asylum stays before 1908, it took a man's account published that year, *A Mind That Found Itself*, by Clifford Beers, to make a definite impression on the public. The 26 excerpts range from broad, altruistic views to detailed accounts of individual experiences. Some of the latter are appalling, for several of the women, obviously sane, were railroaded by husbands who had tired of them, by family or relatives who wanted their land or money, or by others with equally ulterior motives. Once freed, a few of the women devoted themselves to improving the lot of their imprisoned sisters. *William Beatty*

From Kirkus Reviews
A hundred years of first-person reports from women committed to mental institutions that seem no less distressing in the 20th century than in the 19th. Geller (Psychiatry/Univ. of Massachusetts) and Harris (Down from the Pedestal, 1994) have excerpted accounts from the speeches, journals, reports, and books of well-known and unknown women who found not asylum, but degradation, injustice, deprivation, and even torture in the ghettos for the mentally ill where they were confined. The testimonies begin with Elizabeth Stone in 1840, committed because her religious views differed from her family's, and end with actress Frances Farmer in 1943, committed by her mother to an institution where ice-cold baths and sadistic attendants were the order of the day, much as they had been 100 years before. Early accounts make clear how women were subject to the whims of fathers, husbands, and even brothers, with no legal or moral recourse. One author points out an Illinois law that permitted a man to ``put his wife into an Insane Asylum without evidence of insanity.'' As society's views of women changed, so did the diagnoses that justified the asylum. ``Brain strain'' and ``nervous prostration'' were early favorites, when women were considered too frail to bear the burden of both domesticity and education. The forthright Phebe Davis, an inmate in a Utica, NY, asylum from 1850 to 1853, offers an eloquent commentary on such misguided thinking. St. Paul said a woman must not speak a loud word, she reports, but ``that was only his opinion and who cares for the opinion of one lovesick old bachelor, and he had been dead for centuries.'' One carp: The editors have condensed the

writings, but left no indication of where or how many cuts were made. Worthwhile if only for Phebe Davis's pungent observations, but also for framing historic patterns of abuse of the mentally ill. --

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jose Campbell:

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Keri Yokum:

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