



Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness

Gail Hornstein

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In a Victorian-era German asylum, seamstress Agnes Richter painstakingly stitched a mysterious autobiographical text into every inch of the jacket she created from her institutional uniform. Despite every attempt to silence them, hundreds of other patients have managed to get their stories out, at least in disguised form. Today, in a vibrant underground net-work of “psychiatric survivor groups” all over the world, patients work together to unravel the mysteries of madness and help one another re-cover. Optimistic, courageous, and surprising, Agnes’s Jacket takes us from a code-cracking bunker during World War II to the church basements and treatment centers where a whole new way of understanding the mind has begun to take form. A vast gulf exists between the way medicine explains psychiatric illness and the experiences of those who suffer. Hornstein’s luminous work helps us bridge that gulf, guiding us through the inner lives of those diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar illness, depression, and paranoia and emerging with nothing less than a new model for understanding one another and ourselves.

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