



Gracefully Insane: Life and Death Inside America's Premier Mental Hospital

By Alex Beam

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Its landscaped ground, chosen by Frederick Law Olmsted and dotted with Tudor mansions, could belong to a New England prep school. There are no fences, no guards, no locked gates. But McLean Hospital is a mental institution—one of the most famous, most elite, and once most luxurious in America. McLean "alumni" include Olmsted himself, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, James Taylor and Ray Charles, as well as (more secretly) other notables from among the rich and famous. In its "golden age," McLean provided as genteel an environment for the treatment of mental illness as one could imagine. But the golden age is over, and a downsized, downscale McLean—despite its affiliation with Harvard University—is struggling to stay afloat. *Gracefully Insane*, by *Boston Globe* columnist Alex Beam, is a fascinating and emotional biography of McLean Hospital from its founding in 1817 through today. It is filled with stories about patients and doctors: the Ralph Waldo Emerson protégé whose brilliance disappeared along with his madness; Anne Sexton's poetry seminar, and many more. The story of McLean is also the story of the hopes and failures of psychology and psychotherapy; of the evolution of attitudes about mental illness, of approaches to treatment, and of the economic pressures that are making McLean—and other institutions like it—relics of a bygone age.

This is a compelling and often oddly poignant reading for fans of books like Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (both inspired by their author's stays at McLean) and for anyone interested in the history of medicine or psychotherapy, or the social history of New England.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Alex Beam's *Gracefully Insane* is a knowledgeable historical portrait of New England's McLean Hospital, until recently the mental institution equivalent of the Plaza Hotel. Fenceless and unguarded, McLean's grounds were landscaped by Frederick Law Olmsted. Amenities included tennis courts, a golf course, room service, and a riding stable. As one director said, "If you don't know where you are, then you're in the right place." Its patients have included James Taylor, Robert Lowell, and Ray Charles. It also looms large in *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted*, written by former patients Sylvia Plath and Susanna Kaysen. Beam weaves patients' and employees' stories with an informal review of mental health treatments through the years, including lobotomies, insulin-induced comas, ice-water baths, and a ghastly device called the "coercion chair." *Gracefully Insane* is amiable, lively, and honest. Its many anecdotes (derived from patient records, journals, and interviews) are by turns poignant, humorous, and unsettling. --H. O'Billovitch

From Publishers Weekly

"The insane asylum seems to be the goal of every good and conscious Bostonian," Clover Adams wrote in 1879. The asylum she was referring to is the now legendary McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., and in this fascinating, gossipy social history, Boston Globe columnist Beam pries open its well-guarded records for a look at the life of the storied institution. McLean is best known today for its parade of famous patients like Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Ray Charles and all three Taylor children. But these notable "alumni" followed in the footsteps of generations of privileged clientele drawn primarily from Boston's most elite families. From its 1817 inception, McLean's trustees aimed to provide a discreet and appropriately opulent setting for the convalescence of the upper classes. The 250-acre grounds a scattering of Tudor mansions among scrub woods and groomed lawns were planned by landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted (later a McLean patient himself). The hospital offered private rooms, tennis courts, a bowling alley and the latest cures. Beam traces the hospital's place in the history of psychiatric treatment, from the early days of ice water therapies and moral management through the introduction of modern psychopharmacology. He discusses McLean's current condition neither individuals nor insurers can afford McLean's long-term care, and the downsized hospital faces an uncertain future. More than a history of a psychiatric institution, the book offers an unusual glimpse of a celebrated American estate: the Boston aristocracy that produced, for nearly two centuries, an endless stream of brilliant, troubled eccentrics and the equally brilliant and eccentric doctors who lined up to treat them. B&w photos. Agent, Michael Carlisle.

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From Library Journal

This quirky work of social history recounts the story of McLean Hospital, a trendy mental institution affiliated with Harvard University, from its genteel beginnings in the early 19th century to its downsized status today. Through interviews and analyses of archival sources, Beam, a Boston Globe journalist and author of two novels (*Fellow Travelers*; *The Americans Are Coming!*), provides an oddly entertaining narrative that reads easily and supplies fascinating details about business, pop music, and literary figures. Casual readers may be drawn to tales that inspired the film *Girl, Interrupted* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Name-dropping is rampant, reflecting one former patient's view that staying at McLean was comparable to attending a progressive college. Less successful is Beam's attempt to generalize about the history of mental

healthcare from such a unique case. He subtly criticizes the mental health establishment that permitted care to be so heavily influenced by socioeconomic status and whose treatment paradigms shifted so wildly from hydrotherapy and lobotomies to "talking cures" and psychopharmacology. Recommended for large public and regional libraries as well as specialized history of mental health collections. Antoinette M. Brinkman, M.L.S., Evansville, IN

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joyce Bullock:

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Gene Baker:

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Jamie Gregory:

The book untitled Gracefully Insane: Life and Death Inside America's Premier Mental Hospital contain a lot

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