

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Book review

### Profiling psychiatric research in Canada

**Psyche in the lab:  
celebrating brain science in Canada**  
Mary V. Seeman, Neil Seeman  
Hogrefe & Huber, 2006  
258 pp \$37.45 ISBN 0-88937-304-3

Everywhere you look in medicine these days, there are stories. Proponents of narrative medicine debate supporters of more traditional medical humanities. Medical students attend storytelling workshops and present “narratives” to an attentive audience. Storytelling is presumed to have benefits for those who tell the tale and those who listen (the potential risks seem to be less often considered). In addition to providing a means of conveying information, the process of storytelling has been imbued with a number of virtues, including the opportunity for better patient care and enhanced self-awareness. In the discussion of the therapeutic benefits of storytelling, one key fact is often overlooked: some stories are just more interesting than others.

(CPRF), this book contains 29 profiles of Canadians in the mental health field. Sixteen individuals profiled are researchers, while the remainder are consumers, philanthropists or other non-professionals. By telling the story of an institution through the narratives of people involved in its work, the authors add humanity to what could otherwise be a rather dry history.

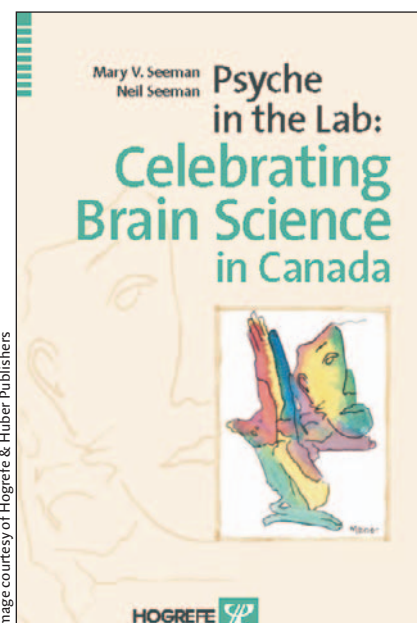
The second half of the book is especially engaging. Voices of consumers and family members are well represented. Likewise, the stories of philanthropists and patrons provide interesting opportunities to learn about donors ranging from Joseph Tanenbaum, a generous supporter of Canadian charities, to Renée Claire Marier, a woman with schizophrenia who gives 50% of the profits from paintings she sells to schizophrenia research.

But as I read through the first section of *Psyche in the Lab*, featuring profiles of psychiatric researchers, I found that while some stories were especially interesting, others were rather unremarkable. The authors used “criterion-

... people who do fascinating research may lead lives that are, at least on the face of it, quite unexceptional.

This is apparent when reading *Psyche in the Lab: Celebrating Brain Science in Canada*, by Mary Seeman and Neil Seeman. Published to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation

based techniques” to select “16 leading scientists” for semistructured interviews. The intention was to choose a diverse group of accomplished scientists associated with the CPRF or the Canadian Institutes of Health Re-



search. The interviews were conducted by an assistant, David Gentili, who also transcribed them.

In some cases, the person's research was interesting to me, while in others, it was the life story of the researcher. But I was struck by the fact that people who do fascinating research may lead lives that are, at least on the face of it, quite unexceptional. In contrast, the chapter on Bruno Cormier, a now-deceased Québec psychiatrist who signed the “Refus global” in 1948, made for engrossing reading not only because of his pioneering work in forensic psychiatry, but also because of his political activism.

Because the Canadian psychiatric community is relatively small, there were people profiled who I knew on a personal or professional level. While that stimulated my interest to read those chapters, the same obviously

could not be said for the general reader.

Perhaps if the authors themselves had been able to interview the persons being profiled, the first part of the book might have been more engaging. Particular avenues of inquiry that stimulated the interest of the authors could have been explored, and then developed more fully. Several times I found myself wanting to know more about how the researcher felt at a critical juncture of his or her career. If the authors could have fleshed out the biographies with more detail, even tales that appeared to be quite ordinary might have revealed thought-provoking insights.

The greatest risk in telling the story of a research foundation is that it will be deathly dull. While the interest level may vary by chapter, *Psyche in the Lab* is, overall, a book that successfully integrates the experiences of several groups as it describes the history of an organization that has made an important contribution to mental health in Canada.

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## CREATIVE CONVALESCENCE

I enjoy convalescence. It is the part that makes the illness worth while.

— George Bernard Shaw

Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, was converted to the religious life while recovering from a battle wound. Convalescence has been put to interesting use by many thinkers, artists and writers. Some, like Robert Louis Stevenson, became famous for it.

Tell us about recovery times — yours, or your patients' — in *The Left Atrium*. We welcome prose submissions of up to 1000 words (pubs@cma.ca).

## Poem

### doctors know

some days are good  
some days are bad

I have come to know  
the bad days

remembrances  
hung dry on the  
crying eyes

daddy's dead  
memories of the little girl  
lost in the big strong arms  
of her hero  
her Atlas  
who held her world up  
now lets it down  
gently on the snow  
covered peaks  
while I watch on  
I can't say  
why days are  
good or bad

I can't say why  
the sound of a soft voice  
with a guitar makes  
me choke up

a grown man  
a hardened man  
fighting  
the same way he did  
when he was seven  
a man's man  
an orthopaedic surgery resident  
fighting  
not to cry  
not to let  
the remembrances of humanity,

return  
to my very own doctor eyes

Doctors bleed  
Doctors cry  
Doctors stand at the foot of your bed  
and pray to God they'll somehow see  
another day

Doctors die

inside

outside

Doctors have good days  
secretly holding their child's  
beautiful smile  
in their minds  
praying that God wouldn't  
put her face  
on the 6 year old female  
the next patient  
on the way  
in transport from a car accident  
her extracted dry blood  
on loan to the  
thirsty 401

Doctors know  
inside  
the smell of death

outside  
the taste of regret

death

doctors know  
good days  
and  
bad days  
days  
happy just to breathe the air

days spent  
staring at the mirrored  
liar  
unspoken

silent

lost

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