

7-2022

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Recommended Citation

McKergow, Mark (2022) "This Book Will Change Your Mind About Mental Health: A Journey into the Heartland of Psychiatry -Written by Nathan Filer," *Journal of Solution Focused Practices*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/journalsfp/vol6/iss1/14>

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BOOK REVIEW**This Book Will Change Your Mind About Mental Health: A Journey into the Heartland of Psychiatry**

Nathan Filer

Faber & Faber Ltd, 2020, 256 pages, ISBN 978-0571345977, paperback £9.99 (hardback and Kindle editions available)

Review by Mark McKergow

Author, Speaker & Teacher of Solution-Focused Work

This is an unusual and very readable book. Nathan Filer is a mental health nurse. He is also an author and not just of this book – his debut novel *The Shock of The Fall* (Filer, 2013) won the Costa Book Of The Year 2013 in the UK and has been translated into 30 languages. The novel tells the story of Matthew Homes, a 19-year-old boy from Bristol, dealing with the death of his older brother. It explores the central themes of loss, guilt, and mental illness, in ways which have clearly resonated with readers around the world.

Since its publication, Nathan Filer has been exploring the world of mental health both as portrayed in fiction and in the media, through his 2017 BBC Radio 4 documentary *The Mind in The Media* (Heaven, 2022). Filer's second book is definitely a non-fiction work, which continues to explore this territory, this time taking clients' eye views and experience as a starting point.

This Book Will Change Your Mind About Mental Health is written for the general public. It explores how mental health issues appear to the unaffected outsider (perhaps as a version of physical medicine with diagnoses, drugs, patients and cures) and then takes that view apart step-by-step. Filer has interviewed experts with different views of the field of psychiatry. The book is fully documented with references and quotes, often given directly to the author rather than taken from the literature, from people like psychiatry professor Robin Murray and clinical psychologist Lucy Johnstone. Johnstone is co-author of *The Power Threat Meaning Framework* (Johnstone & Boyle, 2020), an alternative view on why people sometimes experience a whole range of forms of distress, confusion, fear, despair, and troubled or troubling behaviour, which gives an indication of her standpoint. The way these expert inputs to the book are integrated in a conversational, rather than strictly academic, way gives the book a highly personal quality, as if the author is now talking to the reader rather than addressing them from on high.

What really makes this book stand out, however, is the stories from those who have suffered both from distressed thoughts, feelings and behaviour (and yes, he addresses the question of what to call those people early in the book – Service users? Patients? Survivors?), and those who have suffered at the hands of professionals who are (apparently) trying to help them. And that includes himself. As a mental health nurse, Filer has plenty of experience of this from close-up. The book opens with a stark revelation:

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME that I forcibly medicated a person against his will. It was thirteen years ago, not long after I'd qualified as a mental health nurse, and I had started my career working on a psychiatric ward providing assessment and treatment for adults in acute phases of serious mental illness. There was a patient (or service user or client or son or brother or friend, depending on who you ask) whom I'll call Amit. Amit had been refusing any medication for nearly three weeks and with good reason. The medicine we were offering him contained a poison (Filer, 2013, p. 8).

Many of the chapters focus on extended stories from sufferers. Molly the journalist who drank a bottle of bleach. Steve the soldier who thought his whole life was an army-set test. Clare the mother whose teen son died alone in a dirty flat. Filer has interviewed these people too, and the personal connection overflows from their words and experiences. It will be startling to the general reader how much each of these cases concerns a distressed individual or family who are forced into a generic hole by those charged with helping them, in ways which seem to make matters worse more often than they make them better.

Over the course of the book Filer shows the confusion of much of the mental health world, uncertainties and muddles which look unimportant to the outsider but are life-changing for those involved. Diagnosis, the role of the brain, the role of chemicals and medication, the DSM, stigma and anti-stigma campaigns, the nature of 'schizophrenia', the interests of professionals and governments, hallucinations and delusions, genes, early life experiences, people helped and people let down. He is admirably open about the difficulties, the paradoxes, the progress made and the continuing uncertainties. And, he can really write! The skills of the award-winning novelist come alongside the curious mental health nurse in a combination which is engaging, incisive and profound.

There is so much in this book which supports the kind of person-first, every-case-is-different way that Solution Focused practitioners work. I did my best to address some of these issues in my own book *The Next Generation of Solution Focused Practice* (McKergow, 2021) and did my best with only a few pages (pp. 77-84), and Lucie Duncan, Rayya Ghul and Sarah Mousley have written specifically about using SF to recover from mental distress (Duncan et al., 2021). Here Nathan Filer brings his personal experience (which I can never match), his direct conversations and his literary skills to create an accessible look into the topsy-turvy world of mental health. Read it, share it, listen to it, be informed by it.

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The reviewer

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