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Book review

The Great Pretender: The Undercover Mission that Changed our Understanding of Madness

By Susan Cahalan

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I came to this book unexpectedly because it was referenced in another, *Desperate Remedies* by Andrew Scull (2022). Scull's book is a fascinating and scholarly history of American psychiatry and its attempts to understand and treat mental illness. Scull includes an account of a famous study by David Rosenhan, a psychology and law professor at Stanford University in California, titled 'On Being Sane in Insane Places'. I remembered learning about this study when studying psychology in the 1970s. I can't now recall if I first learned of it in a lecture or in the course text. But I do remember being so fascinated by the study that I got hold of Rosenhan's 1973 paper in *Science*.

Briefly, Rosenhan reported that eight volunteers (a ninth was omitted from the findings for not following the study's protocols) had gained admittance to mental hospitals by claiming they were hearing voices. All the volunteers – Rosenhan called them 'pseudopatients' - were admitted and spent between seven and fifty-two days in hospital before being discharged. The seven who were admitted to public institutions were diagnosed as schizophrenic, while the sole volunteer admitted to a private hospital was given a diagnosis of manic depression (an older term for bipolar disorder). Following diagnosis, the volunteers behaved 'normally', yet even normal acts such as recording notes in a diary were apparently interpreted as symptoms of their illness. The key points of the study were that psychiatrists appeared to be not very good at distinguishing the sick from the well, and that the context (i.e., mental hospitals) produced an expectation of mental illness. The study, which received considerable academic and media attention, according to Scull (2022), severely damaged the public perception of psychiatry in the USA, and in many other countries, caused a crisis within psychiatry, hastened the closure of residential mental health facilities, and, until recently, featured as a classic study in psychology textbooks.

Except that, in the 2022 book that led me to Cahalan's, Scull reports that Rosenhan 'perpetrated one of the most egregious and successful academic frauds of the twentieth century' (p. 305). This fraud was uncovered, '[t]hanks to some astonishing detective work by a New York journalist, Susan Cahalan' (p. 305). I simply had to read Cahalan's book.

At the age of 24, Susannah Cahalan, a journalist with *The New York Post*, began to experience depression, flu-like symptoms, and psychosis. After nearly jumping out of the window of her father's third-floor apartment, she was admitted to hospital, dosed with antipsychotics, and marked up for 'transfer to psych'.

Thanks to many lucky factors that helped set me apart – my age, race, location, socioeconomic situation, generous insurance coverage – doctors pushed for more tests, which led to a spinal tap that revealed the presence of brain-targeting autoantibodies...People no longer implied that trouble was all in my head (Cahalan, 2020, p. 8).

Cahalan had a neurological disease, autoimmune encephalitis. She wrote a book about her experience, *Brain on Fire* (2012) - subsequently released as a drama documentary produced by Charlize Theron, with Cahalan played by Chloë Grace Moretz - and gives talks about her experience. Soon after one of her talks, she had dinner with a clinical psychologist who had heard her speak, and who asked if she had heard of the Rosenhan study. She hadn't but looked it up.

On my first reading of 'On Being Sane in Insane Places,' in a quiet Boston hotel room, the first of hundreds of readings to come, I saw immediately why so much of the general public had hailed it - and why psychiatry writ large despised it (p. 40).

Using her journalism skills, Cahalan researched Rosenhan, who died in 2012, and attempted to track down family, colleagues – and the volunteer 'pseudopatients' documented in his paper. *The Great Pretender* is the story of that detective work, set within a broader context of present-day psychiatry and treatment for mental health difficulties in the USA. The book is a great read – part detective story, part science journalism. I particularly enjoyed the insight we get into Cahalan's research methods: 'I kept coming across the name Perry London. *It's too bad Perry isn't here*, people kept saying to me. *He'd know everything.*' When Cahalan confirmed that Rosenhan had in fact gone undercover in a mental hospital, and when she tracked down two of his graduate students who had also been pseudopatients, I found myself wondering if Scull's assessment of Rosenhan's work had been overly harsh. My view changed when I

learned that one of the graduate student volunteers told Cahalan that his hospital experience had been entirely positive, yet this had not been represented in the paper, and that Cahalan was unable to trace any of the other pseudopatients.

I have only a mild criticism: in a book which deals with labelling and stigma, it's strange that Cahalan feels the need to describe accents in a stereotypical way: thus, the psychiatrist 'R. D. Laing came to Esalen in 1967, speaking in his enchanting Scottish brogue about his work at Kingsley Hall', and '[t]he next day a man's Southern Californian drawl greeted me on the phone'. Maybe she got unlucky with this Scottish reviewer who happens to have relatives in Southern California!

What did I learn? Something I have believed for close to 50 years turned out to be based on fraud (not least because all but two of the pseudopatients were most likely fictional, according to Cahalan's research). The value of having a different take on research: it took a journalist to unmask the deception; there were many criticisms of Rosenhan's research at the time, but these were directed ineffectually because they were expressed defensively rather than in a scholarly manner. Rosenhan was not wrong about the impoverished state of US psychiatry in the 1970s, but especially because he did not follow up his celebrated study, his critique was misdirected. It seems astonishing that the paper got past referees and editors without reassurances about the soundness of the methodology and consent from the study's subjects. I would hope that the research proposal would not have got past today's ethics committees, but Cahalan reports several contemporary examples of research fraud – admittedly those that were uncovered more quickly than Rosenhan's deception – and believes academic fraud may be more widespread than is acknowledged. On the other hand, Cahalan also notes reasons to be more optimistic about developments in neurology, pharmacology, and psychiatry:

I am aware of all the arrogance, incompetence, and failure, but I still believe that psychiatry – and the whole of medicine – will one day be deserving of my faith (p. 294).

Rosenhan's deception had more far-reaching consequences. His paper, and other critiques, such as Ken Kesey's 1962 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and the subsequent 1975 film starring Jack Nicholson, while not solely responsible for the closure of institutions, provided cover for the political decision to close hospitals on the false prospectus of providing care in the community, in the USA and in many other countries. This preference for community, or family, care, over residential care, has also influenced trends in social work. Rosenhan deliberately suppressed evidence of good institutional care because it did not fit his broader theory, and the very people he apparently cared deeply about were the poorer for it.

References

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The review copy was purchased by the reviewer.

About the author

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