

A History of Delusions: The Glass King, a Substitute Husband and a Walking Corpse

Victoria Shepherd

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Victoria Shepherd recounts some of European history's most memorable psychological cases in *A History of Delusions*.

Everyone feels sad, confused, or victimized from time to time, Shepherd suggests. But for an unlucky few, those feelings become all-encompassing, and they manifest as bizarre, terrifying delusions. In these historical case studies: some people thought they were made of glass and would shatter if touched; others believed they were the victims of vast conspiracies to kill them or rob them of a rightful inheritance. While the nature and root causes of these delusions differ, all beg the same questions about what each person is trying to say—and about what they need to feel safe.

Shepherd compares and contrasts some of the best-known examples of delusions from across European history. In the course of her exploration, she adds historical context to each subject's story, speculating about how wartime traumas, technological advances, and religious persecution could have influenced the nature of their delusions. Sometimes, however, there is no outward calamity to blame: sometimes, the human mind is its own worst enemy.

The book starts in the recent past and moves backward through the centuries. Each chapter opens with a compelling portrait of someone whose life was consumed, even destroyed, by a false idea. While acknowledging limitations set by time, and the conflicting agendas of the people relating the subjects' stories, Shepherd makes poignant arguments about what our beliefs say about us. Even now, scientists are just beginning to understand the causes of delusions. By looking back on historical examples of the phenomenon, Shepherd shows both the mistakes and triumphs of the past, which should inform more compassionate, dignified treatment of the mentally ill in the future.

From fourteenth-century England to twentieth-century France, *A History of Delusions* examines the thin, blurry line between sanity and insanity.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (July / August 2022)

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