

Distorted Mind: Mental Illness Revealed

Michael Fortnam

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Fortnam captures his radical separation from reality by sharing his confused thought process.

In this brief but brave memoir, Michael Fortnam strives to share what serious mental illness feels like from inside the patient's head. *Distorted Mind: Mental Illness Revealed* addresses a prevalent memoir topic—the difficult journey from receiving a diagnosis to making a recovery—in a refreshingly honest way. Instead of simply chronicling the events that led to his hospitalization and eventual return to a regular life, Fortnam records his complex thoughts and feelings and effectively communicates his overwhelming sense of bewilderment when he must come to terms with the fact that he cannot trust his own mind.

Although his disoriented and at times desperate voice is unique, Fortnam corrals the chaos in a conventional memoir structure. Chapters devoted to the initial inklings of trouble in his early twenties, his battles with depression and mania, the downward spiral that led to his hospitalization, and the rocky road back to a meaningful life come one upon the other in the expected order. There's a clear progression to his illness. Fortnam, however, doesn't always see what's happening until much later. This book is as much an effort to make sense of it all for himself as it is an attempt to communicate his struggle to others.

Not surprisingly, then, Fortnam's focus on his own confusion can make it difficult to understand the way certain events unfold. For example, he writes about being arrested after a reclusive period when he had holed up in his home and embarked on all manner of esoteric projects—some of them potentially dangerous—but what comes through is not so much the chaos inside his apartment but the astonishment inside his head. He genuinely wonders: Why were the police there? What did they think he was doing with the rag-filled jar of kerosene? Couldn't they see it was a cancer-healing formula God had instructed him to create? Fortnam really didn't understand what was going on in his own life, and while he captures his radical separation from reality by sharing these thoughts, he often leaves the reader almost as bewildered as he was.

The book moves rapidly from one event to another, describing a few in detail but many more in generic terms. It's never explained, for instance, exactly what Fortnam's manic spending frenzies looked like, only that they resulted in an apartment full of "musical instruments" and "tools." There is plenty of room in this slim volume for greater detail and a more particular picture of his life. Interviews with his parents, his psychiatrist, and even the arresting officer would be valuable additions, providing a useful counterpoint to Fortnam's frequently detached perspective.

At its center, this memoir is an honest, heartfelt look at what it really feels like to find that your mind is unraveling, although not everything Fortnam goes through is understood. Family and friends of those dealing with mental illness can gain a new perspective by reading *Distorted Mind*.

SHEILA M. TRASK (April 17, 2014)

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