

SYNOPSIS



Schizophrenia is one of the most misused and contested psychological terms in medicine and culture (Carlson). Consequently, myths have proliferated since Eugen Bleuler built on Emil Kraepelin's concept of "dementia praecox" to define schizophrenia as the disentanglement of psychic functions resulting in ambivalent feelings, autism, and abnormal affectivity (Frith and Johnstone 28–30). For example, schizophrenia continues to be confused with split personality and sufferers still tend to be stigmatized as more violent or creative than neurotypical people (Granger and Naudin). Such stigmas have also had unmistakable gendered (e.g., see Showalter), racial (e.g., see Metzl), and classist overtones (e.g., see Mulvany et al.). These are some of the reasons why patient advocates have recently questioned the term and proposed the recovery-focused alternative of "psychosis susceptibility syndrome" (George and Klijn). The memoir genre, for its part, has played a crucial role in shaping and/or challenging our problematic medico-cultural understanding of schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia memoirs gained currency in the second half of the twentieth century. For instance, memoirs with female protagonists and/or narrators such as Marguerite Sechaye's *Journal d'une schizophrène* (1951), Barbara O'Brien's *Operators and Things* (1958), and Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), despite their contribution to the development of diagnosis and treatment, helped replace the nineteenth-century stock character of the "hysterical" woman with "the schizophrenic woman" in literary culture (Showalter 204–5). Then, in the 1960s–80s, antipsychiatry movements both in France and in the Anglophone world questioned normality and the reliability of diagnosis and treatment, and argued that neurodivergences could lead to higher creativity. These movements mainly built on analyses (e.g., by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Paul Auster) of autobiographical works by the likes of Daniel Schreber, Raymond Roussel, and Louis Wolfson, which gave these works literary cult statuses. While these memoirs were instrumental to refine medico-cultural knowledge about schizophrenia, the memoirs published in the twenty-first century tend to differ significantly from such 'cult memoirs.'

In the West, twenty-first century schizophrenia memoirs emerge in a context marked by social movements such as Mad Pride and neurodiversity and are thus more concerned with raising awareness and providing self-help advice about mental illness than with aesthetic achievements. That is not to say that they are devoid of aesthetic value but, rather, that they engage more actively and explicitly in the difficult task of combating misunderstanding and stigmatization. For example, in the interview available in the first Hyperion edition of *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness* (2007), Elyn R. Saks claims that she "want[s] [her] book to give hope to people who suffer from schizophrenia and bring better understanding to everyone else," and to "implode myths held by many mental health professionals as well as the general public" (347). Health humanities scholars such as Arthur W. Frank, G. Thomas Couser, and Mary E. Wood have read memoirs as springboards for better understanding how illnesses affect patients' lives, and such memoirs are also often cited in psychology, psychiatry, and self-help culture as offering valuable information about subjective experiences of illness (Franssen 404). Other scholars, however, are cautious when it comes to cite, use, or refer to the knowledge produced by illness memoirs, primarily because they are paradoxically both isolated cases and cultural constructs with specific rhetorical aims and a complex institutional dimension that can affect their epistemological validity.

Jennifer Raden and Somogy Varga, for example, stress that the illness memoir is a literary genre that might inform us more about discourses on illnesses in literature rather than about first-hand experiences of illness (100). Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Anneleen Masschelein, for their part, showcase that writers of illness and disability memoirs are influenced by institutions (e.g., publishers, editors, and literary agents) and people in general, which affects the knowledge they produce (174). They also emphasize that published self-help memoirs are often double-edged: while they strive to improve lives lived with mental illnesses, they create narrative models that foreground identities defined by victimhood and suffering, and thus could promote normative

SYNA Possible ideas about health and illnesses (173–74). As the number of (un)published schizophrenia memoirs is growing, we therefore need both healthcare professionals and literary scholars to critically examine their rhetorical forms and functions as well as their socio-cultural and institutional relations to determine whether they can complicate, challenge, or enrich contemporary medico-cultural knowledge about schizophrenia.

To do so, in addition to properly contextualizing schizophrenia memoirs (Franssen 415), one could look beyond the texts and consider readers'—who can be healthcare professionals, patient-experts, caregivers, or more general readers—responses in published book reviews and interviews and/or on reading platforms. A quick look at some readers' responses to Saks' memoir on a reading platform, for example, reveals some discontent if not despair with reading such a narrative in which the author rejects psychiatric care or refuses to take medications multiple times, or occasionally expresses disdain at sufferers who 'surrender' when the illness is too painful to cope with ("The Center Cannot Hold," see, for example, "Jgknobler 2014" and "Crystal 2019"). Schizophrenia *graphic* memoirs have also received little critical attention so far (e.g., see the exceptions of Venkatesan and Saji and Suresh and Venkatesan), while the field of graphic medicine has shown that the comics medium's entangled visual-spatial, textual, and verbal dimensions are promising means for representing the intricacies of complex illnesses (e.g., see La Cour and Poletti, and Gardner). Clem and Olivier Martini's *Bitter Medicine* (2010) and Darryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales* (2010), for instance, explore beyond the templates of hope for permanent recovery or survival conveyed by restitution and warrior narratives (Frank 81–207), and pedagogically inform readers about the problematic subjective, socio-cultural, and/or medical dimensions of schizophrenia through singular and impactful combinations of media. Be they memoirs or graphic memoirs, in any case, these texts remain to be studied in their interactions with their twenty-first century contexts and with the multiple actors that shape illness experiences today so as to evaluate their potential for destigmatizing and enriching our knowledge about schizophrenia.

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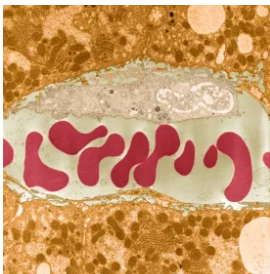
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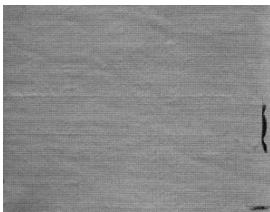
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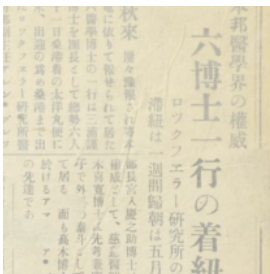
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David Lombard is a junior postdoctoral researcher at the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) affiliated with the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), where he works at the English Literature and the Cultural Studies Research Groups and is a member of the steering committee of the Leuven Center for Health Humanities. He did his Ph.D. in literary studies as a joint degree between the universities of Liège and Leuven in Belgium (2020–24), with a dissertation titled "American Anthropocene Sublimes: Rhetorics and Narrations of Self and Environment in the Contemporary U.S. Ecobiographical Memoir." During his Ph.D. situated at the intersection of American literary studies, narratology, and the environmental humanities, he was also a visiting scholar at the University of Texas at Austin (fall 2022) and the Ohio State University, at Project Narrative (spring 2023). Since 2018, he has been mainly working and publishing in the fields and areas of contemporary (American) literature and culture, life writing and memoir studies, environmental humanities, health humanities, aesthetic theory and theories of the sublime, Henry David Thoreau and American transcendentalism, rhetoric and rhetorical narratology, and comparative literature. He is the author of the book *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), which served as an extended pilot study for his PhD project funded by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS). In addition, his essays and book reviews have been published in edited volumes as well as in academic journals such as *Épistémocritique*, *Miranda*, the *Journal of Arts and Media Studies*, the *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, *Local Environment*, *The Trumpeter*, and *Acta fabula*. He is also the co-editor of two special issues: "The Pastoral: New Trajectories in the Anthropocene" (*Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities*, December 2021) and "Anthropocene Sublimes" (*Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, spring 2025). His current postdoctoral project, titled "The Twenty-First-Century Schizophrenia Memoir and Graphic Memoir: A Rhetorical-Narratological and Multi-Actor Materialist Approach" (2024–27), is situated in literary-cultural studies and the health humanities and investigates the forms, functions, and cultural and institutional relations of the historically important genres of the schizophrenia memoir and graphic memoir in their multiple twenty-first-century contexts.

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