

Review

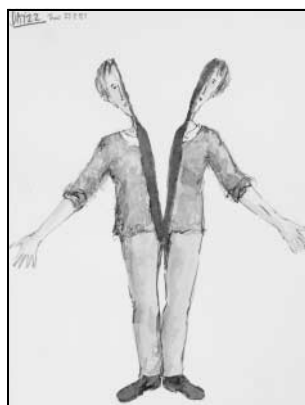
Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me

Bobby Baker
Profile Books, 2010, £15.00 pb, 232 pp.
ISBN 9781846683749

Diagnosed with borderline personality disorder in 1996 and beginning to self-harm, artist Bobby Baker referred herself to the Pine Street Day Centre therapeutic community. For the next 10 years she meticulously documented her experiences, both internal and in relation to the services she encountered, in a series of over 700 watercolour 'Diary Drawings', 158 of which were later exhibited at the Wellcome Collection in London. These images are beautifully reproduced in this volume, along with essays by Baker herself and her daughter, psychologist Dora Whittuck, which add context and an opportunity explicitly to convey Bobby's reflections on mental illness and recovery. Each page shows one drawing, the day number and sometimes a brief caption.

In the book we accompany the artist through her treatment, initially lurching between emotions. In the first fortnight alone we see her bounding into the Day Centre (Day 1), trapped in 'dingy dank brown despair' (Day 3), parodying her own murderous rage against her key-worker (Day 6 and 7), encircled in a waterfall of weeping (Day 8) and nakedly covered in the wounds of self-harm (Day 10). She later depicts with pathos her psychotic thoughts, psychotherapy and emergence to a verdant image of recovery.

As a psychiatrist exploring these cathartic, often humorous and sometimes painful depictions, I found myself constantly fascinated by the way they depict the phrases spoken by my own patients and states of mind dryly described in medical texts. We see Bobby viscerally split from head to groin, contemplating the horrors, sometimes ready to explode, beneath her façade. She toys with 'oblivion' through alcohol and tranquillisers, and portrays her paranoia as a giant Crisis



'Day 22', Bobby Baker © Wellcome Images

Team eyeball peering through her letterbox. Powerfully, we also see ourselves from her perspective: whether showing silent compassion, being drowned in painful memories or observed arriving 'to save our sanity'. At other times, we are shown as 'meddling professionals' squelching her brain, with knives and talons, paralysed at a 'harrowing CPA' meeting or unknowingly revealing insights into ourselves by the quality of our footwear.

Diary Drawings is a rich, insightful and hopeful book, which I will have no hesitation in recommending to colleagues, students or patients wanting an extraordinary perspective on our work.

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doi: 10.1192/pb.bp.110.031450