



The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic

By Darby Penney, Peter Stastny

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“*The Lives They Left Behind* is a deeply moving testament to the human side of mental illness, and of the narrow margin which so often separates the sane from the mad. It is a remarkable portrait, too, of the life of a psychiatric asylum—the sort of community in which, for better and for worse, hundreds of thousands of people lived out their lives. Darby Penney and Peter Stastny’s careful historical (almost archaeological) and biographical reconstructions give us unique insight into these lives which would otherwise be lost and, indeed, unimaginable to the rest of us.” —Oliver Sacks

“Fascinating. . . . The haunting thing about the suitcase owners is that it’s so easy to identify with them.” —*Newsweek*

When Willard State Hospital closed its doors in 1995, after operating as one of New York State’s largest mental institutions for over 120 years, a forgotten attic filled with suitcases belonging to former patients was discovered. Using the possessions found in these suitcases along with institutional records and doctors’ notes from patient sessions, Darby Penney, a leading advocate of patients’ rights, and Peter Stastny, a psychiatrist and documentary filmmaker, were able to reconstruct the lives of ten patients who resided at Willard during the first half of the twentieth century.

The Lives They Left Behind tells their story. In addition to these human portraits, the book contains over 100 photographs as well as valuable historical background on how this state-funded institution operated. As it restores the humanity of the individuals it so poignantly evokes, *The Lives They Left Behind* reveals the vast historical inadequacies of a psychiatric system that has yet to heal itself.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

When New York's 120-plus-year-old mental institution Willard State Hospital was closed down in 1995, New York Museum curator Craig Williams found a forgotten attic filled with suitcases belonging to former inmates. He informed Penney, co-editor of *The Snail's Pace Review* and a leading advocate of patients rights, who recognized the opportunity to salvage the memory of these institutionalized lives. She invited Stastny, a psychiatrist and documentary filmmaker, to help her curate an exhibit on the find and write this book, which they dedicate to "the Willard suitcase owners, and to all others who have lived and died in mental institutions." What follows are profiles of 10 individual patients whose suitcase contents proved intriguing (there were 427 bags total), referencing their institutional record—including histories and session notes—as well as some on-the-ground research. A typical example is Ethel Smalls, who likely suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her husband's abuse; misdiagnosed and institutionalized against her will, she lived at Willard until her death in 1973. While the individual stories are necessarily sketchy, the cumulative effect is a powerful indictment of healthcare for the mentally ill. 25 color and 63 b&w photographs.

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Review

"The Lives They Left Behind is a deeply moving testament to the human side of mental illness, and of the narrow margin which so often separates the sane from the mad. It is a remarkable portrait, too, of the life of a psychiatric asylum—the sort of community in which, for better and for worse, hundreds of thousands of people lived out their lives. Darby Penney and Peter Stastny's careful historical (almost archaeological) and biographical reconstructions give us unique insight into these lives which would otherwise be lost and, indeed, unimaginable to the rest of us." —**Oliver Sacks**

"Fascinating. . . . The haunting thing about the suitcase owners is that it's so easy to identify with them."
—**Newsweek**

"In their poignant detail the items helped rescue these individuals from the dark sprawl of anonymity."
—**New York Times**

"[The authors] spent 10 years piecing together a handful of poignant biographical narratives, tracking down medical records, talking to former staff and using artifacts from the suitcases as clues to the lives these patients lived before they were nightmarishly stripped of their identities." —**Newsday**

"This book should be required reading for anyone who struggles with the treatment of mental illness in community settings." —**New England Journal of Medicine**

"A powerful indictment of healthcare for the mentally ill." —**Publishers Weekly**

"No reader will walk away untouched by these compelling portraits." —**Ronald Bassman, Ph.D.**, author of *A Fight to Be: A Psychologist's Experience from Both Sides of the Locked Door*

"An important and profoundly moving story. . . . The exquisite details we learn about the patients' lives—the

color of lace on a dress, a plea to a bishop, the photo of a wife who died—convey the particulars of their humanness, their strengths, and their tragedies, and a chapter revealing sad and frightening parallels between long-ago and current treatment of many people called mentally ill should shock us all into action.” —**Paula J. Caplan, Ph.D.**, author of *They Say You’re Crazy: How the World’s Most Powerful Psychiatrists Decide Who’s Normal*

“Darby Penney and Peter Stastny have . . . performed an important service, reclaiming these individuals from the nameless, faceless fate of being only ‘mental patients.’” —**Judi Chamberlin**, author of *On Our Own: Patient Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System*

“As we have yet to provide a full measure of support and treatment to men and women diagnosed with mental illnesses, *The Lives They Left Behind* offers a sobering reminder of past tragic errors, lest, in our search for new therapies, we lose sight of what should matter most: our sense of common humanity.”

—**Drew Days III**, Alfred M. Rankin Professor of Law at Yale Law School, former Solicitor General in the Clinton Administration and Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in the Carter Administration

“In unpacking the prior lives stored in these suitcases, Darby Penney and Peter Stastny turn remembrance into an act of alchemy.” —**Kim Hopper, Ph. D.**, author of *Reckoning with Homelessness*

“A unique and mesmerizing evocation of lives erased . . . at once unnerving, heartbreakin, and a bitter testament to an era in psychiatric history whose legacy is all too present today.” —**Gail A. Hornstein, Ph.D.**, author of *To Redeem One Person Is to Redeem the World: The Life of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann*

“*The Lives They Left Behind* is a tour de force, a must-read for anyone concerned with social justice, human rights and historical reclamation. Darby Penney and Peter Stastny brilliantly rescue ten people who spent time at Willard State Hospital from certain historical anonymity and silence by giving them voice to speak for themselves. Their riveting accounts invite us to explore the turmoil and strengths of their inner terrain while mourning the erosion of hope after years of captivity and inhumane treatment in the name ‘help’ and under the guise of ‘best interest.’ *The Lives They Left Behind* is more than a testament to the past, it is a wake up call to our collective conscience, to uphold the spirit and dignity of all human beings.” —**Laura Prescott**, President and Founder, Sister Witness International Inc.

“A stunning achievement.” —**Robert Whitaker**, author of *Mad in America* (from the Foreword)

From the Back Cover

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