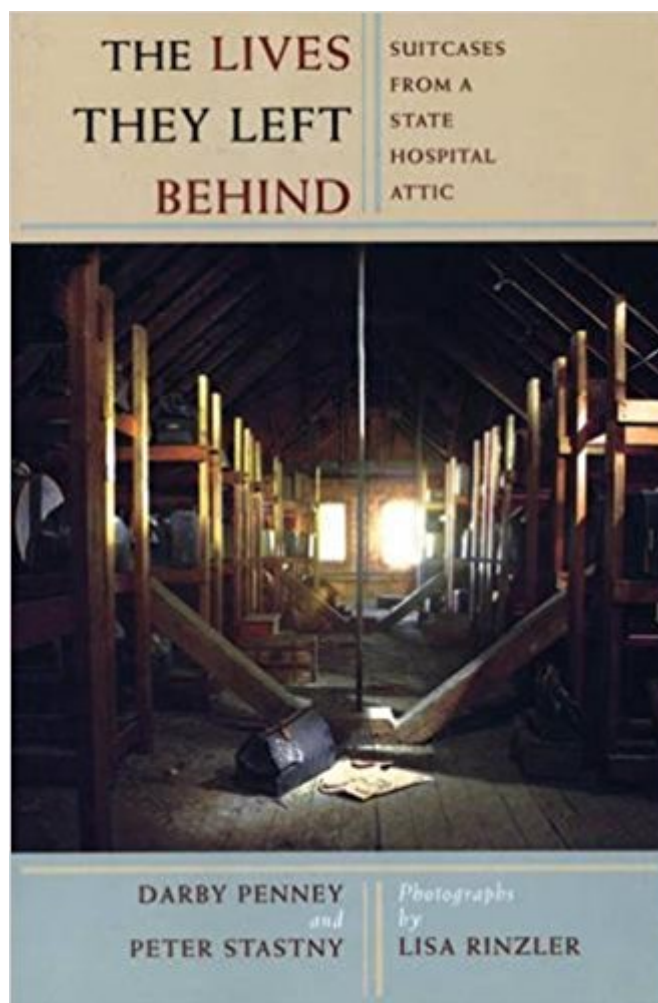


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The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases From A State Hospital Attic



Synopsis

‘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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"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.

"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, heartbreaking, 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 of "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) — "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.

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—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*

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I worked for 7 years at a state hospital in Texas, I have seen both good and bad patient care. The stories here are similar to some of the patients now. This book was very interesting it shows even if mental health issues are present these people had friends love ones and were deserving of simple respect and courtesy. The only difference now is instead of debtors they are called homeless and are put in mental institutions so people don't have to see them. It's cheaper than jail.

A state hospital in upstate New York closes and hundreds of suitcases are found in the attic. After everything is cataloged and researched, the authors choose ten lives to focus on. I found it amazing that some people lived in mental hospitals for forty or fifty years. One woman was there for 75 years.

Great book, well researched! It had to take years to find that much factual information about those poor people. Hopefully having their lives written about in this book will help to bring them some peace. It seemed as though most of them should have been able to have much better lives outside the hospital.

Poorly written. I was shocked by some of the authors comments regarding the current state of psychiatry. To say that patients should embrace hallucinations is an absurd statement. It's hard to believe this book was co-authored by someone in the medical field.

A HAUNTING LOOK AT THE LIVES OF METALLY ILL PEOPLE NOW LONG GONE. This is a book that lays bare the truth about mental health systems before deinstitutionalization. Let's face it about 30 years in Deinstitutionalization is a failure. The book *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* shares how life in the huge mental hospital warehouses was no better and maybe in some ways far worse. *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* shares how racial prejudice played its filthy role in who got thrown in the hospital as prison mental health system. The book *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* is an attempt to reconstruct the lives of former mental patients from the suitcases containing remnants of the lives they left outside. *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* is a forensic reconstruction of patients lives that is well done and interesting reading. I won't go into spoilers here but the lives looked into are interesting if heavily weighted on female subjects of investigation. I would have liked it if they had featured more subjects. *The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* did a good job of fleshing out the oppressive \ depressing atmosphere of life in a mental hospital of this era. The sick part is how some people with higher levels of functioning got labeled mentally sick and eventually were forced into the role of mental patient by well meaning doctors, staff and others.

Difficult to conceive how very easy it was in the early 20th century to commit people to life-long stays in institutions. If you were perceived to be a problem, your essential rights as an American citizen and a human being were stripped away, despite any very lucid protestations of the individual being institutionalized. How mental illness was dealt with is examined in a few case, or perhaps "suitcase" studies in this book. Traumatized lost souls whose conditions often worsened after being committed. A very sad commentary on the mindset of early 20th century "treatment" of mental illness. Such incredible sadness foisted upon those who no longer "fit" into the expectations of society. A very good read!

Fascinating view on how "insane" were seen not long ago --As MSN psych nurse and educator, it's painful to see lack of progress. There has been so much research and discovery about what causes mental illness over the past 20 years, and gains in effective treatment,, yet funding for the mentally

ill is the first to be cut in bad times. Like now. God forbid we don't pave and manicure every highway in the northeast. But money for the aesthetically challenged mentally ill? So that they could live productive, longer, and happier lives? Not happening. While I'm on the soapbox, let me clarify one other point: the sociopaths responsible for mass murders are NOT the kind of people you'll see as clients in a psychiatric hospital. Most of the mentally ill have more than enough self-blame for any ten people, and are much more likely to be hurt by others than to hurt them. While it's not exactly a scientific study, it's so well written that it's clear what constituted mental illness even half a century ago. A must read for any advocate for those with psychiatric illnesses.

This started by my reading "What She Left Behind" which was as a result of this book. When I finished that one, I had to read this one. To me, this is fascinating. The reasons why people were incarcerated here for almost their entire lives were diverse but knowing the strides made in psychiatry since then makes what happened just 70 years ago seem barbaric. This was a study that took many years and they brought back to life people who were kept in this hospital. I enjoyed the pictures and seeing what the suitcases contained and seeing the pictures of the people, particularly the progression of the aging process on some of these people. Anyone interested in history and psychiatry or psychology should read this. Totally fascinating.

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