



Voluntary Madness: Lost and Found in the Mental Healthcare System

By Norah Vincent

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From the author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Self-Made Man*, a captivating expose of depression and mental illness in America

Revelatory, deeply personal, and utterly relevant, *Voluntary Madness* is a controversial work that unveils the state of mental healthcare in the United States from the inside out. At the conclusion of her celebrated first book--*Self-Made Man*, in which she spent eighteen months disguised as a man--Norah Vincent found herself emotionally drained and severely depressed.

Determined but uncertain about maintaining her own equilibrium, she boldly committed herself to three different facilities--a big-city hospital, a private clinic in the Midwest, and finally an upscale retreat in the South. *Voluntary Madness* is the chronicle of Vincent's journey through the world of the mentally ill as she struggles to find her own health and happiness.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Vincent's first trip to a mental institution—to which the writing of *Self-Made Man* drove her—convinced her that further immersion would give her great material for a follow-up. The grand tour consists of voluntary commitments to a hospital mental ward, a small private facility and a boutique facility; but Vincent's efforts to make a big statement about the state of mental health treatment quickly give way to a more personal journey. An attempt to wean herself off Prozac, for example, adds a greater sense of urgency to her second research trip, while the therapists overseeing her final treatment lead her to a major emotional breakthrough. Meanwhile, her fellow patients are easily able to peg her as an emotional parasite, though this rarely stops them from interacting with her—and though their neediness sometimes frustrates her, she is less judgmental of them than of the doctors and nurses. The conclusions Vincent draws from her experiences tend toward the obvious (the better the facilities, the better chance for recovery) and the banal: No one can heal you except you. Though keenly observed, her account never fully transcends its central gimmick. (Jan.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Struggling with the “psycho-emotional” conflicts of being a woman living as a man for her last book, *Self-Made Man* (2006), Vincent checked herself into the psychiatric ward of a hospital. While there, she found inspiration for her next immersion-journalism experience. But this experience went way beyond observation as Vincent actually wondered about the state of her mental health. For a woman with a history of depression, what began as an investigation into psychiatric practices and questionable diagnoses, within the broader context of modern American culture, morphed into a personal exploration of mental stability. In this sometimes harrowing and sometimes humorous account, Vincent recalls her stay at three mental-health facilities: the ward of a big-city public hospital, a rural private psychiatric hospital, and an alternative-treatment program. Vincent chronicles not just the social and economic differences in illnesses and treatments at the facilities but also the madness of bureaucracies that overmedicate and don’t listen enough to what patients have to say. A riveting and enlightening look at mental-health treatment. --Vanessa Bush

Review

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