



## WRITING MADNESS

Interview with Barbara Taylor, author of *The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in Our Times*  
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*Waking up in a mental hospital isn't something you plan for. It's not what I see that astonishes me—I've sat through enough loony bin films to have some idea what to expect—but who I am. There have been moments in recent months when I have hardly recognized the desolate woman inhabiting my body and brain; but sooner or later the familiar self would always reappear, sporting her labels—historian, feminist, writer. Now I am in a place that redefines me. Now I am a loony, a nutter, one of those forlorn beings who lurk in the dark recesses of our society. My me has drained out of me; I am on the far side of the moon.*

Barbara Taylor (<http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/staff/profile/4575-professor-barbara-taylor>) was an acclaimed young historian, author of the award-winning *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983), when her world fell apart. Severe anxiety and immobilising exhaustion took over her life. She began an intensive psychoanalysis, and within a few years her daily life had crumbled. Eventually she joined the 'ghostly lunatic army' of residents admitted to the infamous Friern Hospital (formerly Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum), once Europe's most populated mental institution. The corridor at Friern—the longest in Europe—witnessed her journey of suffering as she struggled with her demons and negotiated her newfound identity. Hers is a powerful account told against the backdrop of dramatic changes in western mental health care. The year after Taylor was discharged from the British mental health system, in 1993, Friern closed its doors and its residents were released into the 'community'. Interweaving her personal story with this broader history, the author offers a poignant meditation on the forces of madness, both internal and external. In addition to depicting daily life in Britain's 'last asylum', her book sheds new light on the complexities of writing 'from below' when one is simultaneously lost in personal fantasy, and all too familiar with the myth-making powers of memory.

On the occasion of this special issue, Barbara Taylor has kindly agreed to share with us her experience of 'writing madness'. Along the way we come to learn more about her voyage of memory, as perceived through her unique double lens; her relationship to psychoanalysis, whose rigid protocols ironically proved very enabling; and her struggles to (re)define her sense of identity, again and again.

**Let's start with the process of writing. This is an account of an historical nature constructed by an historian with a scholarly interest in the history of subjectivity. It is neither an autobiography nor a third-person account; it's a memoir. Why this form? What does the first-person narrative add to the writing experience? And how do you**

**conceive of your status in this process: are you an historical object? (Can you ever pretend to be one, in view of your double standpoint as subject and object?)**

From the time when I first conceived the book, it was always going to be some kind of marriage between memoir and history. I wasn't sure what form that would take. I knew that I wanted to use my experiences in the asylum—particularly, in Friern Hospital here in London—as a window into the bigger changes that were occurring in psychiatric services in Britain and elsewhere at the time. When I was a patient in the hospital, I was far too caught up in my own difficulties to really be thinking about the very specific circumstances that I was in; that is, that I was witnessing a dramatic period of transition in mental health services. But of course later, with the hospital closure and my own historical interests, I became very conscious—in the way that one does when you look back on your involvement in periods of historical change—that I had lived through this really seismic shift. So I knew I wanted to bring together my story with that much bigger story. So that wasn't problematic. But just what I was going to emphasise, what perspectives I would take, I was much less certain about.

For example, when I began research for the book on the historical aspects of it, I did not have a sense of whether the shift to community care—this revolution that I lived through—was a good thing. I think I sort of assumed that it had been. Friern itself had been a very tough place to be and I knew that a lot of people had had it a lot worse than me there, so the closure of Friern was not something I felt very passionately about. I may have had a pang when I was a patient there: what would happen if I needed it again? I'm sure there were many people who felt more than just a minor pang at that thought—but on balance, I thought, well, I guess they know what they're doing, this is probably OK. And of course, what I found out was that it hadn't been OK. And it isn't OK. I'm not suggesting that we want to go back to the situation that I found myself in at the time. What I'm saying is that my view of the historical moment that I lived through changed as I began to do the research. And that gave the book a third dimension, which is this policy aspect, which I had not anticipated at all—and I'm not making any pretence that it's fully developed; but the book does contain an assessment of the situation now compared to the things that I experienced back in the 1980s.

In terms of how I positioned myself within the narrative: it is true to say that to a degree I turned myself into a historical subject in a way similar to how I had handled other women that I had written about. Until recently—that is, before I became ill and indeed in the years after—the main focus of my historical work was on the lives and politics of women, especially early feminists and Mary Wollstonecraft in particular. After I recovered I spent many years writing an intellectual biography of Mary Wollstonecraft which I'd been working on until I was unable to continue working. I'd become very used to excavating aspects of a woman's life, including trying to think about her inner life; because unlike some intellectual historians, I can't build a wall between individuals' theoretical positions and their personal experience. I do think that each feeds into the other. So I'd been pondering these aspects of subjectivity—of female subjectivity and subjectivity more generally—for many years, and how a historian uses sources to illuminate those sorts of questions. So when I turned the historical gaze on myself, then I found myself with a lot of sources.

Now I'm not pretending that the process was exactly the same. But it's something I have thought about, and I need to think about more. There's no question that having the historian's perspective on things helped me to make an imaginative leap into the lives of the past—we all do this, all the time, empathy, whatever you want to call it, we are always engaged in trying to make that sort of imaginative leap. And in an odd way, when one negotiates personal memory (especially when you've got to my age—I'm now coming up to 65), there is in a sense an effort of the historical imagination needed to access one's past. You have memory, but of course memory is unreliable; you need to think sceptically about memories, even your own memories—*especially* your own memories. And you need to have other forms of evidence to marshal alongside them. All of these in the aid of an imaginative effort which brings you, in some

sense—in that sort of romantic historicist way—closer to the past. I had to do that for myself. Because when you have been *very* psychologically unwell, and then there's been a process of internal change, the distance that separates the past self from the present self is greater. And whereas most people maybe experience some sense of continuity, of development over time, along lines that were already laid out earlier in life, I have a real sense of a caesura between the person I was in my late twenties or early thirties when I broke down, and the person I became through psychoanalysis.

So I'm giving you a very long answer to the question but I think actually it's important because it lays out a lot of what the book was attempting to do, and you can probably already hear in what I'm saying some of the big challenges that the book posed for me. But also the excitement—I've never enjoyed writing a book in the same way and to the same degree as I did this one.

**Yet this is a difficult story. Why write it? Could one read in your account a double therapeutic objective (i.e., a personal therapy as well as a collective therapy for the so-called psychiatric survivor movement)?**

No. Neither. I didn't have a personal therapeutic aim in writing the book; I had a literary aim. I had a powerful wish to write—not to move away from my historical writing but to add another dimension to it. The book is an imaginative reconstruction of aspects of my history, and it weaves its way through dramatized dialogue with my analyst which is meant to deliver the reader into a sense of witnessing. I want to put the reader in a sense of actually having a very direct sense of witnessing aspects of my experience. And nothing that I write in the book was untrue to the quality of the experiences that I had and what I remember of them, but of course I also had to revitalise them through my language, through choice of anecdote, through the way I coloured episodes, through prose form. That was the biggest literary challenge I've ever faced. I mean, I'm not a fiction writer, and I don't ever imagine myself as such, but when you say [in a conversation before the interview] 'It reads like a novel in places', that's because I was experimenting with form. And that was fantastic. It was a wonderful experience. And that's what I was aiming for in part. I also wanted to defend psychoanalytic psychotherapy against the animus that is felt against it by large parts of the psychiatric establishment—the misconceptions that people have about it. I very much wanted to do that.

And then, as I said, I can't resist a good story and I knew there was a story to be told here. One's own life is unique to oneself, but I knew that my experience was not unique *at all* in the sense of what happened to me in the hospital, and I knew that there were aspects of what had happened in the asylums that had not been talked about—friendship, for example, and its importance. As soon as I did some reading, I began to see how important friendship had been to people who had been in hospitals: when people had a chance to describe their experiences, which most people don't, this would come up. But in academic studies, there was nothing about this. So I wanted to reclaim aspects of that older psychiatric world and to talk about questions of care, and dependency, and feelings of belonging – things that that current mental health policy has either marginalised or repudiated. And the more I talk to people now, the more I've felt that it was really important to talk about those things.

Now some of the ways I talked about those things—well, I was going to say that they put me at odds with the service user movement. In fact, I don't think that's true. I *thought* it might be true. I never had any dealings with the service user movement before I began working on the book, and I don't now—I mean, all this was a long time ago in my life, and it would be sailing under false colours to pretend to be part of that world now, or to act as a spokesperson for it or anything of that kind (and occasionally I've been under pressure to do that, and I'm not prepared to because I think there are plenty of people out there who are current service users and who have valuable things to say). But when I was doing the book and met with a number of service user activists, their defence of aspects of community care—like the so-called recovery model which preaches quick-step routes to an autonomous existence, independent living and so on and so forth—I was

very unconvinced by, and I thought that I was going to get into trouble with some service users about this. And maybe there are some out there who feel uneasy with it, but that hasn't happened. But I didn't set out trying to provide ammunition for the service user movement. Inasmuch as the book could do that, in the sense of helping people who are trying to improve the state of psychiatric services, well then I'm delighted to hear about it because *my God*, they need improving.

**Why publish this book now, so many years later? Was it for personal reasons? Was it to give enough time for historical distance, to truly 'transform memory into history'?**

This question has a several-part answer. I started thinking about working on this book five years after finishing my analysis—I certainly wouldn't have done it sooner than that. I needed some distance from the immediacy of the psychoanalysis.

That was one thing. Another was that I was always going to publish this book under my own name. I had published a piece back in 2002, I think it was—in the *London Review of Books*—which was a personal piece about being in Friern, which I had insisted I would only allow to be published under a pseudonym, and that was right for me at the time. But I knew I wasn't going to do that again. I needed to feel that I was in a place in my life where it was OK to go public. And I was right about that. In fact, I was more right than I knew when I started the book, because by the time it was published, I had got into the job that I wanted to have [at Queen Mary University of London]. There was nowhere else that I wanted to go, professionally. And I think it would be very naïve to imagine that a book like mine could not damage the reputation or the professional prospects of a younger person. In an earlier period it would have been very unwise for me to have taken the risk. And when people who have had similar experiences say that they're thinking about publishing about this, if it's someone younger and someone who is still trying to get into whatever position they're hoping for in working life, I say: well, think very hard before doing that.

**Can you tell us a bit more about the book's reception: What kind of feedback did you get after its publication—from the main protagonists of your story to its broader popular and scholarly reception in various other circles (historians, ex-patients, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, literati)? Did any of it surprise you?**

I think [*laughs*], well! I was surprised by the scale of the response—thrilled by the warmth of the response to it. It's had an extraordinary reception, including from some of the protagonists who recognised themselves in this story. Those who are major figures in the book, such as my former analyst—he loved the book, he didn't know at all that it was being written; he had no idea until it dropped through his mailbox. My psychiatrist did; I interviewed her and she read the parts where she appears. Everyone that I interviewed for the book, I gave them what I said about them and where I quoted them for their approval. And all the professional responses, whether it's been my fellow historians or psychiatrists or psychotherapists—people have been extraordinarily generous, forthcoming in their responses. And I've been very moved by that.

I've been most moved by the reaction of service users probably, because I've only done three events which involved a substantial number of service users (two of them were entirely for service users). And there people had a lot to say about differences between my experiences and theirs, the way things are now as opposed to then, and so on. But even though some of them are still struggling a lot, finding life very difficult, and there I was—a professional person, good job, having been able to afford this very expensive long-term psychoanalysis that for some of them was inconceivable—even so, their reactions have been very warm, exceptionally so. And I have to tell you, I have talked to hundreds and hundreds of people now, and not a single time have I been asked a question in which the intent was to embarrass me, or humiliate me, or catch me out—not once in all that time. And I think [*laughs*], when people are feeling a little negative about

human nature, that is something to think about. Because you know, this is a book which has made me very vulnerable to that, and not once in a public setting has anyone taken advantage of that vulnerability. Isn't that fascinating? Including a lot of people who suffer from very serious mental disorders. I had one woman who was cross with me—she insisted that the whole book was untrue because she had not had identical experiences; she was cross about that. And that's the kind of thing that happens if you're going to do a big service user event. She was very dismayed by the fact that basically we're not the same person—which was interesting, but was hardly hurtful to me; rather, it left her feeling quite confused and dismayed.

**How did your double role as a woman and a specialist on the history of the feminine condition colour your experience? And in a related vein, did you see yourself as consciously or unconsciously playing out various archetypes you had studied elsewhere (the 19<sup>th</sup>-century locked up Madwoman, the iconoclastic figure of Mary Wollstonecraft, etc.)?**

No one's asked me that question before, I really have to think about it! [*pause*]

When I became so unwell, I was one sort of woman; and later I came to feel like a very different sort of woman. So my ideas about what it means to be a woman changed, in ways that maybe aren't reflected in the book—that's a very interesting thought. Because questions about my femaleness, about my position in relation to men—these were issues that came up a lot in the analysis. They weren't central issues—although certainly questions about female sexuality came up a great deal (that does become more apparent in the book). But when I was writing the book, I found it quite difficult to remind myself that there might be something specific about my experience *as a woman* inside the systems that I was describing. I had to really remind myself of that. And I think that might perhaps be a measure of the degree to which mental illness flattens out a lot of distinctions.

**On this theme of identity: there's this passage when you first arrive in the asylum, where you note 'I didn't know who I was anymore'.**

I didn't know who I was; and in terms of my womanhood, I don't think I ever had any idea of who I was. It was a very murky and muddled element in my sense of self, which I would enact in various ways... I spent a lot of time and energy in the early years of my analysis enacting a sort of femme fatale. I describe a degree of sexual promiscuity, a sort of playing a part. There are things that I don't talk about in the book—just the degree to which I did that [had sexual affairs]; there are things that I found quite difficult to talk about: questions of appearance, how one styles oneself, and so on—I just couldn't find a way of writing about those things. But some of that stuff is probably conveyed anyway, in the way that I conducted myself at the time—and then all that stopped, and gave way to a sense of being completely abject and monstrous.

And then this sense of monstrosity—our culture offers us specifically female forms of it. I don't know whether the unconscious does. It's a very interesting question. But I certainly felt barely human—much less womanly in any sense that I comprehended it. Of course in the book I explore female friendship in the asylums; I don't really talk about it as female friendship, I don't locate it in a longer history of female friendship. Interestingly, until we're talking about it now, it hadn't occurred to me to do so. And I had to give myself a nudge to actually include the material I did include on the specific history of women in the Victorian asylums, and particularly in Friern, which had had a predominantly female population through most of its history. So, I'm not quite sure what it says about my historical sensibilities, or the combination of those and my sense of self, that these issues about gender and womanhood didn't loom as large as I might have thought they would, looking back. And I'm not sure that I've explained either to my satisfaction or yours quite why this was. It's something I need to think about more.

**In a related vein, your time spent in Friern coincided with a special moment in history. As you mention, in this asylum there had always been a larger percentage of female patients—which echoed a broader trend throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—but, over the past 15 or so years there’s been a reversal of this trend. Now more men are being admitted to psychiatric institutions. So the ‘dangerously mad’ now tend to be portrayed as male rather than female. Did you feel anything during this transition period? What do you think about the links that are still being made between representations of madness and gender?**

Well, again—these are not questions I have asked myself in that way. The representations of lunacy in women: of course, the gothic offers you lots of very dangerous women, but by and large, the stereotypical madwoman is someone who is kind of wasting away from misery. The locked-up woman was the suicidal depressive; whereas today the violent young man—our modern stereotypical madman—is predominantly (though not exclusively) black. And that change has to do with lots of things. It has to do with the history of racial minorities, and what it’s like to occupy a socially marginalised or subordinate position. It has to do with questions of who can be managed through medication in the so-called community. It has to do with issues of criminality. As I say in the book, the biggest psychiatric ‘providers’—to use the terminology—in the United States are prisons. And here, too, in Britain, the prisons are full of people with mental disorders, while hospital inpatient services are mostly in locked wards. What you had in the 1950s—when there was a very big asylum population in both countries—was lots and lots of voluntary women patients suffering from a whole variety of things but particularly from very acute depressive illnesses. Now in Britain there are almost no voluntary in-patients because there’s nowhere for them to go. There are so few beds that they are only allotted to people who have been legally detained. So psychiatric institutions have become carceral institutions once again—and that’s a really big shift. People are being detained because they are regarded as a risk to other people, and that is more likely of course to be men, and particularly young black men.

**To what extent is yours a British story?**

Well—that’s something I tried to find out more about as I prepared the North American edition of the book. I did quite a lot of research after the British edition was published. It’s been published now in Canada and will be published in the U.S. in March. I didn’t make huge changes in the book, because as a historical story, it is a British story. But I realised that the developments that I was describing were occurring across the Western world and that there was a great deal of influence coming from North America into Britain, and vice versa. So I did a lot more research just to try and satisfy myself that I understood what the parallels were, and the differences. It will be interesting to see what reception the book gets when it’s published in the United States. It may get almost none; we’ll see what happens.

In Canada, nothing much seemed to happen for a time after the book’s publication, but now I’m a finalist for the Canadian non-fiction prize ([http://www.thecharlestaylorprize.ca/2015/longlist\\_15.asp](http://www.thecharlestaylorprize.ca/2015/longlist_15.asp)) and I’ll be going to Toronto soon. And there, I’m going to find myself involved in more discussion with people about the book. And I’m going to ask the publishers to set up some sort of mental health event. So I’m hoping to hear from people what they make of it. And I’m hoping that once the book is published in the U.S., I’ll get a chance to do that there as well, which I would welcome—it would be very interesting to have some comparative conversations about the current situation.

**Throughout the book you adopt a careful, nuanced approach, staying away from clichés; whether it’s about psychoanalysis, the very presence of the asylum, deinstitutionalisation, etc. Your story is also in no way a dithyrambic celebration of madness and its creative potentials. I notice you tread carefully on this fine line. Which**

**audience did you have in mind, and were you at all cautious about these controversial topics? Did you perhaps feel a responsibility?**

[*Pause*] A responsibility to whom?

**To yourself, to the psychiatric survivor movement, to psychoanalysis?**

The service user movement didn't really come into focus for me until I was well into the writing of the book. And then it did, and I had many illuminating conversations. But I didn't set out with the movement in mind. I had read some madness memoirs, along with other misery memoirs—not a genre that I'm particularly drawn to (of course, there are some wonderful ones). But I knew that I didn't see myself in any way as a victim. I was very keen to show that having the capacity to take responsibility for oneself is a gift. It's something that not everybody has; you can be deprived of it, and it was one of the things that I acquired. I don't mean by that some sort of autarkic 'I'm all right, Jack, I don't need anything from anybody' attitude because I don't believe in that; I strongly believe in people's need for other people. What I mean is the ability to live one's own feelings, including one's pain, without trying to dump these on other people. And if I were going to sum up what the analysis has given me—among many other things—that would be one of the main ones.

So that is a long-winded way of saying, I was trying to avoid what I saw as a lot of very easy traps and clichés in this kind of writing—none of which I felt had any connection to what I wanted to say. I *hate* sentimentality of any kind, and I knew that it would be very easy to fall into forms of sentimental writing. I don't like 'fine writing'—but when you're talking about the unconscious, it would be easy to imagine that overblown prose that might take you where you wanted to go. I was determined to avoid this. When I began to write the book, I told myself that there were things I couldn't write about. Some of the erotic material, the stuff about compulsions, the sense of this kind of demonic presence in myself, I thought: I can't write about this! But as the story took shape, I realised that if I didn't write about those things, the narrative would fall apart. It wouldn't be true, and it was my sense of the truthfulness of what I wrote that held the story together. I mean, there are still areas of silence, of tactfulness—about my sister, for example. But in the end, when people talk about the book being honest, I was left with no choice. Either I did that or I stopped writing the book. And that meant showing that I had not had a sense of responsibility for myself, and what a miserable thing that was for me (and other people), how sad it was; how I acquired it, the pain and the struggle that that involved.

One thing I should mention is that some people have been quite shocked by the behaviour of my analyst, (which he, I should say, thrilled me by saying he thought it was extraordinarily accurate). Some interviewers have said to me 'My God, he was so hard on you, so brutal!'—all of which surprised me. Because what I'm showing is a war, it's a real war. My fear was that people reading it who might think of going into psychotherapy might go 'Oh my God!' [*laughs*] And I have said to some audiences, well, look, I'm talking from the position of someone who was *really* unwell. I mean, I was going to kill myself. I would have died. And when someone is hell-bent on self-destruction and you throw yourself in their path, as my analyst did, it's going to be a really rough encounter.

**Loneliness plays a big part in your account. It has also, I understand, taken on a significant place in your recent academic pursuits. To what extent have your professional choices been affected by this entire experience?**

Very much. The decision to work on the history of solitude came out of the experiences I describe in the book—of not being able to tolerate aloneness. This incapacity posed an intellectual puzzle for me. What does it mean, to be alone? Who do we feel ourselves to be, at such times? People in the Western tradition have answered those questions in so many different

ways, and I became fascinated by that intellectual history of solitude. So I've been working at this on and off for some years. I haven't got the answers to my questions. There are many different answers of course, just as there have been many different times and circumstances in which people have asked the questions. Yet what's so interesting to see is that when people begin to write about these issues, the ways that they frame them, stretching right back to Plato—are not so dissimilar. Which made me think, well this is a very big topic about which surprisingly little has been written. I mean, you would think there would be more discussion of it: we're talking about a universal human experience here.

**Solitude, it would seem, has become a ubiquitous experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century...**

Indeed! I teach a course on it, and I always kick off by saying to the students: What is solitude? They think they know, and then they start to wonder... [*laughs*] And then I say: You're all alone in the house, and you're on Skype. Are you alone? And then, you're dreaming and someone you love or someone who's died or you cared about, is there. Are you alone? Are you more alone then than when you're on Skype? These kinds of questions get a really interesting discussion going and make people realise that solitude is a fantasy position. It's a question of how we imagine ourselves in relation to others, and the world.

So anyway, yes—I'm trying to work out how to frame this research project because it's so enormous, and that's proving very exciting and very challenging. I'm enjoying myself very much.

**Thank you very much, Barbara, for this most insightful interview!**