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"Searing . . . captures an exquisite range of self-awareness between madness and insight."

First published in 1994. Reprinted and a bestseller in 2000 (due to movie based on the book).

In the late 1960s, the author spent nearly two years on the ward for teenage girls at McLean Hospital, a renowned psychiatric facility. Her memoir encompasses horror and razor-edged perceptions, while providing vivid portraits of her fellow patients and their keepers.

"Searing . . . captures an exquisite range of self-awareness between madness and insight."--Boston Globe.

Girl, Interrupted Details

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From Reader Review Girl, Interrupted for online ebook

Tara Lynn says

Saw the movie, loved Angelina in it. Now I'll tackle the book.

Update: Finished the novel. I'm now convinced that the publication and fantastic reception of this novel was probably a great case of timing. Kaysen's account of her stay in McLean Hospital is a captivating look into her mental state during her 2 year stay. However, I've got to say that if she had stayed elsewhere, or tried to publish her account now, it probably wouldn't have been received as favorably. For the most part, many of her intermittent stories read as a desperate cry for attention, ANY attention. Her parents are NEVER mentioned, and I find it odd to see that the novel has no seeming beginning or end. We're given a VERY brief description of her original interview, as well as interesting reproductions of her case files, but her rambling thoughts throughout give no impression of how she actually responded to her therapy.

I'm sad to say that I honestly expected more. Susanna's desperate hero-worship of her friend Lisa, her wild behavior, and her desperate attempts to receive attention from anyone tell me that far from requiring a hospital stay, she needed a hug, some coffee, and a good friend/parent to tell her that she was being an idiot about her life. I've seen more self-actualization on some Twitter ramblings than I saw in Girl, Interrupted. Not worth the read.

? Sh3lly - Grumpy Name-Changing Wanderer ? says

I read this book around the time the movie came out. I remember liking it, but not loving it. I'm curious to maybe do a re-read one day. I kind of felt like it was one of those books that got a lot of hype and didn't live up to it. I liked the movie. If I ever do a re-read, I'll add to this. I don't remember much, to be honest, except that it didn't blow me away. I bought the book and I ended up over the years donating it to a thrift store. So, I must not have liked it that much. :P

Glitterbomb says

“I was trying to explain my situation to myself. My situation was that I was in pain and nobody knew it, even I had trouble knowing it. So I told myself, over and over, You are in pain. It was the only way I could get through to myself. I was demonstrating externally and irrefutably an inward condition.”

Amen to that.

Look, this is a book where, if you already suffer from a mental health issue, *you will get it*. You will draw parallels in your own life and experiences. You will nod in agreement at the internalisation, the questions, the *doubt*. Absolutely nothing has changed there, from the 60's to today, and it never will. Its the nature of the beast. Having a mental health issue is all about doubt.

If, you're on the other side of this, if you have perfect mental health (nobody does, but stay with me here), you probably won't understand this, and because you don't understand it, you probably won't enjoy it. And there's nothing wrong with that. Absolutely nothing.

Thanks to recent campaigns to draw awareness to mental health conditions, people these days are somewhat more receptive to the idea of others whose minds don't quite work the same way theirs do. But, we are nowhere near where we need to be in regards to this issue. Nowhere near.

This is a very brave story, published in an era when mental health *wasn't talked about*. Period. It may be somewhat outdated in respect to modern diagnosis' and treatments, but the feelings are all the same. This book is so honest, and that shines through in every single sentence.

It spoke to me, and I hope it speaks to you too.

Navessa says

I'm sort of at a loss for how to describe this book and the emotions it provoked within me. I guess the best word I could use is "unsettled", but probably not for the reason you would imagine.

This quote might shed some light on what I mean:

"The less likely (a) terrible thing is to happen, the less frightening it is to look at or imagine. A person who doesn't talk to herself or stare into nothingness is therefore more alarming than a person who does. Someone who acts "normal" raises the uncomfortable question, What's keeping me out of the loony bin?"

Precisely. This story is told not from the perspective of someone who sees creatures lurking in the shadows, or is convinced that she is the girlfriend of a Martian, or is blinded by homicidal rage, but by a young woman fully self-aware of her own shortcomings.

It made me ask myself, which is the worse fate? Descending blindly into madness, or being fully aware of your own dilemma and finding yourself helpless to prevent it?

I think the reason that so many people find this tale so haunting is that while reading it, one can't help but compare themselves to the narrator. I certainly did. And that's the very reason this book left me feeling so unnerved.

I was strikingly similar to this MC at the age of her institutionalization. What if I had been unlucky enough to be diagnosed by a therapist like hers? He spent all of **fifteen minutes** with her and came to the conclusion that she needed to be committed.

After reading about the interaction, I can't help but wonder...WHY? And more disturbingly...why not ME?

I dare you to read this and not ask yourself the same questions.

This review can also be found at The Book Eaters.

Ellabella says

We're told not to, but I sometimes do judge a book by its cover. At least once in my life, it has paid off. I first read this book because I saw it laying under the desk of a girl in my French class in 8th grade and was immediately attracted to it- the contrast of blue against white and the separation and duality of the girl between.

It was beautiful and strange and thought-provoking and somehow irrationally felt as close to me as some crazy friend who'd been trapped in my own brain for thirteen years. The author at once seemed to be a part of me that hadn't yet been able to speak, and a complete stranger who frightened and compelled me.

I've returned to it time and time again and each time have found new truths and new absurdities. It so accurately and curiously expresses the truths of a mind in distress and the questioning of a woman in the making (and particularly of a woman approaching adulthood in the 1960's, while psychology was still a relatively new field). I lead a book club discussion of it some years ago and was startled at the stark honesty that it inspired in us as we talked, regardless of whether we actually liked the book or not.

To me, the book has nearly no relation to the movie other than the slight similarities between the premises. Where the movie may introduce you to interesting characters and attempt to give you a linear story, it has no way to bring you into the complex and contradictory inner world of the author.

I will recommend to anyone to give it a try, because I believe what you discover in it speaks not of the book itself, but of who you as the reader are.

Karlyflower *The Vampire Ninja, Luminescent Monster & Wendigo Nerd Goddess of Canada (according to The Hulk)* says

I told her once I wasn't good at anything. She told me survival is a talent.

Insanity. For most of us the idea of being insane is scary. The harder question is the why; why is insanity so scary? Is it so scary because we have all, at one time or another (I believe), doubted our own sanity? I know I have. Or is it so scary because it is so impossible to define, to categorize in absolutes? When is the threshold at its thinnest?

In the moments when my brain launches like a freight train into a station, yet in about a dozen different ways, at 4 o'clock in the morning when I have been exhausted and unable to sleep all day? In the inner conversations I have with myself, or other people, inside my own head that never see the light of day? What does it really mean to be crazy?? In the quiet nectar of a cup of coffee in the morning when the fog is tumbling lazily over my brain making everything just a little less 'real' feeling?

Is it true what *they* say; the more you question your own sanity the less likely you are, in fact, to be insane? If so Susanna Kaysen is definitely NOT insane. She questions **everything** and has probably one of the most introspective voices I have ever read. Her thoughts, expressed superbly in Girl, Interrupted, are well thought out and certainly sane *sounding*.

Was I ever crazy? Maybe. Or maybe life is... Crazy isn't being broken or swallowing a dark secret. It's you or me amplified. If you ever told a lie and enjoyed it. If you ever wished you could be a child forever. They were not perfect, but they were my friends.

What is insanity?! Is it a true state of being or is it a mind's reaction to an unnatural state of existence? How natural is it really to exist in a world constantly defining you for you, where it is more important to seem something than truly BE it. Perhaps we will never really know, certainly (even now, far removed from the dates Kaysen found herself at home in an institution) there are far more questions than answers.

Category: A Memoir

Kelly (and the Book Boar) says

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/>

“People ask, how did you get in there? What they really want to know is if they are likely to end up in there as well. I can’t answer the real question. All I can tell them is, it’s easy.”

Boy was it ever easy for Susanna Kaysen to end up in a psychiatric hospital. Now, Susanna was not “normal” per se. She randomly obsessed about things as bizarre as whether or not she actually had bones in her body since she couldn’t see them and was battling depression that at one point led her to down 50 aspirin. She most definitely needed some help . . . But in the 1960s the form of help provided to young girls like Susanna was a long-term stay in the local looney bin where the Thorazine flowed like water and electric shock therapy was a sure-fire cure for crazy.

Although compact and a *very* fast read, *Girl Interrupted* is a haunting story that I won’t soon forget and will easily go down as one of the best memoirs I’ve ever read. Not only is the story fascinating (and a bit horrifying), but Ms. Kaysen’s writing is some of the most truthful I’ve seen . . .

“Suicide is a form of murder – premeditated murder. It isn’t something you do the first time you think of doing it. It takes getting used to.”

“I think many people kill themselves simply to stop the debate about whether they will or they won’t.”

"It was only part of myself I wanted to kill: the part that wanted to kill herself."

"Today, you seem puzzled about something. ' Of course I was sad and puzzled, I was eighteen, it was spring, and I was behind bars."

Highly recommended.

Erin says

have you ever spent any time in a psychiatric hospital? yeah, well, i don't recommend it. i was a patient for a total of 2 and a half days, and it was one of the best and worst experiences of my life. i liked this book because i was able to relate to some of her feelings. when i went in, it was because i was on the verge of something, and thank god i caught myself in time. my first morning there, i remember thinking, "i have to get out of here, because i may not be crazy now, but these people will make me crazy." i'm so glad to have been proved wrong. while this may sound terrible, i listened to the other people's problems, and realized that my mild depression (or whatever it was) was nothing in comparison to what these poor people were going through in their lives. susana keysen may have had some problems, but overall, she was one of the sanest people there. she was able to get to know some "interesting" people, and in seeing them, she could compare her own problems to theirs.

sorry to use my own story to describe someone else's book, but that's what made it such a good read for me. a good book should have the ability to transfer you to that time or place, and my experiences made it so much easier for this book.

Nataliya says

"Was insanity just a matter of dropping the act?" Good question, isn't it? You may start asking yourself this after reading this book.

I only spent a few months taking care of patients in psychiatric hospitals, but it made me really appreciate the nuances of Kaysen's story. It is the viewpoint of someone who had to experience questioning her sanity - the one thing most of us take for granted.

"Every window in Alcatraz has a view of San Francisco."

What some don't know about personality disorders is that they will not "just go away". You can learn how to cope with them, but you will not be "cured". The scary thing about them is that you can look at them as bits of your "regular" personality, just significantly amplified. *Some of borderline personality disorder symptoms include implausibility, uncertainty about one's identity, rapid changes in interests and values, thinking in black-or-white terms, unstable or turbulent emotions, chaotic relationships, fear of being abandoned, and feelings of emptiness and boredom.* I am sure all of us have experienced some of these at one time or another. **The scary question then becomes - what separates "normal" from "crazy"? Where are we on that spectrum?** Is that what scares us about "going crazy"? The same question seems to be troubling Kaysen.

"Was everybody seeing this stuff and acting as though they weren't? Was insanity just a matter of dropping the act?"

Doctors and nurses alike tend to be wary of patients with personality disorders, and borderline personality disorder in particular gets a bad rap. It can be quite draining treating someone with BPD, that's true, but we don't always think about what the world must seem like through their eyes. And that's where *Girl, Interrupted* brings this often overlooked perspective.

This book does not have a defined plot or a linear narrative - it is just a story of an unhappy young woman trying to find her place in a world that excludes her, and it is an enlightening and interesting read. I highly recommend it for anyone who is interested in medicine or psychology.

Duane says

After reading novels like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest or The Bell Jar, one could be forgiven for feeling skeptical about the treatment for the mentally ill during the 1960's. I'm not sure Susanna Kaysen's memoir will change that much. In 1967, after a short interview with a psychiatrist, she was admitted, (committed may be a better word), to a mental hospital in Massachusetts, the same one that treated Sylvia Plath. Her stay lasted about 2 years. She was told she had a "character disorder". Twenty five years later, after reading her hospital records, she learned she was diagnosed with "Borderline Personality Disorder". This memoir is her recollection of the time she spent, the treatment she received, the doctors and nurses who treated her, and the other patients around her. For those of us who are not personally familiar with these type of histories and institutions, this is an eye opening revelation and I can only hope things have improved since 1967.

The book title was inspired by Vermeer's painting "Girl Interruped at Her Music".

<http://www.johannes-vermeer.org/girl-...#>

Emma Giordano says

3 stars! While I did enjoy this book, I don't feel I loved it as much as I expected to.

CW: borderline personality disorder, suicide

I am not much of a non-fiction reader, so the format and storytelling methods of memoirs and such are unfamiliar to me, and I typically do not enjoy them as much as fiction novels. I did believe I would enjoy *Girl, Interrupted* more than other non-fiction works that I've read because I am a big fan of the film adaptation. I feel as if the book were to be more chronological and follow a linear plot ARC as opposed to unanticipated time jumps, I would have enjoyed it more as that as what I prefer to read. I understand this fact is charming to many readers who love this book, but it's just not my cup of tea. I also felt the chapters were too short (and the novel as a whole). I think I would have felt much more from the stories and characters if I had more time to learn their habits, their desires, and what makes them tick.

On the positive side, I loved the subject matter of the story. Borderline Personality Disorder is rarely discussed in media, so I feel the fact that *Girl, Interrupted* exists and has gained widespread attention is amazing. There are many passages that I feel are thought-provoking and insightful regarding what it is like,

not only to live with an illness like BPD, but what it is like to have a mental illness in the 1960's.

Though I struggled with certain elements of the story and it left me a bit disappointed, I would still recommend it to anyone looking for non-fiction books about psychology and specifically Borderline Personality Disorder.

Paul Bryant says

Everything is made of language. In the morning you hear those damned birdies tweedlydee tweedlydoo to each other or some damned cats meowing but that's not language. It may be communication but it has no grammar and it can only describe the here and now (the hear and know). The birdies are tweebing about the cats, "look there's a kitty cat watch out" and the cats are meowing about the birdies ("I see a lot of edible things in trees") and it doesn't get much more interesting than that. They will never write a novel. Whereas humans are the opposite, they almost never talk about the here and now. It's always "I'm sure this wasn't as expensive as last time we were here" or "you have to get your suit cleaned for next week". Human language is a really dangerous device, it's explosive, because not only can you talk about things that aren't in the here and now, you can with very little effort talk about things that couldn't possibly exist ever. The owl and the pussycat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat. They took some honey and plenty of money wrapped up in a five pound note. Well, it's just nonsense, because you wouldn't wrap up honey in a five pound note, it would gunge up the five pound note, no retailer would accept it, and anyway, an owl and a pussycat would never be able to hire a boat. They wouldn't have a clue about navigation – how could they use oars? Is this a motorised boat? Was it a tidal estuary? Anyway, I'm getting distracted – by language. And this proves my point. Language means that hardly anything we say is true. I wish I was dead. My mother's going to kill me. The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain. I am no longer in control of my own brain, something else is. All commonly used phrases, a million of them, none of them literally true. Well, we hope not. We hope there are very few mothers who will kill their children, actually kill them, if they're an hour late. The metaphorical aspect of language, which is its limitless joy and psychedelic legerdemain that we all are in love with, or why would we be readers, leads us humanish beings into some unhappy dark places. All that beating of heads against walls about the Trinity in Christianity for instance. It's a metaphor – three aspects of God – not three Gods – it's a poetic way of expressing an ineffable reality (if you're a Christian) - but the metaphor escaped and took on a life of its own and became a source of much befuddlement. Susanna Kaysen artfully informs us how the madness gets in. It's when you can't tell what is language describing something that is from language describing something that might be or could be or never could be. She gives an example – that bureau in the corner looks like a tiger (simile). No – that bureau in the corner IS a tiger! This whole book is about whether we are brains or minds. Brains are very very very very very complex machines. But minds are something else. Drugs can fix brains like oil can fix an engine. But drugs can't fix minds.

The only power they had was to dope us up. Thorazine, Stelazine, Mellaril, Librium, Valium : the therapists' friends. Once we were on it, it was hard to get off. A bit like heroin, except it was the staff who got addicted to our taking it.

This is a gigantic debate and may, of course, be another metaphor that has taken on an undeserved life of its own. (Is there a ghost in the machine? Well, I don't believe in ghosts. But if a thing walks like a ghost and quacks like a ghost, then maybe.)

Language leads this memoir astray. Susanna's account of her 18 month stay in the loony bin (her jocular term, don't look at me like that) is so wry, "cool, elegant and unexpectedly funny" (Sunday Times),

“triumphantly funny” (NYT), “darkly comic” (Newsweek), so mordant, so witty, that it without meaning to verges on presenting hospitalization for mental illness as a hip alternative to college. The tag line on the back of my copy is : “Sometimes the only way to stay sane is to go a little crazy”. Hmmph, I should say not. Like it’s some kind of choice. Like you’re aligning mentally ill people with hipsters, beatniks, drop-outs, Left Bank artistic sufferers, hey, Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath – all those cool types. That’s the blurb writer getting carried away. Like all of us. Carried away by the onrushing ever tumbling surge of human language which is the ruin and the salvation of us all.

Britany says

3.5 Stars

I've always been fascinated with mental health and when this movie came out, it was one that I watched time and time again. I never realized it was a book, and not only that but a true account from Susanna Keysen.

The book is short, and cuts right to the point. The chapters are set up like thoughts or short concepts that Susanna wants to share. The movie does a great job of sticking close to the book and I was impressed with how closely they matched. Susanna finds herself sent to Belmont after an appointment with her Doctor. She certainly struggles with boredom and while her needs and desires were different from the average Cambridge resident, certainly not enough to commit her to an asylum. I'm glad that I picked this one up and if you are interested in the subject matter, I would urge you to do the same.

E says

While Susanna Keysen composes some very poetic essays offering alternative and sometimes beautiful perspectives in her autobiography, her general tone is very, very defensive. Granted discussing whether or not one suffered from a mental illness can never be easy, but the book seems to be her manifesto for proving that she wasn't really borderline, as her therapist diagnosed.

I don't know enough about Borderline Personality Disorder to judge - I agree that it seems women are disproportionately diagnosed with it, and a conservative environment could easily allow for any non-conformist woman to be blamed for her own marginalization and labeled insane. However, while Keysen seems to want to be seen as simply non-conformist in an oppressive time, she was in some ways destructively so by her own admission. She gave herself bruises, she attempted suicide, she tried to break into her own hand convinced it was a monkey's.

The early Sixties sounded like a terrible time to be a woman, and many of the mental institutions were anything but conducive to healing. Nevertheless, I don't buy the defensive rebel's libertarian spiel that they should just be left alone to hurt themselves, uninterrupted. Perhaps Susanna wanted to criticize her diagnosis or how she was treated, but claiming that her acts of self-harm warranted no such "interruption" with treatment seems rather dramatic and ungrateful. The adolescent glorification of the misunderstood, self-harming Plath-like waif is both dangerous and very selfish, and there are scores of books and songs and films to help this glorification along.

I hope girls who read this book are smart enough not to fall for it, but can still enjoy her moments of poetic greatness.

Sidharth Vardhan says

"Today, you seem puzzled about something.' Of course I was sad and puzzled, I was eighteen, it was spring, and I was behind bars."

Kind of sheds light on the whole system of mental asylums, doesn't it? Anyway how do you know if the treatment of a mentally disordered person is working. You won't take their word for it, and if they question the institution, than you can claim (and actually genuinely believe) that you are suffering from persecution complex. That is the trouble - they have a big word for everything which makes you think of it as a disease. If you are too moody, you have bipolar disease; if you are too sad, you are depressed; if you are too happy, you are suffering from euphoria. You can't do anything out of proportion or rules in this world gets declared insane. And once you are declared crazy, even things you do by the book of proportions is suspected:

"They had a special language: regression, acting out, hostility, withdrawal, indulging in behavior. This last phrase could be attached to any activity and make it sound suspicious: indulging in eating behavior, talking behavior, writing behavior. In the outside world people ate and talked and wrote, but nothing we did was simple."

Also, with a race which seems to be at war with itself and rest of life on planet since begining of its so called 'intelligence' and which has brought the planet to destruction, who, really can lay claim on sanity?

Still it is one of those chances where you can see things from point of view of an inmate.

With people like author and her friends, part of problem is knowledge of their instablity. How much lonely they must feel knowing that that they are alone in the world of things they are imagining. And some were really teenagers, discovering the not so likeable realities of the world, so one can't help wondering whether they couldn't be helped more with a good counseling and medicine rather than being locked in an asylum.

I still do not agree with her complete disapproval of professional of psychologists, I think that as a field it still seems to be finding its feet (and unfortunately has started on wrong foot) - also while being a psychologist may not be the hardest thing, being a good one must be terribly difficult requiring insight into human mind, a combination of compassion and disinterestedness, patience etc. But except for that, it was beautiful all around.

Parting thought : it is a memoir, read it like that and not as a novel. It is not supposed to be entertaining.

More quotes:

"When you're sad you need to hear your sorrow structured into sound."

"Why did she do it? Nobody knew. Nobody dared to ask. Because—what courage! Who had the courage to burn herself? Twenty aspirin, a little slit alongside the veins of the arm, maybe even a bad half hour standing on a roof: We've all had those. And somewhat more dangerous things, like putting a gun in your mouth. But you put it there, you taste it, it's cold and greasy, your finger is on the trigger, and you find that a whole world lies between this moment and the moment you've been planning, when you'll pull the trigger. That world defeats you. You put the gun back in the drawer. You'll have to find another way."

"Suicide is a form of murder—premeditated murder. It isn't something you do the first time you think of doing it. It takes getting used to. And you need the means, the opportunity, the motive. A successful suicide demands good organization and a cool head, both of which are usually incompatible with the suicidal state of mind."

"I think many people kill themselves simply to stop the debate about whether they will or they won't."

"It was only part of myself I wanted to kill: the part that wanted to kill herself."

"Our hospital was famous and housed many great poets and singers. Did the hospital specialize in poets and singers or was it that poets and singers specialized in madness?"
