

Same Time Next Week: True Stories of Working Through Mental Illness



Written by Lee Gutkind

Reviewed by: Kimberly Wang

New York University
Gallatin School of Individualized Study



Photo by Karen Meyers

With increased efforts to reduce stigma and approach mental health care from a more personalized perspective, *Same Time Next Week* comes at a critical moment in the transformation of psychotherapeutic practices from the clinical to a more humanized model. Offering an intimate look into a world that, until recently, has remained largely hidden behind closed doors and hushed tones, the eighteen stories comprising this anthology are deeply personal, rich and thorough in their narrative structures without the sterile feel of the traditional case study. In their exploration of a wide variety of mental illnesses including (but not limited to) depression, bipolar disorder, OCD, schizophrenia, and eating disorders, these stories are distinct in that many are written by mental health professionals who have, themselves, experienced mental illness and therefore have first-hand knowledge of the trials and tribulations of recovery.

The stories in this collection follow three general forms – patients writing about their struggles with mental illness, clinicians discussing their experiences with particularly memorable patients, and clinicians discussing their own struggles with mental health issues. In incorporating all these different forms of storytelling into a single collection, editor Lee Gutkind's efforts to give voice to the many different circumstances and individuals affected by mental illness are reflected in the great diversity of accounts found within the pages.



From the fascinating story of a young man diagnosed with periodic catatonia just after achieving his PhD in neuropsychology to the haunting story of a philosophy professor struggling with traumatic memories of sexual assault, each tale's value is in its compassionate humanization of clinical labels.

With all accounts detailing the lives of different individuals, the stories featured in this anthology offer an intimate look at the experience of mental illness and recovery from two different points of view – from the perspective of the patient and from the perspective of the mental health professional – a duality

that is helpful in its allowance for deeper insight into both client and therapist mentality. Of the stories told from the perspective of the patient, "In Minnesota, Once: On Anorexia, Masculinity, and Recovery" by archaeologist and poet Owen Vince, explores the unique difficulties faced in male disordered eating. Vince's strong command of imagery and raw emotional appeal makes the story distinctive even as he discusses the typically conventional themes of shame and loss of self-control. Of the stories told from the perspective of the clinician overseeing a client, one especially memorable account, "Inside," recounts the deepening of the relationship between a particularly difficult client and an initially reluctant clinician, Dan Tomasulo. In Tomasulo's telling of how the "smelly referral" of "a bad impersonation of Janis Joplin" (pg. 55)

eventually developed into a mutually rewarding experience, the humor in this story serves as a compelling literary device to underscore the importance of humility and trust in the therapeutic experience.

The most distinctive feature of this anthology is, perhaps, its exploration of therapist as patient. With many of the stories written from the perspective of former patients who have since become licensed mental health practitioners, the takeaway message is clear – though “mental health providers often hide their own psychological struggles for fear of damaging their professional reputations” (pg. 87), this needn’t be the case. In fact, such accounts are illuminating and inspiring testaments to the collective power of a strong support system, courageous introspection, and time to overcome the psychological demons of mental illness.

While some of the stories do feel a bit generic and some of the writing styles may not be as engaging as others, Gutkind has, overall, done an excellent job in selecting stories to capture the many different faces of mental illness. *Same Time Next Week* offers an important learning opportunity for readers of all personal backgrounds and levels of education but may be

of special interest to mental health professionals who wish to increase the level of sensitivity in their practice by gaining deeper insight into clients’ psyches, to those hoping to better understand the struggles of their loved ones, and, of course, to those who are currently struggling (or who have struggled) with their mental wellbeing. Despite their distinctive literary styles and different anecdotal components, these stories are really part of a larger overall narrative, one that speaks of the inevitable suffering and joys of human life, the themes of transformation and perseverance in the face of psychological woundedness, and the changes in traditionally stigmatized attitudes and approaches towards mental illness that must be addressed in order to optimize the effects of existing healing practices.

Kimberly L. Wang is a third-year undergraduate at NYU Gallatin pursuing an individualized degree in neuropsychology and a minor in Child and Adolescent Mental Studies. Her academic interests include the natural sciences, philosophy (specifically metaphysics and epistemology), history, language, and the visual arts. In her free time, Kim enjoys listening to and playing music, reading, creative writing, drawing, and being outdoors.

Lee Gutkind: Writer, Speaker, Innovator

By Nancy Eichhorn

I first met Lee Gutkind at a creative non-fiction writing workshop at Goucher College. Participants were assigned to smaller writing pods—I had the fortune to be assigned with Dinty Moore, an American essayist and writer of both fiction and non-fiction books. At the end of the weekend, participants were selected from each group to read their essay aloud. My group picked me—I wrote a story about my relationship with my grandmother and her expectations of what it meant to be lady. It involved eating a maraschino cherry. Yes, I was terrified to stand in front a large auditorium-audience filled with writers and publishers, teachers and agents. At the end of the evening, Lee came up to me and noted that he would never view a maraschino cherry the same. He was positive and supportive at a time when I was wondering if I had what it takes to be a “real” writer. His kind words and actions during that conference have stayed with me.

According to Lee’s website: he founded *Creative Nonfiction*, the first and the largest literary journal to publish narrative/creative nonfiction exclusively as well as starting the first MFT program in creative nonfiction at the University

of Pittsburg, and the first low residency program at Goucher College.

All the while, he has practiced what he preached; he has immersed himself in diverse worlds for months and years and produced dramatic and intimate creative nonfiction books about subjects as rich and varied as the motorcycle subculture, child and adolescent mental illness, baseball umpires, veterinary medicine and organ transplantation. His book about his life, growing up ‘fat’, was a powerful read in my perspective.

His latest endeavor is to teach scientists, engineers, policy scholars, mathematicians, roboticists, philosophers, innovators and scholars who are pushing the envelope of change to write true stories that inform, entertain and compel readers to want to learn.

I look forward to reading more of Lee’s work and that of those participating in his new frontier.

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