



## The Meaning of Madness

*Neel Burton*

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## **The Meaning of Madness** Neel Burton

This book proposes to open up the debate on mental disorders, to get people interested and talking, and to get them thinking. For example, what is schizophrenia? Why is it so common? Why does it affect human beings and not animals? What might this tell us about our mind and body, language and creativity, music and religion? What are the boundaries between mental disorder and 'normality'? Is there a relationship between mental disorder and genius? These are some of the difficult but important questions that this book confronts, with the overarching aim of exploring what mental disorders can teach us about human nature and the human condition.

Dr Neel Burton qualified in neuroscience and medicine from the University of London and is a Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He is the author of several books, including a prize-winning textbook of psychiatry and a prize-winning self-help book for people with schizophrenia. He lives and teaches in Oxford.

## **The Meaning of Madness Details**

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## From Reader Review The Meaning of Madness for online ebook

### David Ross says

A smart little introduction to behaviour disorders like bipolar, schizophrenia and suicide. The origins and treatment histories are discussed as well as a host of statistical analysis common to each disorder. No game changing theories, just solid foundational research.

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### Jamie says

This book I would recommend to anyone interested in mental health, studying or loving with mental health condition. it is very simple and written extremely well bringing in lots of imagery and facts without imploding your brain with medical terms. A must read for any student starting in mental health or those who have a interest at a beginner level. touching on all aspects into what the disorder is, and traits that can be identified with medical explanation of why. A great start to understanding. And for those who are not students, perhaps dealing with a mental health issue or a family or friend of someone it breaks down all the myths and stigma surrounding mental health and brings a very human feel not a them and us feeling.

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### Steven says

This was an interesting, if a bit unstructured, survey of mental illness and philosophy. While I appreciated the author's intertwining of the two, the structure of the book was difficult at times.

Specifically, the author's choice of setting apart each paragraph as a stand-alone entity, often with little or no transition between disparate thoughts or subjects, was frequently jarring and made getting into the 'flow' of the text nearly impossible. Also, there were digressions within each chapter that I did not understand - for instance, why we are given a bit of a lengthy biography on Freud partway through the chapter on Anxiety, and then immediately (no transition!) thrust into Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Editorial choices such as these prevented me from fully enjoying the text.

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### Rod says

This is a book I really enjoyed reading. I think is a very comprehensive review of the major personality disorders (What is personality?, Schizophrenia, Depression, Maniac-Depressive, Anxiety, Suicide) One of this book main strengths is that it addresses each disorder from many angles: neurological, psychiatric, psychological, cultural, the individual experience, religious, and even, artistic manifestations. Its other strength is that Neel Burton uses simple language without losing depth. Whether you are interested in the topic, you are a student or you are a mental health professional looking to refresh and update your knowledges, you will find this book enjoyable and interesting.

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## **Sudha Bellamkonda says**

Burton's writing is very even keeled and concise even as he is making a point about the controversial topic of whether mental disorders like ADHD, depression and bipolar disorder are over-diagnosed in the western world. His premise that labeling these conditions as disorders/diseases is primarily to serve the purpose of societies that want to conform to the "normal" and does not help the actual patients (for lack of a better word) is touching.

He draws a parallel between how as recently as the early 20th century, homosexuality was labeled a mental/personality disorder with inhumane, and in some cases downright absurd, "treatments". In the same vein, he argues that depression and bipolar disorder may not be disorders or failures of the human psyche and we are in the early stages of fully understanding these conditions - which might play a role in the evolution of the human race.

I saw his TED talk on YouTube and his lucid and balanced talking style made an impression on me. The book is the written equivalent of the same style.

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## **Peter says**

As a general introduction to the issues of mental disorders, I could recommend this book. At 200 small pages, it cannot but remain superficial on all topics (schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, suicide, ...). I have read several books on these topics and therefore it did not offer any new insights. So don't expect any new theory about the meaning of madness in this book. It's a general overview of the problems concerning mental disorders and that's all it is.

However what bothers me enormously is that there is no reading list at the end of the book! There are many very interesting authors mentioned in this book (Thomas Nagel, Kay Redfield Jamison, William Styron, etc...), so I expected an extensive list of more specialized works.

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## **Mark Mills says**

This book is informative and interesting and challenged a lot of the ideas I had about mental illness. That allowed it to rise above some pretty major stylistic flaws.

I've been looking for a book like this for a while. Writing about this topic is mostly (and understandably) self help for patients. That which isn't typically seems to be written by English Literature professors who treat mental illness as a cultural phenomenon devoid of biological roots. So I was pleased to find a book that takes a broader view of 'madness' written by a psychiatrist rather than a Foucault wannabe.

It tries to answer a lot of questions I'd not really thought to ask like: why haven't the genes that predispose us towards mental illness been evolved out of us, can we draw dividing lines between different conditions and about the balance between treating the symptoms and the underlying cause.

I found the broad argument that mental illness is inherently related to the ordinary functioning of the human mind convincing. The authors views on the limitations of diagnosing and treating through reference to rigid

typologies is topical given the impending publication of DSM V.

While I like the way Burton writes, there were problems with the presentation of his argument. In particular the verbatim repeating of whole paragraphs, while allowing each chapter to function as a stand alone essay, becomes rather jarring if you read the book from start to finish. More generally, it felt like it needed more editing to get the material to gel into a satisfying whole. Burton does also regularly seem to move from being an author writing for a reader to a doctor addressing a patient. While this is understandable given that those with mental health problems are likely to make up a large part of the readership, it nonetheless further disrupts the flow of the book. I would not, however, wish these criticisms to leave you with the impression this is not a readable book, when in fact it is eminently so.

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### **Michaela says**

The Meaning of Madness opens up the topic of mental diseases. The author does a great work with asking questions and providing answers from both points of view. The book is essay-like with lots of history on mental diseases and a bit more philosophical than I expected, but it was an interesting read anyway. My only issue is that I would expect it to be more explanatory in terms of biology and psychology as the short description about the book seemed to show exactly that, rather than philosophical questions. That being said the author did provide biological and psychological background along with some evolutionary explanations and definitely provided some topics for a debate which was his aim.

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### **Carson hall says**

(This "review" is for my purposes only).

Mixed feelings on this one. I wasn't really happy with what looked like a cut & paste job to me, but I did find the information interesting. I do believe that some of it was not exactly accurate though, especially the schizophrenia/cannabis connection.

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### **RedCharlieRun says**

Fascinating and well presented. A helpful insight into mental health and a reminder of the complexities surrounding medical diagnosis of mental and personality disorders.

I would recommend if you have a general interest in personality disorders.

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### **Book says**

The Meaning of Madness by Neel Burton

"The Meaning of Madness" is about educating the public on mental disorders through open debates and getting people interested in this important and interesting topic. The book addresses common mental

disorders: personality disorders, schizophrenia, depression, manic-depressive illness, and anxiety disorders and even the topic of suicide. Psychiatrist, philosopher, writer, and blogger for Psychology Today, Dr. Neel Burton has written an accessible and intelligible book on mental disorders. This interesting 211-page book is composed of the following six chapters: 1. Personality, identity, and agency, 2. Schizophrenia, the price for being human, 3. Depression, the curse of the strong, 4. Manic-depressive illness, that fine madness, 5. Anxiety, freedom, and death and 6. Suicide.

Positives:

1. Accessible and generally well-written book that deals with the important issue of mental disorders.
2. A fascinating and commonly misunderstood topic.
3. The author does a wonderful job of defining new terms.
4. Good use of tables and diagrams.
5. The concept of personality the notion of "free will".
6. Classification of personality disorders and how they differ from mental illnesses. Interesting tidbits and introduces readers to a number of disorders. As an example, anankastic personality disorder which is characterized by excessive preoccupation with details, rules, lists, or schedules; and perfectionism so extreme that it prevents a task from being completed.
7. The concept of groupthink. I wished that was pursued in more detail.
8. Putting schizophrenia in perspective. The history of it. Symptoms of schizophrenia. What it is and what it is not. The drugs created to address it.
9. Icons of science and art who were afflicted with some of these illnesses and/or disorders.
10. Symptoms of depression. Degrees of depression. Treatments. Interesting look geographical variations in the prevalence of depression.
11. Interesting subtopic of perceptions of a remedy's potency.
12. Manic-depressive illness or bipolar disorder in perspective. The symptoms of mania. Treatments.
13. A look into anxiety, the causes and treatments. Phobias. What agoraphobia truly is versus what it is perceived to be.
14. Suicide, the main causes. Debunking some myths.
15. A little philosophy for good measure, "God cannot commit suicide even if he wishes, but man can do so at any time he chooses." Thought-provoking, is it not?
16. The epilogue summarizes the book effectively.

Negatives:

1. An interesting book overall but it felt uneven and lacked the production quality of other books of its ilk.
2. Very few footnotes and no formal bibliography.
3. A glossary of terms would have been very helpful.
4. The writing lacks panache, it's accessible but it is often dry.
5. Repetitive. It may have a lot to do with the fact that neuroscience and other fields are in their infancy thus limiting the knowledge we have on these mental disorders. The lack of scientific validity as the author denotes is a problem for all psychiatric disorders.
6. I wished the author would have been clearer on what the current scientific consensus is among the subject matter experts on many of the topics discussed. As an example, a reference table that showed all the mental illnesses, causes and best form of treatment according to the scientific consensus.
7. So many fascinating topics were basically just mentioned but were bound to incite curiosity. Personally, I am very interested in the concept of groupthink and would have liked a link or a book recommendation.

In summary, mental disorders is a fascinating and important topic. The book is a good introduction to mental disorders though I felt it was a bit uneven and many times left me with more questions than answers. That being said, it does a good job of making such complex and often times confusing topics accessible to the public. I give it 3.5 stars but will lean 4 because of the fascinating nature of the topic.

Further suggestions: "Human" and "Who's In Charge" by Michael S. Gazzaniga, "The Tell-Tale Brain" by V.S. Ramachandran, "Hardwired Behavior" by Laurence Tancredi, "The Belief Instinct" by Jesse Bering, "Subliminal" by Leonard Mlodinow, "Why People Believe Weird Things" and "The Believing Brain" by Michael Shermer, "The Blank Slate" by Steven Pinker, "SuperSense" by Bruce M. Hood, "Paranormality" by Richard Wiseman, "The Myth of Free Will" by Cris Evatt, "God Soul Mind Brain" by Michael S.A. Graziano, and "The Brain and Meaning of Life" by Paul Thagard.

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### **Eduard Barbu says**

The book is a laymen introduction to personality disorders like schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder. For me, the book was a great information source and allowed me to better understand the controversies around the personality disorders. For certain individuals (very few though) the mental disorders were the source of inspiration but for most people and their relatives, they are an ordeal. I was surprised to learn that 38.7 percents of the population in Germany, Italy, and the UK have experienced hallucinations. Like most of you, I have met "strange" people in my life. A recurring type are those who have an excessive preoccupation with details, rules, and lists. According to Burton, they might suffer from Anankastic Personality Disorder. Then I met religious preachers that act like the people affected by mania. Furthermore, I met people that believe they have a divine mission or that they are the chosen ones or that they are persecuted by obscure forces or the state. Read this short book and you will see in a different light various encounters in your life.

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