



The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in Our Times

Barbara Taylor

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In the late 1970s, Barbara Taylor, then an acclaimed young historian, began to suffer from severe anxiety. In the years that followed, Taylor's world contracted around her illness. Eventually, her struggles were severe enough to lead to her admission to what had once been England's largest psychiatric institution, the infamous Friern Mental Hospital in North London.

The Last Asylum is Taylor's breathtakingly blunt and brave account of those years. In it, Taylor draws not only on her experience as a historian, but also, more importantly, on her own lived history at Friern—once known as the Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum and today the site of a luxury apartment complex. Taylor was admitted to Friern in July 1988, not long before England's asylum system began to undergo dramatic change: in a development that was mirrored in America, the 1990s saw the old asylums shuttered, their patients left to plot courses through a perpetually overcrowded and underfunded system of community care. But Taylor contends that the emptying of the asylums also marked a bigger loss, a loss of community. She credits her own recovery to the help of a steadfast psychoanalyst and a loyal circle of friends— from Magda, Taylor's manic-depressive roommate, to Fiona, who shares tips for navigating the system and stories of her boyfriend, the "Spaceman," and his regular journeys to Saturn. The forging of that network of support and trust was crucial to Taylor's recovery, offering a respite from the "stranded, homeless feelings" she and others found in the outside world.

A vivid picture of mental health treatment at a moment of epochal change, *The Last Asylum* is also a moving meditation on Taylor's own experience, as well as that of millions of others who struggle with mental illness.

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