

Soul Survivor: A Personal Encounter With Psychiatry

by Mary and Jim Maddock, (Sheffield: Asylum Books, 2006, 159pp)

A review and commentary by Don Weitz

Although *Soul Survivor* is a small book, it is huge in its personal and powerful message—a woman going through psychiatric hell can not only survive but triumph over psychiatry with support of family, friends and community. An autobiographical work co-written by Mary and Jim Maddock, an Irish married couple, the book centers around Mary's courageous struggles for personal freedom and identity—as wife, mother, survivor, and human rights activist. With love and strong support of husband Jim, Mary eventually escapes from the oppressive, soul-destroying psychiatric system. It's an inspiring story and moving journey that deserves to be widely read by psychiatric survivors, human rights activists, and especially psychiatrists and other mental health professionals.

Much of the book focuses on Mary's survival in several repressive institutions – first a convent, then psychiatric wards and a psychiatric hospital that should be called psychoprisons. Planning to become a nun, Mary enters a Catholic convent but soon drops out; she can't tolerate its regimen of strict obedience to authority and rigid hierarchy. She soon meets and marries Jim and gives birth to daughter Claire. In 1976 soon after Claire is born, Mary suffers an adverse reaction to “the gas” or anaesthetic. The doctors label the reaction as “hypo-mania”; they also misdiagnose Mary's condition as “puerperal psychosis” or “postnatal depression”, other terms for postpartum depression which is a very common and temporary emotional state (pathologized as “mental illness”) many women experience following childbirth. Psychiatrists continue misdiagnosing her highs and lows as symptoms of “manic-depression” or “bipolar mood disorder” – a common example of psychiatry's fraudulent medicalization of intense emotion and life crisis as “mental illness”.

Once Mary is psychiatrically labeled, locked up and drugged in various psychoprisons—e.g., St. Stephen's Hospital in Sarsfield and St. Patrick's Hospital in Dublin - Mary's and Jim's life is quickly transformed into a living “HELL” (see the “Nightmare” chapter). Like many other people, they at first naively believe that psychiatric treatment will help Mary overcome her “illness” Unfortunately, their awakening comes several painful years later at great emotional cost. During a 6-year period, Mary finds herself in 4 or 5 different hellholes where she is forcibly and unethically drugged, electroshocked several times, barely spoken to by psychiatrists and where her human rights to informed consent, dignity and respect are routinely violated. The psychiatrists con Mary and Jim into believing the root cause of Mary's problems is a “genetic biochemical imbalance.” ---a discredited psychiatric claim and popular hoax still propagated as medical fact in psychiatric journals.

While Mary is locked up, the psychiatrists unethically and forcibly drug her with several neurotoxins including dangerously high doses of the neuroleptic Largactil (chlorpromazine or Thorazine), the “mood stabilizer”, kidney-destroying Lithium which

she's ordered to take for almost 18 years (!), and the antidepressant Surmontil which triggers frightening hallucinations. After many years of agony, Mary withdraws gradually, safely and completely – no small achievement since most survivors are unable or unwilling to withdraw from these addictive poisons because of understandable fears, and doctors' widespread refusal to help them withdraw. (Physician refusal to help patients withdraw from psychiatric drugs is widespread and severely criticized as unethical by psychiatrist Peter Breggin and social scientist David Cohen in their book *Your Drug May Be Your Problem*.)

Mary and Jim slowly discover several things: psychiatric drugs don't help, they disable and disempower Mary and other patients; drugs and electroshock ("ECT") are cruel techniques of behavioural and social control; psychiatric patients have virtually no rights while locked up; incarceration in psychiatric facilities is in fact imprisonment. A few of Jim's criticisms of the drugs, psychiatric nurses and medical model are worth noting:

they [drug side effects] are [then] considered to be part of the psychiatric 'condition' with even more medication in a misguided and vicious cycle. On a number of occasions, Mary was overcome by a faint-like weakness which caused her to fall to the ground. The reaction of the nurses...showed how ignorant they were of these side-effects. Angrily, they would tell her to "Get Up!" and not to act like that, as if she had some choice in the matter! . . . , they would make threats to her that she would not be allowed visitors – emotional blackmail of an emotionally disturbed patient and completely at odds with the best traditions of the general nursing profession. It was as if the nurses went along with all the psychiatrists said. Drugs were best, they were for your good and that's the end of it. . . And if any of the nurses did have any misgivings, they learned to keep their mouths shut, such was the power of the doctors and the prevailing 'medical model' ethos.

In 1976 after she and Jim view the horrendous shock scene in *On Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Mary is ironically and forcibly subjected to the torture of several sessions of memory-destroying/brain-damaging electroshock ("ECT") - a treatment for her "mania" or "bipolar" condition. Tragically, electroshock wipes out all memory of the birth of Claire, Mary's first daughter – a common experience of many women shock survivors and young mothers (massive memory loss is also described by Canadian shock survivor Wendy Funk in "What Difference Does It Make?" - *The Journey of a Soul Survivor*). Although Mary chooses not to describe her shock traumas, she obviously shares Jim's assessment of electroshock as "... electrical lobotomy,.. held over patients as a threat or punishment for not conforming to hospital routines or being a nuisance. It is a perfect metaphor for the control/power/domination ethos of the 'medical model'. [ECT] should be banned."

I totally agree, so do many other psychiatric survivors, human rights activists and other critics. Unfortunately, electroshock is still legal and administered in many hospitals in Ireland, other European countries, Asian countries, Canada, and the US. Nevertheless, a global anti-shock movement is gradually emerging -- shock survivors, antipsychiatry activists, human rights and advocacy organizations including MindFreedom International, the World Network of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry, the European Network of Users

and Survivors of Psychiatry, the Toronto-based Coalition Against Psychiatric Assault have already organized successful public forums, protest rallies, and demonstrations against electroshock and forced drugging as tortures that have brain-damaged and ruined the lives of hundreds of thousands of citizens and killed hundreds.

Like the mythical Phoenix, Mary rises out of the ashes with the strong support and understanding of Jim, close relatives and friends. She somehow finds the inner strength and courage not only to withdraw from some of psychiatry's most debilitating and disabling neurotoxins, but becomes an active and respected leader in advocacy and human rights organizations in Ireland and Europe. For example, Mary helps establish MindFreedom Ireland, a group member of MindFreedom International, a coalition of over 100 psychiatric survivor and advocacy groups in 14 countries. I wish all member groups of MindFreedom International and a selected bibliography of some survivor books and videos were included, they would have added to the book's value as a resource for psychiatric survivors and researchers – a minor criticism.

Psychiatrists almost destroyed the mind, soul and spirit of Mary Maddock; they've already destroyed the minds and lives of thousands, if not millions, of others. This book is not just about one woman's personal victory over psychiatric oppression, it's a gift to psychiatric survivors and human rights activists everywhere, a triumph of the human spirit.

Biographical note:

Don Weitz is an antipsychiatry activist, co-editor of *Shrink Resistant: The Struggle Against Psychiatry in Canada*, and co-founder of the Coalition Against Psychiatric Assault in Toronto.