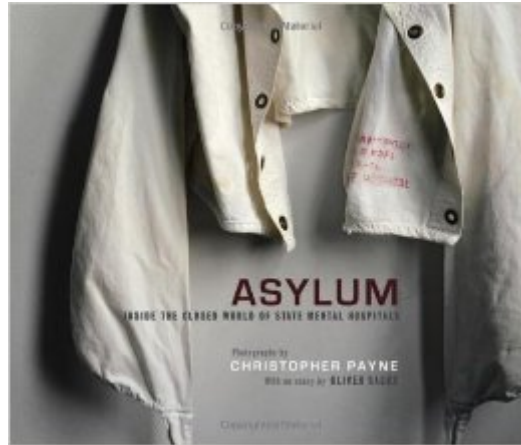


The book was found

Asylum: Inside The Closed World Of State Mental Hospitals (MIT Press)



Synopsis

For more than half the nation's history, vast mental hospitals were a prominent feature of the American landscape. From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, over 250 institutions for the insane were built throughout the United States; by 1948, they housed more than a half million patients. The blueprint for these hospitals was set by Pennsylvania hospital superintendant Thomas Story Kirkbride: a central administration building flanked symmetrically by pavilions and surrounded by lavish grounds with pastoral vistas. Kirkbride and others believed that well-designed buildings and grounds, a peaceful environment, a regimen of fresh air, and places for work, exercise, and cultural activities would heal mental illness. But in the second half of the twentieth century, after the introduction of psychotropic drugs and policy shifts toward community-based care, patient populations declined dramatically, leaving many of these beautiful, massive buildings -- and the patients who lived in them -- neglected and abandoned. Architect and photographer Christopher Payne spent six years documenting the decay of state mental hospitals like these, visiting seventy institutions in thirty states. Through his lens we see splendid, palatial exteriors (some designed by such prominent architects as H. H. Richardson and Samuel Sloan) and crumbling interiors -- chairs stacked against walls with peeling paint in a grand hallway; brightly colored toothbrushes still hanging on a rack; stacks of suitcases, never packed for the trip home. Accompanying Payne's striking and powerful photographs is an essay by Oliver Sacks (who described his own experience working at a state mental hospital in his book *Awakenings*). Sacks pays tribute to Payne's photographs and to the lives once lived in these places, "where one could be both mad and safe."

Book Information

Series: MIT Press

Hardcover: 209 pages

Publisher: The MIT Press; 1 edition (September 4, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0262013495

ISBN-13: 978-0262013499

Product Dimensions: 11.8 x 1 x 10.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.9 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (83 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #232,046 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #106 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Special Topics > History](#) #115 in [Books > Medical](#)

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Customer Reviews

"Asylum" is not a book of words as much as it is a book of images. A photo-essay, others have called it. And the pictures definitely tell a story. "Asylum" contains haunting and classical views of 19th century Kirkbride-plan mental hospitals. The old asylums were closed-off worlds complete with greenhouses, sewing rooms, craft shops, small theaters, even bowling alleys, to occupy and entertain the patient-residents. The hospitals were completely staffed and stocked for nearly every medical contingency. They had the all the facilities and devices of 20th century psychiatric care including: straitjackets, ice showers, immersion tanks, ECT units, and one would imagine, lobotomies, for the 'treatment resistant'. Entire communities and cultures existed inside those red brick buildings, with their white painted trim around doors and windows, and everything inside painted institutional green. In the old days, thousands of patients lived out their adult lives in these State asylums, with diagnoses like: 'undifferentiated depression' and 'dementia praecox', and were even buried on the premises after they had expired. This book really brought back some memories. I once lived as a teenager in a residential treatment facility on the grounds of Concord Hospital (originally called: "New Hampshire State Asylum") which is depicted a few times in the book (p45, 47, 143). Looking at the photos of the different institutions in this book, I saw my old room, my old bed, the basement tunnels, the bathrooms we showered in, the chairs we sat in during group, the windows I used to look out of...

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