

[HARDCOVER: UK]

Undercover and overlooked in the psychiatric ward

BY ALEXANDER LINKLATER
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

To produce her first book, *Self-Made Man*, lesbian author Norah Vincent embarked on an adventure in "immersion journalism," spending a year disguised as a man. She emerged with a best-selling account of American masculinity and some unresolved mental-health issues. Though she does not clarify whether the strain of adopting a fake identity was a trigger, she suffered a depressive collapse towards the end of her research and wound up in a locked psychiatric ward.

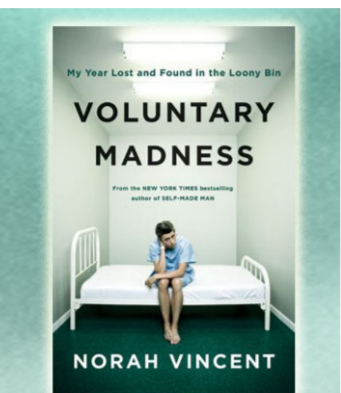
Where *Self-Made Man* ended, her new book, *Voluntary Madness*, begins. After her breakdown, Vincent decided to re-enter the psychiatric system as a journalist, posing as a patient with a serious mental disorder. Unsurprisingly, as her immersion narrative deepens, the distinction between Vincent as journalist and Vincent as patient dissolves. It turns out she has long suffered from depressive episodes that date back to a childhood trauma, the precise nature of which is revealed towards the end of her story.

This blurring of roles creates an interesting ambiguity. Vincent attempts to speak both with the authority of a commentator who has researched the American psychiatric system from the outside, and with the psychic vulnerability of someone experiencing it from within. To give the reader a feeling of what happens to disordered minds in an institution, she has to be mad enough herself to render the experience, but not so mad as to lose the plot. She must, to tell a sane story, maintain her perspective on other patients whose experiences of the world are defined by far more profound distortions and psychoses.

It is a problematic balancing act, but one that captures the fundamental dilemma of psychiatry — how to reduce subjective experience to the objective classifications of medical science. The precedent is the famous 1972 experiment by American psychologist David Rosenhan, who sent researchers into a dozen psychiatric institutions with instructions to report phony hallucinations. The fact that all of them were admitted with formal diagnoses exposed the central difficulty of the profession (one that remains as real today as it was then): that the only test for even the most extreme psychiatric illnesses is a patient's own report of his or her state of mind. Vincent is not exactly faking it, but she plays up to what she knows her doctors need to hear to achieve the level of admission appropriate to her task.

The shallow, anti-psychiatric conclusions that might be drawn from this — that mental illnesses do not really exist or that diagnostic classifications are meaningless — are not, however, ones that Vincent indulges (though she certainly questions the categories). She begins her

Publication Notes



VOLUNTARY MADNESS: MY YEAR LOST AND FOUND IN THE LOONY BIN
BY NORAH VINCENT
304 PAGES
CHATTO & WINDUS

journey in a New York public hospital where the reality of diseased minds presses upon her with irrefutable force. Nor does she shy away from the paradox that lies behind the stigma — that to care for the mentally ill means confronting a potential abhorrence of the sufferer. "Good intentions," she writes, are "the casualty of contact."

While recognizing the social need for incarceration as safety net, she provides potent criticisms of entrenched medical habits — the grim realities of bureaucratic inertia and lazy diagnosis in which the sickness of patients is reflected in, and reinforced by, the nature of the institution. "Did the people make the place or did the place make the people?" she wonders. The question should be asked by every doctor in every institution.

After two weeks in the closed ward, she goes to a private hospital in the Midwest, run according to the same psychiatric model but in a better environment with more caring staff. The difference for the patients is palpable, with the added irony that the insurance costs are no more than they were for the public institution.

Finally, Vincent arrives as a patient at an alternative center with high-quality facilities, programs of both medication and psychotherapy, and a distinctively American blend of cognitive, behavioral, spiritualist and psychoanalytic jargon. And it's here that she comes to her own, personal resolution.

The originality of *Voluntary Madness* lies in the fact that Vincent is reporting from inside the system at its three cardinal levels: a hard-core public institution, a more congenial private equivalent, and an intensively personalized therapeutic realm. As near as is possible in a single account, this presents the full spectrum of psychiatry in operation. Vincent's observations veer between the insightful and the trite, but in a field dominated by antagonistic professional specialisms of brain and mind, it can take an informed generalist to see the big picture.



SUNDAY PROFILE



We need an election — not a coronation — to ensure our next US senator reflects the will of the people.

— James Tedisco, Republican leader in the New York state senate

The Kennedy who declined

Caroline Kennedy, who withdrew her bid for a US Senate seat last week, guarded her privacy so closely for much of the past five decades that she was poorly prepared to campaign for political office

BY SEBASTIAN SMITH
AFP, NEW YORK

All Kennedys seem born to rule, but in Caroline Kennedy's case there was a difference: she didn't want to.

Late Wednesday Kennedy announced her last-minute withdrawal from consideration for the US Senate seat vacated by Hillary Clinton, the newly confirmed US secretary of state.

The about-face, just when she was apparently within reach of winning the coveted position, was seen as a stunning surprise. "SHE'S OUT!" screamed the *New York Post* tabloid on Thursday. "Caroline's Kaput."

Yet that seemingly abrupt retreat crowned decades of resistance by Kennedy to entering what is practically her family business.

Sole surviving child of assassinated US president John F. Kennedy and scion to a family synonymous with political power, Kennedy, 51, is as close as Americans come to royalty. Her uncle Robert F. Kennedy, also assassinated, once held the Senate seat she was trying to fill.

Other members of the clan, led by JFK's brother and ailing Senate elder statesman Ted Kennedy, are fixtures in the political pages and gossip columns of newspapers.

But until applying for Clinton's Senate seat, Caroline Kennedy had never sought public office.

A wealthy and intensely private person, she graduated as a lawyer, but reportedly never practiced. She wrote seven books, but never played the celebrity game.

Though she lives on New York's exclusive Park Avenue, she reportedly keeps using the city's grimy subway, and her philanthropic work and activity in New York's public education system get little publicity.

For many Americans, Caroline Kennedy has remained almost frozen in time — forever the adorable girl photographed riding her pony around



Caroline Kennedy, second from left, talks to students from the City Hall Academy after a press conference held to launch the Adopt a School: Kids Are Everyone's Business program in New York on Jan. 26, 2004. PHOTO: AP

the White House grounds or, tragically, attending her father's 1963 funeral at Arlington Cemetery.

So there was an electric reaction in January last year when she burst out of her fairly private world to endorse Barack Obama.

In a *New York Times* column titled *A President Like My Father*, Kennedy wrote of never having seen a president who matched up to the way people still talked about JFK.

Now, she said, "I believe I have found a man who could be that president."

The *Times* quoted Obama campaign manager David Plouffe this week saying that this Kennedy blessing came out of the blue. "We found out when the rest of America found out," he said. "It was a remarkable thing."

From there, Kennedy entered the political big time as an Obama campaigner and advisor on the crucial decision of picking a vice president candidate.

Then less than two months ago, she threw her hat into the ring as contender for Clinton's seat, a decision that rests wholly with New York Governor David Paterson.

But a lifetime of shyness and seeming lack of hunger for power had apparently left her badly prepared.

She committed the cardinal sin of trying to ignore the media. Then she gave a flurry of interviews, only to get in more trouble for appearing vague and curiously unable to avoid punctuating sentences with endless repetitions of "you know."

Within days, Kennedy veered from seemingly inevitable choice for the seat to target of critics who complained she was being foisted on the public with nothing to her resume but her famous family name.

Some even compared her to Sarah Palin, the Alaskan governor who ran as Republican John McCain's vice presidential candidate and drew ridicule for lack of foreign policy savvy.

The question of her qualifications gained added relevance in the wake of the scandal in Illinois where Governor Rod Blagojevich is accused of wanting to auction the Senate seat vacated there by Obama.

"We need an election — not a coronation — to ensure our next US senator reflects the will of the people," the Republican leader in the New York state senate, James Tedisco, said.

Friends defended Kennedy as someone who embodied the spirit of public service and whose lack of political smoothness simply showed that she was fresh and not part of the existing system.

Analysts pointed out that she had two big pluses in Paterson's eyes over her rivals, led by New York state attorney general Andrew Cuomo, himself son of a former New York state governor, Mario Cuomo.

One was her link to the Obama team, the other her ability to raise significant amounts of money in coming political campaigns, especially Paterson's own re-election next year.

But voters, it seems, were unimpressed: an opinion poll published just last week showed that more New Yorkers wanted Cuomo.

Paterson, an independent-minded governor, was reportedly discomfited by pressure from the Kennedy camp.

According to the *New York Times*, Kennedy withdrew amid concern for her uncle Ted Kennedy, a father figure who has been badly ill for months, and just this Tuesday, on Obama's inauguration day, suffered a seizure.

Observers say it's possible too that Caroline Kennedy realized she had bitten off more than she wanted to chew with the Senate bid.

Or simply that Paterson gave her a chance to leave the competition gracefully.

The governor denies pushing her out. "The decision was hers alone," he said on Thursday.

[HARDCOVER: US]

Who is Michelle Obama?

'Michelle: A Biography,' which is mostly a compendium of the known record, portrays America's new first lady as a hard-working girl-next-door type

BY ANGIE DROBNIC HOLAN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, ST PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

Barack and Michelle Obama spent two years on the campaign trail as he ran for president, but in many ways the US is still getting to know them.

Collectively, Americans seem eager to know them better, judging from the big ratings their television interviews garner. For those who want to know more about Barack, there are several biographies as well as his own books: the memoir *Dreams From My Father* and the more politically oriented essays of *The Audacity of Hope*.

But for those interested in Michelle Obama, there are noticeably fewer choices. One early entrant is *Michelle*, by *Washington Post* feature writer Liza Mundy.

The catch here is that the Obamas did not cooperate with this one. Far from it. Mundy wrote an article for the online magazine *Slate* puzzling over the

fact that the Obamas seemed to have actively discouraged friends and family from talking to her. It is puzzling, because *Michelle* is a friendly biography that portrays the next first lady as a likable, smart, girl-next-door type.

Born Michelle LaVaughn Robinson in 1964, she was raised by loving parents rooted in Chicago's black community. Mundy gives particular attention to the historical events affecting her South Side neighborhood, from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the racial unrest of the 1960s.

Encouraged to be a high achiever by her parents, Michelle Robinson attended Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, an integrated school where she served as a class officer. She then headed off to the Ivy League, completing her undergraduate degree at Princeton University, followed by Harvard Law School. Mundy is particularly good at depicting the campus culture wars of the 1980s,

though there are big gaps in what Michelle said or thought about the issues of the day.

After law school, she worked at an elite Chicago law firm, where she met her future husband. She resisted him at first because she suspected, based on the office buzz about a whiz kid from Hawaii, that he might be "nerdy, strange, off-putting."

It's about the early years of their relationship that *Michelle* offers the most insight. Mundy depicts her as being as charismatic and ambitious as her future husband and just as concerned with public service and social change.

The details of her professional career demonstrate a continuing line of civic-minded work: She left the law firm to join the mayoral administration of Richard M. Daley, after being recruited by Valerie Jarrett, now one of Barack Obama's closest advisers. She left city government to work more directly in public

Publication Notes



MICHELLE: A BIOGRAPHY
BY LIZA MUNDY
224 PAGES
SIMON & SCHUSTER

service as the executive director of Public Allies, an organization that trains young people to work in the nonprofit sector.

Michelle then worked for the University of Chicago Hospitals as a community affairs liaison, helping the university organize volunteers and expand contracts with women- and minority-owned firms, and conducting neighborhood outreach programs.

Finally, Mundy tackles the US presidential campaign, though the book was published just before the election and so does not include Barack Obama's victory.

Although undoubtedly sympathetic to Michelle Obama, Mundy forthrightly addresses charges from her critics, including the flap when she said, "For the first time in my adult life I am really proud of my country, and not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change."

Mundy concludes that Michelle

Obama probably meant what she said, based on interviews with black leaders who defended the comment. They loved their country, they said, but were not always proud of it because of its history of racial discrimination, and there is an important distinction there. "People who have not traveled the same road that African-Americans have traveled could not understand it," Mundy (who is white) quotes one Chicago minister as saying.

Mundy concludes that Michelle Obama is "outspoken, likable, grounded. She may indeed be quick to find fault with bosses, with America, whatever, but she is also warm and loyal and, truth be told, not much of a rabble-rouser. If she becomes first lady, she will be an interesting and occasionally lively one."

The job of first lady, though, is "difficult and constraining and unenviable... all the scrutiny, and none of the power." Mundy

here sells the first lady position short. Whatever the job's limits, modern first ladies have used their celebrity to promote causes and charities. From this point of view, the job is an open-ended opportunity for someone with a career in public service.

Michelle Obama has said she intends to be "mom-in-chief," spending much of her time mothering her two daughters, but it seems likely, based on Mundy's portrait, she will also use her new platform to promote cherished causes.

For researchers and investigators, *Michelle* is mostly a compendium of the known record, although Mundy gets bonus points for her easy-to-read prose style and for documenting her sources well in above-average end notes. For confirmed Michelle Obama fans or for those who are simply intrigued by a new first lady and would like to know more, *Michelle* is great night-table reading.