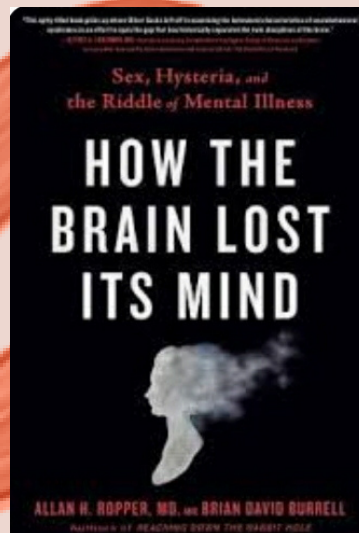


BOOK: HOW THE BRAIN LOST ITS MIND: SEX, HYSTERIA AND THE RIDDLE OF MENTAL ILLNESS

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A truly intellectually stimulating read, *How the Brain Lost its Mind* opens up with a doctor classifying diseases such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder as diseases caused by faulty brain structure and function rather than being a mental illness. Philippe Pinel, the man who basically started psychiatry, saw insanity as a problem of the mind. At the same time, a class of study which saw the brain as a muscle to be exercised (called Phrenology) promoted the treatment of illnesses of the mind by keeping active and busy, though the study was disproved in 1822.

The book then dives right into the disease of the time which plagued the masses—syphilis. Specifically, it gives an insight into how a fairly unassuming disease for society today effectively institutionalized over half a million people over the years before a feasible treatment was found. Generally, syphilis was known to be transmitted during intercourse and resulted in lesions and dry ulcers called chancres. What was not known at the time, however, was that the disease had the ability to affect other organs of the body, such as the liver, heart and brain, and that it could also manifest in the form of hallucinations, paralysis and insanity. Heralded as the 'great imitator,' Sir William Osler proclaimed that "He who knows syphilis knows medicine."

Alongside this disease, a preview into some of medicine's greatest minds is also given. Jean-Martin Charcot, the man responsible for deciphering the functions of the human nervous system, was also an instrumental part in uncovering syphilis' lesser known manifestations. However he was also responsible for his single-minded focus on proving his theories, as depicted in André Brouillet's painting, *Une Leçon Clinique à la Salpêtrière*. Charcot sought to place hysteria, a term usually reserved solely for women, next to epilepsy and decided to add hypnosis to his arsenal of diagnostic tools. Most famously, Charcot's work with the patient Blanche Wittman would gain much praise and criticism by the masses. The journalist Maupassant, a known womanizer, was one such critic who ultimately succumbed to syphilis and enlisted Charcot's help. Unwittingly, it was here that the man would link sex and neuroses.

We get an insight into different case studies as the secrets of syphilis are revealed, primarily with regards as to how the disease is able to lay dormant for years at a time, only to appear suddenly as fits of hysteria, illness and madness. The case of Chomentowski suddenly patrolling with a rifle or Guthrie's sudden descent into illness portray this. Scientists would later discover that the caudate nuclei of the basal ganglia were shrunken in patients with General paresis of the insane (GPI), a symptom that manifested later on for most syphilitic patients. Add in Mesmer linking animal magnetism to illness with his attempt to cure the blind Maria Theresia in Vienna, and the term neurosyphilis was coined specifically with reference to tabes dorsalis (locomotor ataxia) and GPI.

While most saw syphilis, commonly referred to as 'the pox,' as a masculine rite of passage, Fracastorio began to perpetuate what would be the foundations of germalogy by stating that the bubonic plague was caused by bacteria. At this time, venereal disease also faced much scorn and prejudice. The upper class would pay to keep the cause of death secret if it were caused by sexually transmitted diseases, and there was also the degeneration theory, which saw syphilis as a case of 'the sins of the father falling onto his offspring.'

These theories would all go up in smoke when Perkin discovered the first synthetic drug maevine(Tyrion purple), as this would pave the way for Schaudin to prove the presence of spirochetes in blood samples of syphilitic patients. The presence of 'serum,' the part of the blood left over after the red and white blood cells were removed, and the presence of the protein known as the complement would also be of great value. Together with Ehrlich, both men would develop the Wasserman blood test for syphilis. Ehrilch would later discover the first antibacterial chemotherapy drug.

Later, Noguchi would accidentally prove that spirochetes were also present in persons with general paresis of the insane which contributed another stepping stone towards eradicating syphilis. Wagner-Jauregg would use inoculation of the malaria fever as one of the first cures for syphilis and which would later be replaced with the discovery of penicillin by Fleming. Another set of scientists, Parran and Mahoney, were responsible for ensuring penicillin was administered to the masses in preference to the other available treatments of arsenicals, bismuth and mercury. While both men accomplished great feats, Parran's achievements are overshadowed by his controversial human experiments that he conducted on soldiers in Guatemala during his bid to cure syphilis.

From beginning to end, How the Brain Lost its Mind provoked many thoughts, both scientific and ethical. The sheer magnitude of the medical discoveries associated with the road towards curing syphilis were extraordinary, as were the gross violations of human rights and privacy. It also showcased how versatile a disease syphilis was, that it transcended its initial sexual class and transformed into an affliction of the mind and of the brain in some instances. While many milestones were attained, syphilis has made a quiet reappearance in the masses that seems to be largely ignored.

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References:

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