



reviews

The Devil and Daniel Johnston (video)

Director: Jeff Feuerzeig
Sony pictures VHS/DVD,
USA 2005, DVD £19.99,
running time 1 h 50 m (12A)

This was Winner of Best Director at the Sundance Film Festival 2005 and Winner of the Audience Award Best Documentary at the San Francisco Independent Film Festival.

Introducing himself as suffering from manic-depressive psychosis, US singer/songwriter Daniel Johnston, labelled 'genius' by his many followers, allows this documentary to give an insight not only into his creative output but also the destructive power that mental illness has been having on his life.

The film's obvious target audience will be musicians and music lovers, which is why the psychiatrist in me watched it with some trepidation, wondering how the fabled link between genius and madness would be portrayed. My fears were unjustified, as it is shown that his psychosis sadly does not enhance, but clearly inhibits Johnston's creative potential.

The viewer gets to know the vast volume of 20 years' worth of artistic outpourings, comprising countless audio tapes, cartoons and home movies. But the viewer also witnesses live performances coming to a tearful, premature end, and sees Johnston on stage puzzling his audience with incessant ramblings about the devil. Although for many years Johnston's charming and idiosyncratic songs – often played with more passion than technical skills – have been cherished by an ever-increasing fan base, one is left wondering what shape his career might have taken without his being unwell. On the other hand, his art would not be what it is without the influences of his psychotic experiences, especially his delusional preoccupation that superheroes could rescue the world from the devil. Recommended for medical students and anyone else wishing to refresh their memory about symptoms of mania is the audio-diary recording of Johnston recounting these symptoms, apparently during an acute manic episode.

The film also gives an insight into the family's experiences of helplessness as the illness tightened its grip on their son. Painful with hindsight, it is possible to sympathise with their difficulty in recognising his increasing disorganisation as anything more sinister than adolescent non-conformity, although it is haunting to hear how a family Christmas celebration ends with the tormented Johnston being simply sent away on a bus rather than



taken to a hospital. The now elderly parents, once hopeful that their children would care for them in their old age, find themselves in the position of caring for their middle-aged son who has lost his independence.

The documentary's focus is on Johnston's music and visual artwork rather than aiming to give a detailed psychiatric history or indeed confirm a clinical diagnosis, but it highlights that in many ways these issues are inseparable. It is a sensitive, non-judgemental and ultimately admiring portrait of an artist and patient, a person as a whole, and as such might perhaps unintentionally go some way to tackling stigma in society.

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Mental Health Policy and Practice

H. Lester & J. Glasby
Palgrave Macmillan, 2006,
£18.99, 260 pp.
ISBN: 1403935432

This clearly written book by two academics (one a general practitioner and the other with a social work background) seeks to provide an overview of important developments in mental healthcare. Two introductory chapters set the scene, providing the reader with a somewhat unreliable history of mental healthcare in England and a breathless account of mental health policy over the past 30 years. Four service-related chapters follow, encompassing primary care, community mental health (a whirlwind tour of hospital closure, community

mental health teams and the new functional mental health teams), hospital mental health (i.e. acute beds) and forensic mental health services. We are then treated to a quartet of chapters on meta-issues that preoccupy contemporary policy makers: partnership working, user involvement, antidiscriminatory practice and carers.

Every potential reader of this book will find something they did not know. I was completely ignorant of the literature on the pitfalls of partnership working and read this chapter with great interest. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the book's scope there are errors of fact and misinterpretations of the literature. Lord Ashley, when he stated that 'asylums would effect a cure in seventy cases out of every hundred', was using an evidence base at least as firm in its day as anything that has come out of North Birmingham in the past decade. Enthusiastic as we are about locking people up in the UK, the prison population has not as yet reached 140 000. To call shell shock 'post-traumatic stress disorder' is an anachronism. To aver that those who take a biomedical approach towards mental illness espouse 'mind-body dualism' is surely to misunderstand both concepts.

The authors identify three theoretical frameworks through which much of their material is interpreted (the social model of disability, the recovery paradigm and communitarianism) and quote generously and approvingly from a wide range of texts that take what is fashionably termed a critical approach to established practices in mental health.

I predict that the book will sell well, inform many and perhaps mislead a few.

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