

Introduction

I started to write this book about six years ago, when I went on a short trip to South America with my partner. He was working, and for the first time in many years I had nothing to do. It just poured out, a chapter a day, and, in the evenings, we talked with each other about what had happened in the early days of our marriage, and afterwards.

This is a book about mental illness, something I have experienced as both a patient and a doctor. After experiencing severe mental illness myself, I went on to train as a psychiatrist. Mental illness is why it was written, but, of course, it is only one person's story. Mental illness is highly prevalent, but there are many different mental illnesses, and very many different people.

My story is, perhaps, unusual in that I was interested in psychiatry even as a medical student. But I learnt what it was like to be a patient, an in-patient on a psychiatric ward, before I learnt to become a psychiatrist. I always felt different, stigmatised, even, following this oddly inverted route. As a patient, I experienced diagnoses and treatment, and saw others experience them too; later, I tried to understand them, as a doctor and a psychiatrist. I have had, and continue to have, many different medications, and even electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and struggle with both the stigma and the benefits.

I have been a psychiatric patient for more than thirty years, a psychiatrist for slightly less. I have a diagnosis of bipolar

AN IMPROBABLE PSYCHIATRIST

disorder, and I don't think this will go away, although I am lucky that treatment keeps me well much of the time. I am also a mother, who experienced loss and perinatal mental illness. The desire to be a mother and the feelings of grief when it went wrong were hard to bear and even acknowledge, and sometimes I think these changed me more than anything.

I hope my story may be of interest to some, and, even more, of comfort to others. Being able to write and talk about my illness and experiences, in the context of being a mother, wife, friend, and doctor, has brought me great solace over the years.

The memories recounted in this memoir are my own and may be affected by the passage of time as well as by the experiences described, so may not be wholly accurate.

Some names have been changed.