



Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs

By Jonathan Metzl

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Pills replaced the couch; neuroscience took the place of talk therapy; and as psychoanalysis faded from the scene, so did the castrating mothers and hysterical spinsters of Freudian theory. Or so the story goes. In *Prozac on the Couch*, psychiatrist Jonathan Michel Metzl boldly challenges recent psychiatric history, showing that there's a lot of Dr. Freud encapsulated in late-twentieth-century psychotropic medications. Providing a cultural history of treatments for depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses through a look at the professional and popular reception of three "wonder drugs"—Miltown, Valium, and Prozac—Metzl explains the surprising ways Freudian gender categories and popular gender roles have shaped understandings of these drugs.

Prozac on the Couch traces the notion of "pills for everyday worries" from the 1950s to the early twenty-first century, through psychiatric and medical journals, popular magazine articles, pharmaceutical advertisements, and popular autobiographical "Prozac narratives." Metzl shows how clinical and popular talk about these medications often reproduces all the cultural and social baggage associated with psychoanalytic paradigms—whether in a 1956 *Cosmopolitan* article about research into tranquilizers to "cure" frigid women; a 1970s *American Journal of Psychiatry* ad introducing Jan, a lesbian who "needs" Valium to find a man; or Peter Kramer's description of how his patient "Mrs. Prozac" meets her husband after beginning treatment.

Prozac on the Couch locates the origins of psychiatry's "biological revolution" not in the Valiumania of the 1970s but in American popular culture of the 1950s. It was in the 1950s, Metzl points out, that traditional psychoanalysis had the most sway over the American imagination. As the number of Miltown prescriptions soared (reaching 35 million, or nearly one per second, in 1957), advertisements featuring uncertain brides and unfaithful wives miraculously cured by the "new" psychiatric medicines filled popular magazines. Metzl writes without nostalgia for the bygone days of Freudian psychoanalysis and without contempt for psychotropic drugs, which he himself regularly prescribes to his patients. What he urges is an increased self-awareness within the psychiatric community of the ways that Freudian ideas about gender are entangled in Prozac and each new

generation of wonder drugs. He encourages, too, an understanding of how ideas about psychotropic medications have suffused popular culture and profoundly altered the relationship between doctors and patients.

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Editorial Review

From The New England Journal of Medicine

Prozac on the Couch is a creative, intelligent, and provocative challenge to the notion that biologic psychiatry has replaced psychoanalysis as the dominant therapeutic model in psychiatry. Tracing treatments for depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses from the 1950s to the early 21st century, psychiatrist Jonathan Metzl builds an argument that "the history of Freud is specifically the history of Prozac" by showing how "psychoanalytic themes and psychoanalytic notions of gender keep showing up in representations of biological psychiatry." He does so through closely reading representations of psychotropic medications in popular news and fashion magazines from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s (e.g., *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Cosmopolitan*), in psychopharmaceutical advertisements from professional journals from 1964 to 1997 (e.g., the *American Journal of Psychiatry* and *Archives of General Psychiatry*), and in selected works of American literature between 1990 and 2002 (dubbed the "Prozac narratives"). These periods correspond roughly to the heydays of psychiatry's three American "wonder drugs" -- Miltown, Valium, and Prozac. The book has six chapters. In the first, Metzl develops the intriguing premise that the shift from psychoanalysis to biologic psychiatry was, and is, incomplete, by exposing "those pieces of the prior regime that remain imbricated after the shift . . . [and that] can govern the form and function of the regime that takes its place." Metzl constructs his argument with a fascinating compendium of print images that show how both psychoanalytic and biologic constructs are often similarly engaged in "maintaining traditional gender roles" and how the uses of "psychotropic medications often redeploy all the cultural and social baggage of the psychoanalytic paradigm." In case readers need a refresher in the various theoretical orientations psychiatry has embraced during the past half-century, Metzl traces the "alleged demise" of psychoanalysis from 1955 through the present. In subsequent chapters, he explores the "marriage of mothers and medications" through the rhetoric of Miltown, America's "first psychopharmacological wonder drug," showing how, in the visual construction of patienthood in advertising, a woman's sanity was connected to her marital status, and mental illness was "presented as a threat to the nuclear family." His analysis of Prozac as depicted in popular memoirs such as Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (New York: Riverhead, 1995) and in Persimmon Blackbridge's novel *Prozac Highway* (Vancouver, B.C., Canada: Press Gang, 1997) is particularly illuminating. In his conclusion, Metzl challenges psychiatry to "expose its own synapses and dendrites with the same vigor with which it has exposed those of its patients . . . [and to] become more aware of its own, uniquely biased spectator positions." *Prozac on the Couch* is an intriguing and challenging work standing at the intersection of medicine, history, culture, and "gender studies." Metzl -- who holds a Ph.D. in American studies and directs the Program in Culture, Health, and Medicine at the University of Michigan, in addition to seeing patients -- writes for an audience willing to think beyond traditional categories and to engage in serious cultural criticism. His arguments cross academic disciplines, and readers who are used to traditional medical discourse may struggle at times with Metzl's theoretical perspectives and language, which draw heavily from cultural studies. But for those who are looking for fresh perspectives, and who are willing to have their assumptions questioned, this book will be a real education and a pleasure to read. *Delese Wear, Ph.D.*

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Review

"*Prozac on the Couch* is a totally fresh and mind-altering work of medical history and cultural criticism that challenges us to think about psychiatric medications in ways that are both uncomfortable and inspiring: in

other words, in ways that challenge us to change our points of view about what we swallow and why."
(Lauren Slater, author of *Prozac Diary*)

"Jonathan Michel Metzl's book is an original and insightful exploration of the lively cultural meanings he locates in the spaces between the person, the psychotropic drug, the physician, and the neuroscientist."
(Emily Martin, author of *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*)

"*Prozac on the Couch* combines a bold thesis regarding the persistence of Freudian categories of sexual difference amid the paradigm shift in psychiatry, documentation spanning professional and popular discourses, and lively, clear prose."

(Mari Jo Buhle author of *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*)

"[A] plea for a truce between those who deal with the mind and those who study the brain. . . . [An] engrossing history of psychiatry over the past 50 years. . . ."
(*The Economist*)

"*Prozac on the Couch* is a creative, intelligent, and provocative challenge to the notion that biologic psychiatry has replaced psychoanalysis as the dominant therapeutic model in psychiatry. . . . [A]n intriguing and challenging work standing at the intersection of medicine, history, culture, and 'gender studies.' . . . [F]or those who are looking for fresh perspectives, and who are willing to have their assumptions questioned, this book will be a real education and a pleasure to read."

(Delese Wear *New England Journal of Medicine*)

"Jonathan Metzl's provocative book . . . takes on biological psychiatry's master narrative . . . and persuasively, with wit and elegance, deals it a devastating blow. . . . Sparkling insights abound in *Prozac on the Couch*. . . . [A] delightful, challenging book that will be of great interest to historians of psychiatry and, more generally, to anyone interested in the intriguing gender politics of psychopharmacology."

(Elizabeth Lunbeck *Isis*)

From the Back Cover

""Prozac on the Couch" combines a bold thesis regarding the persistence of Freudian categories of sexual difference amid the paradigm shift in psychiatry, documentation spanning professional and popular discourses, and lively, clear prose."--Mari Jo Buhle, author of "Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Slowik:

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Willette Bickel:

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Kathryn Sheffield:

The ability that you get from Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs will be the more deep you excavating the information that hide inside the words the more you get considering reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to understand but Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs giving you buzz feeling of reading. The copy writer conveys their point in a number of way that can be understood through anyone who read the idea because the author of this publication is well-known enough. This particular book also makes your vocabulary increase well. So it is easy to understand then can go with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We recommend you for having that Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs instantly.

Luis Poole:

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