

Book review by Irit Shimrat

Tranquil Prisons: Chemical Incarceration under Community Treatment Orders
By Erick Fabris. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, 240 pp., \$29.95 paper, \$60.00 cloth (CAN)

Tranquil Prisons makes a strong case against the use of coerced psychiatric treatment in the community. Combining reviews of existing literature with his own research findings – and liberally spicing that mix with stories from his own and others' experiences on the receiving end of coerced treatment – Fabris convinces the reader that the very concept of community treatment orders (CTOs) is deeply flawed.

Fabris sympathetically recognizes that society considers it necessary to make mental patients stay on neuroleptic (“antipsychotic”) drugs, primarily in order to protect the public from potential violence. But he counters this by citing research clearly indicating that “mental illness” is not in fact correlated with violence. Nor does he shy away from pointing out the harmful effects of psychiatric drugs – including causing people to become violent.

Fabris emphasizes the importance of narrative – of story – in understanding the social construction of “madness” and “mental illness.” It is very telling that he homes in on the stories of service providers' experiences and observations, on the grounds that people on the receiving end are often too drugged-out to provide coherent accounts. Perhaps the most striking statements from the former group is made by a legal clinic worker, speaking of refugees who become mental patients: “. . . the fact that people are perceiving our mental health system as a form of torture that's worse than the one they escaped should concern people.” Indeed, it should.

One of the most intriguing and unique ideas in this book is that of going crazy on purpose: “I embraced madness one year later . . . I needed to make the experience my own again after hiding it away in the hospital ward . . . I used sensory and sleep deprivation . . . and other methods to destabilize my orderliness” (p. 33). Repeatedly, and delightfully, Fabris argues that madness need not be construed as defectiveness: “We are ‘sound’ even when/if we make little sense” (p. 199).

Fabris rightly criticizes the mental health system for “naming, overpowering and silencing” those it purports and intends to help, both in institutions and – especially by the use of CTOs – in the community. Referring to the coerced drugging that is CTOs' main component as chemical incarceration, he quotes Erving Goffman's insightful statement that “Drugs control the nervous system to restrict bodily movement and communication with others, which are two basic conditions of incarceration” (p. 6). This truth lies at the heart of Fabris's reasoning and of the problem with CTOs – and, indeed, with psychiatric treatment as it currently exists.

I would have liked to see the book begin with Fabris's gorgeous narrative of his own madness, which he has chosen to relegate to the second chapter (e.g., "But this change, this chance at meaning, in the cracks and lines, is just logical error to the ambulance man" [p. 13]; "To be pushed down naked, told my wonderment was a disease, was too much" [p. 33]). The poetry and urgency here immediately personalize the book, viscerally connecting reader and author. But of course Fabris knows his colleagues as I do not; perhaps such an opening, which I'd have found so intriguing, would have been off-putting to them.

Conversely, I found myself repeatedly distracted and annoyed by such instances of academic jargon as the use of the term "the body" to connote "the person" – particularly when what is being said about "the body" clearly refers to someone's actions or words, or to what most of us would call the mind. (A particularly jarring example is the phrase "psychotic and other body types" [p. 48]). I presume that such constructions must be perfectly acceptable in the halls of academe – but Fabris does state right off the bat that "This book is written for people who have been imposed upon or sometimes feel disordered or disoriented" (p. vii). That being the case, it would behoove him not to impose disordered/disorienting phraseology on us.

My only other criticism is a wish for more thorough editing and proofreading. For example, the footnote on page 8 refers to "the proper noun Mad" – "mad," whether capitalized or not, is an adjective, not a noun.

All that notwithstanding, I found *Tranquil Prisons* entirely gripping, and consider it an important piece of the effort to bring common sense and compassion into discussions of psychiatric treatment, coercion, and more constructive ways of looking at "mental illness."

Irit Shimrat, who describes herself as an escaped lunatic, is the author of Call Me Crazy: Stories from the Mad Movement (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1997). In the late 1980s and early 1990s she edited Phoenix Rising: The Voice of the Psychiatrized and co-founded and coordinated the Ontario Psychiatric Survivors' Alliance, as well as presenting two programs on CBC Ideas: "Analyzing Psychiatry" and "By Reason of Insanity."*

* see <http://www.psychiatricsurvivorarchives.com/phoenix.html>