Our Necessary Shadow: The Nature and Meaning of Psychiatry
Tom Burns. Pegasus, $27.95 (384p) ISBN 978-1-60598-570-1

Burns, professor of social psychiatry at Oxford and a practicing psychiatrist, looks at psychiatry and mental illness as a subjective phenomena, yet nonetheless “real” to its subjects and participants. By examining the shadow that psychiatry and psychotherapy cast on other aspects of culture, he reveals the practices to be historically contingent—part of, though frequently at odds with, other branches of medicine—as well as how they have come to define our concepts of personhood, daily life, our legal system, and our view of fate. The book begins as a history of the treatment of mental illness, from humor and asylum to the “discovery of the unconscious,” psychoanalysis and shell shock, and the early, grisly medical cures (insulin wards and malarial treatment of syphilis) of psychiatry. Burns puts forth no defense of psychiatry’s past sins, but is confident in the value of the newly open, evidence-based treatment of mental illness that typifies 21st-century care.

While his early chapter on seeking psychological care seems misplaced, Burns’s focus on psychology’s operations in our larger culture is provocative, well-researched, and well-suited to interested lay readers looking for insight into medicine and the mind. Agent: Felicity Bryan (U.K.) (June)

The Reef: A Passionate History: The Great Barrier Reef from Captain Cook to Climate Change

This lively, detailed, and unabashedly Eurocentric history of the interaction between navigators, castaways, scientists, and the Great Barrier Reef tells a story of place through the biographies and first-person accounts of the notable individuals who have encountered the Reef. McCalman (Darwin’s Armada) delivers the facts with a deft blend of Robinson Crusoe–like adventure tale, hearty sea shanty, and society gossip rag. The dozen stories start with James Cook’s 1770 “discovery” of the massive coral structures around New Holland, move through William Kent’s 1880s research projects as the first “scientist-photographer” (which gave the Western world an understanding of the Reef’s beauty), and reach the present day as coral expert Charlie Veron tells the Royal Society that greenhouse gases are killing the reefs—the canaries of climate change—and acidifying of the oceans. While McCalman briefly acknowledges Aboriginal Australians—as travel companions on a BBC-funded recreation of Cook’s voyage—the indigenous point of view is notably missing, with the native people of Australia only described through outsider reports as noble savages or fearsome can nibals. Though McCalman successfully brings his exploring protagonists from the historical record into life, the choices of stories this piece tells lean unnecessarily toward colonialist exoticism. B&w illus. (June)

With Malice Toward Some: Treason and Loyalty in the Civil War Era

The dissolution of the Union in 1861 was shocking to most Americans, forcing a public discussion about what constituted treason: how was it expressed in words and actions and who decided what it was? As abolition and the debate over the expansion of slavery began to tear the country apart in the 1850s, Americans contemplated how certain kinds of speech might be classified as treasonous, and historian Blair (Cities of the Dead) found that local residents played a large role in influencing charges and arrests. Emotions ran high in 1859 when John Brown was hanged for treason against the state of Virginia because the slave revolt he had led resulted in the deaths of five people. During the war, the Union government struggled to decide whether spying, sabotage, or defecting to the Confederate Army were dangerous enough to constitute treason. How could these actions be sufficiently policed to protect the country? Even at the end, when Confederate soldiers were paroled after Appomattox, legal definitions of treason gave way to the more practical politics of reconciliation and reconstruction. Though Blair mercifully shies away from the complexities of constitutional theory, his emphasis on demonstrable treason is heavily steeped in politics and law, making for slow reading. (June)

The Inevitable City: The Resurgence of New Orleans and the Future of Urban America

After Hurricane Katrina, most of Tulane University lay paralyzed and underwater. Cowen, president of Tulane at the time, led a charge to dramatically refashion the university, and the surrounding city, with a mission of social service and responsibility. In forthright and upbeat fashion, Cowen details the development of that mission, and the sometimes-controversial renewal plan he helped steer with civic and business leaders. Facing unprecedented devastation and a shockingly slow and inadequate government response, Cowen and company were forced to make “hard call[s]” that often met with resistance from, among others, members and representatives of an understandably suspicious population of poor, mostly African-American residents. The university soon restructured and mobilized its academic departments, such as the School of Architecture, bringing services and expertise to blighted areas of the city, and encouraging undergraduates (via a new academic requirement) to actively engage neighborhoods through the Center for Public Service. Part memoir, part leadership study, the book offers 10 principles for rebuilding American cities. Given Cowen’s central role in the regeneration of New Orleans, this is a bird’s-eye view that’s sure to appeal to policy makers, activists, and corporate managers. In addition, Cowen acknowledges historical patterns that feed both the city’s character and the frictions it faces as a diverse but still unequal society. (June)

A Literary Education: and Other Essays

Epstein follows up Essays in Biography (2012) with another collection of provocative and beguiling thought pieces. The six selections grouped under “Memoir” comprise an informal autobiography that takes the author from his Chicago boyhood to his current life as an obit-reading
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