



Madness: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)

Andrew Scull

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Madness is something that frightens and fascinates us all. It is a word with which we are universally familiar, and a condition that haunts the human imagination. Through the centuries, in poetry and in prose, in drama and in the visual arts, its depredations are on display for all to see. A whole industry has grown up, devoted to its management and suppression. Madness profoundly disturbs our common sense assumptions; threatens the social order, both symbolically and practically; creates almost unbearable disruptions in the texture of daily living; and turns our experience and our expectations upside down. Lunacy, insanity, psychosis, mental illness - whatever term we prefer, its referents are disturbances of reason, the passions, and human action that frighten, create chaos, and yet sometimes amuse; that mark a gulf between the common sense reality most of us embrace, and the discordant version some humans appear to experience.

Social responses to madness, our interpretations of what madness is, and our notions of what is to be done about it have varied remarkably over the centuries. In this Very Short Introduction, Andrew Scull provides a provocative and entertaining examination of the social, cultural, medical, and artistic responses to mental disturbance across more than two millennia, concluding with some observations on the contemporary accounts of mental illness.

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