

## Book Review:

### *Our Necessary Shadow: The Nature and Meaning of Psychiatry.*

Tom Burns. UK: Penguin Books 2013. ISBN 978-1-846-14465-3

Que-ping Yang<sup>1</sup>, Man C.M. Tsui<sup>2</sup> & Guofu Zhang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wuxi Mental Health Center, Wuxi Tongren International Rehabilitation Hospital, Nanjing Medical University

<sup>2</sup> Hong Kong Institute of Technology

Correspondence: Guofu Zhang, Wuxi Mental Health Center, Wuxi Tongren International Rehabilitation Hospital, Nanjing Medical University, China. Tel: 852-9324-4185. E-mail: zhangguofuwx@163.com

Received: January 18, 2016

Accepted: January 25, 2016

Online Published: February 29, 2016

doi:10.20849/ajsss.v1i1.26

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v1i1.26>

Psychiatry is a “special” specialty (comparing with other specialties) in a sense that it raises queries and even criticisms on its existence and hence diagnosis and interventions.

As a medical specialty, psychiatry heavily adopts medical model in its interpretations and practices. Not surprisingly, healthcare practitioners (including doctors, nurses and occupational therapists) play a leading role in this field. From the reviewer’s observation, there are conflicts between healthcare practitioners and social care practitioners on how to help the needy people. Nevertheless, those unresolved issues have not yet been discussed or debated openly and sufficiently. The healthcare practitioners and social care practitioners just keep focusing on their own frame of reference without trying (either deliberately or subconsciously) to understand the perspectives of the other.

The reviewer was excited when coming across the book written by Tom Burns (a professor of social psychiatry at Oxford University) which is “the first attempt in a generation to explain the full subject of psychiatry” by having thoroughly re-thought the nature and meaning of psychiatry. This book is decided to be reference-free and all of the nearly 300 pages are about the author’s own critiques and insights from his 40 years of field experience. Its two parts are on “how modern psychiatry developed” and “the questions psychiatry asks about us and the questions we ask of it” respectively. For instance, the topics include “the rise and fall of psychoanalysis” and “the first medical model (between the wars)” in Part One, and “is psychiatry trustworthy?” and “new treatments but old dilemmas” in Part Two.

Instead of merely a factual summary of the history, the development of modern psychiatry is thoroughly reviewed in Part One. It forms a solid foundation for readers to understand and analyze the reflections and critiques made in Part Two. Nevertheless, it would be even better if there are some abstract/introduction and summary/concluding remarks respectively in both parts so that readers can grasp the flow, essence and standpoints more easily.

In the epilogue, the author reiterates his belief that psychiatry is absolutely not simply about the brain but the issue that human beings try not to touch on. This highlights what the title “our necessary shadow” means.

Perhaps it is the point that ‘psychiatry is more than a science’ but “a practical response to the reality of the mental illnesses” which makes it so sophisticated that it constantly arouses debates on its origins as well as directions of future development. Indeed, debates are constructive if people involved are passionate to openly and heartedly realize the discrepancies of the fundamental ideologies and then dissect the corresponding pros and cons with reference to the ever-changing world.

This book serves as an opportune initiative to start off the unattempted yet crucial dialogue among the various disciplines in the field (at least including healthcare and social care practitioners) on the related old yet unresolved issues. While psychiatry is the “necessary shadow” as what the author argues, it is also an “unnecessary shadow” from any productive discussion. It does not need to reach a conclusion (actually hard and unrealistic) but at least a start of inspiring dialogue. Only then will the needy people genuinely benefit.

**Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).