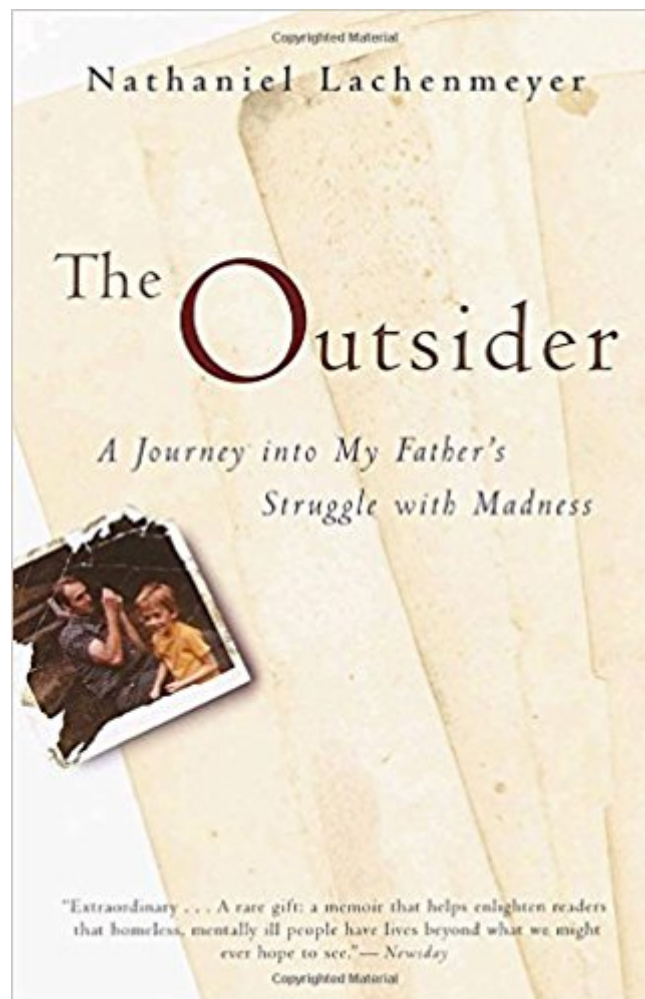




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The Outsider: A Journey Into My Father's Struggle With Madness



Synopsis

The Outsider is an unsentimental yet profoundly moving look at one family's experience with mental illness. In 1978, Charles Lachenmeyer was a happily married professor of sociology who lived in the New York suburbs with his wife and nine-year-old son, Nathaniel. But within a few short years, schizophrenia—a devastating mental illness with no known cure—would cost him everything: his sanity, his career, his family, even the roof over his head. Upon learning of his father's death in 1995, Nathaniel set out to search for the truth behind his father's haunted, solitary existence. Rich in imagery and poignant symbolism, The Outsider is a beautifully written memoir of a father's struggle to survive with dignity, and a son's struggle to know the father he lost to schizophrenia long before he finally lost him to death. The Outsider is a recipient of the Kenneth Johnson Memorial Research Library Book Award and is the winner of the 2000 Bell of Hope Award, presented annually by the Mental Health Association of Philadelphia to honor a significant and far-reaching contributions benefiting those facing the challenge of mental illness. •

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Customer Reviews

Writing with compassion and candor, Lachenmeyer seeks to understand his father, Charles, a professor of sociology and a complex puzzle of a man who slowly lost his agonizing fight with schizophrenia and died in 1995. Drawing upon the older man's letters to explore his emotional demons, Lachenmeyer discloses that his father's condition deteriorated when Charles was dismissed from Hunter College in 1975 and his mother died later that same year. Although Charles

remained optimistic that he could reverse his fortunes, even after losing several other teaching jobs in New York colleges in the 1970s and 1980s, his condition precipitated the loss of his home, marriage and child just two months short of his 38th birthday in 1981. Lachenmeyer admits to his own confusion and bitterness when confronted with Charles's odd behavior, which caused him to sever all ties between them in 1989, when the author was 20. In one letter to his embattled father he wrote: "I cannot live in your world; you cannot live in mine." Eventually, Charles became obsessed with an evil government conspiracy to enslave the world, working briefly as a part-time cab driver before living on the streets. Through interviews with family, friends, former colleagues and medical personnel, Lachenmeyer constructs a heartrending portrait of a man whose emotional illness eventually robbed him of everything, counterbalanced in part by the author's gradual understanding of the plight of homeless people, who are often the victims of madness and misfortune. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

It was only after his long-estranged father died that Lachenmeyer discovered he had been living on the streets. This book is a son's attempt to reconstruct his father's downward spiral from a promising career as a sociology professor to his death as a schizophrenic vagrant who had been in and out of mental hospitals and eluding Burlington, VT, police. First-time author Lachenmeyer wrestles with the guilt of having cut off communication with his father and with his fears about his own sanity. In a style reminiscent of Oliver Sacks, he wonderfully evokes the pathetic beauty of his father's attempts to retain his dignity and hope as he struggled with inner torments and the indifference of others. The book adds no new facts about schizophrenia or mental health policy and thus isn't a necessary purchase for small collections. But it is highly recommended for larger public and academic libraries.-Mary Ann Hughes, Neill P.L., Pullman, WA Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Anyone searching enlightenment in dealing with a schizophrenic family member would benefit from this book. Lachenmeyer's journey to understand his father's struggle not only portrays his father's struggle with madness, but also Lachenmeyer's response to that struggle. Mental illness affects the entire family on many levels; Lachenmeyer's account reveals as much about a healthy person's response to the suffering of a loved one as it does about the suffering person's struggle. Carefully and painstakingly researched, beautifully rendered, the result is a clear story of Lachenmeyer's father's journey through years of homelessness . It is a heartfelt, loving tribute to his father that is very healing and informative for a reader who relates to Lachenmeyer's experience.

This is a well written, thoughtful investigation of a man's descent into the depths of mental illness. It is written by the son of the mentally ill man, after his father's death and is an attempt by the son to understand how a brilliant professor with a PhD in sociology could have wound up homeless in the frigid environs of a Vermont winter. Pieces of the puzzle of his life after the breakup of the father/son relationship are put together with painstaking delicacy, and obvious pain on the part of the author, whose childhood companion and beloved 'Dad' turned into an object of fear and mystery. With the benefit of maturity, the son considers how his father survived and how he must have felt, experiencing all the heartbreak and suffering and terror of his decline. It helps him to examine letters his father sent him over the years, which he kept, as if holding onto a piece of the father he once knew and lost. His obvious regret over having severed relations with his father when the illness was in flower is acknowledged through this attempt to reconstruct his father's life during the "lost years". The only flaw that I would mention is the author's inference that his father's mental illness was somehow brought on by the way he was raised, in a strict, Christian-Scientist home by a strange, paranoid mother. Although this was no doubt an unhealthy environment to grow up in, it overlooks the explanation that severe mental illness such as paranoid schizophrenia is the result of "broken brain" and cannot be caused by good or bad parenting. Still, the book is a touching tribute and a realistic portrayal of the tragedy of schizophrenia, which has been called "the cruelest illness of all".

Poignant tribute to a father who suffered from mental illness. It is heartfelt, smart, and revealing story of the journey a son takes in coming to terms of the loss of his father. Mental illness is a subject that still does not have the kind of support and compassion as other illness. He sheds light on how our society does not educate nor create the right resources on how to face this debilitating disease that affects us all.

THE OUTSIDER brought the pain and the struggles of Charles Lachenmeyer to life. Charles was a brilliant sociology professor who gradually was transformed into a victim of paranoid schizophrenia. Even at his lowest points, he kept trying, and he kept believing in humanity. In one letter to the author, he wrote, "No matter how adverse the circumstances--and mine have been adverse--there is never any reason to give up . . ." This book breathes life into a person with mental illness, and it brings understanding. It left me in tears and with a deep respect for Charles.

How many times have we looked at homeless people on the street and wondered how they got

there? I've thought about it many times, because my own father was homeless when he died. When I searched for books about people with homeless parents, Lachenmeyer's "The Outsider" was the only one I could find. I expected a revealing look at what it's like to have an indigent parent - what I didn't expect was for it to be so touching, well-written, and kind. I hope others read it and have more compassion for the nameless people haunting our streets. All of them have family somewhere.

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Nathaniel Lachenmeyer's account of his father, Charles, was a warmly written personal account of a man's rapid deterioration from a brilliant, young sociologist to a homeless vagabond. I knew Charles Lachenmeyer very well when I was a student. He's was a very attractive, rebellious young sociologist, who was caught between the American dream of middle class suburbia and rebelliousness. He was a breath of fresh air in the staid world of academia. Unfortunately, his mental problems prevented him from a successful career as an academic sociologist. I think that his son is quite successful at capturing much of this. Although Nathaniel was too young to recollect his father's academic career, he was quite successful at visiting Chuck's graduate department and obtaining valuable recollections that his former professors had of him. As a sociologist, I would have liked a little more of this. All in all, I found this to be a brilliantly told story of a son's attempt to connect to his past through the story of his father's downward trajectory.

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