



**Review of *The Outsider: A Journey into My Father's Struggle with Madness*<sup>\*</sup>**

by

Karen Lutfey  
University of Minnesota

Book: *The Outsider: A Journey into My Father's Struggle with Madness*

Author: Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

Publisher: Broadway Books, New York

Year: 2000

How does a highly intelligent, suburban-dwelling, happily married father of one, who has a promising career as a sociology professor, come to occupy a world of poverty, homelessness, and institutionalization? Six years after breaking off contact with his schizophrenic father, Nathaniel Lachenmeyer discovers that his father has died, alone, of heart disease in a decrepit studio apartment in Burlington, Vermont. Furthermore, it is evident that the elder Lachenmeyer, Charles, was living in extreme poverty at the time of his death, and had been transient and hospitalized for extended periods in the preceding years. This discovery prompts the author to retrace the events of his father's life during the fourteen years since his parents divorced, focusing especially on the latter period during which they were out of contact and Charles' circumstances clearly deteriorated. The result of this search is the story of a son's struggle to understand the mechanisms by which he and his father moved apart and the world his father lived in as a sufferer of schizophrenia.

Lachenmeyer's memoir is an insightful and clearly genuine inspection of his life and the impact of severe mental illness on his family. At times, his writing is captivating in its simplicity and clear depiction of intense emotion, as when he describes his mother telling his father she wants a divorce: "He sits down on the bottom step and covers his face with his hands...I am crying. My mother is crying. My father is crying. Each of us knows it is over; our family has died." Lachenmeyer also effectively portrays his own role in the family's trajectory by straightforwardly describing his own flaws and speculating about the role his confusion, intense emotion, arrogance, and selfishness as a young man may have played in his father's homelessness and eventual demise. The multidimensionality of his character contributes significantly to understanding the ways schizophrenia impacts entire networks of people, as opposed to corroborating a model in which the mentally ill person suffers alone and in a social vacuum.

Furthermore — a unique feature for a memoir — the author has clearly done an impressive amount of research to reconstruct the events of the last fourteen years of his father's life. He marshals multiple types of information collected from diverse sources, including records from police, courts, and two mental hospitals in Vermont and New Hampshire. He also conducted interviews with an impressive array of people who knew his father at various stage of his life, including relatives, college professors, graduate school advisors, employers, friends, police officers, judges, and bartenders and food service providers who knew his father when he was transient.

These sources of information allow the author to triangulate his own knowledge with that of people who had contact with his father at other times in his life. Lachenmeyer presents this information in combination with other primary sources, including letters from their eight years of correspondence after Charles left home, a collection of answering machine tapes with messages recorded by his father during periods in which he was highly delusional, and newsletters Charles distributed during the same time period to a large group of subscribers describing a CIA conspiracy designed to control his thoughts. By integrating these various types of information, Lachenmeyer presents a coherent, well-documented, and authoritative timeline of events from his father's childhood in the 1940s until his death in 1995. [end page 277]

Ultimately, however, the author relies on this extensive research precisely because he had very little first-hand interaction with his father after Charles moved out of the house; Lachenmeyer could not have written this memoir without the support of other people's accounts of his father's life. This distance in their relationship generates a speculative quality in the narrative, which, in turn, has implications for the larger project and the audiences for whom it is most appropriate.

First, Lachenmeyer ties together several component of his research with speculation about what his father was thinking and how various events may have impacted his schizophrenia. For example, he asserts that Charles's interaction with his own mother, a strict adherent of Christian Science, created a situation in which he was forced to question his own understandings of reality, and that these interactions laid an early groundwork for his later struggles to discern reality when he was delusional. Later, Lachenmeyer draws repeated attention to Charles's doctoral research on double-bind theory (a social psychological theory of interaction) and his work in a mental hospital as efforts to understand his own familial origins and their impact on him. While these interpretations are corroborated by the author's mother (former wife of Charles), and they are useful and interesting points, Lachenmeyer pursues them throughout the book at the cost of minimizing their analytic leverage. He notes, in fact, that double-bind theory is "no longer widely accepted as an explanation for what causes schizophrenia...most researchers are in agreement that (it) is caused by an interaction of neurological and environmental factors" (p.73). In light of this information, the author's subsequent focus on these early events of Charles' life leave unanswered questions about the neurological basis for Charles's problems, as well as the impact of later life changes such as job changes, relocations, socioeconomic upheaval, and divorce. To the degree that Lachenmeyer is trying to understand how and why schizophrenia disrupted his family, his speculation and relatively singular focus on Charles's mother and his early research preclude discussion of other, perhaps important, topics. Perhaps more important for the author, however, is the fact that his story is much more compelling in the places where he relies on his own memories and personal experiences with his father; it is the strength of his personal accounts that draws attention to the weaknesses of the reconstructed portions of the history.

Second, there is a striking absence of details concerning the day-to-day difficulties that arise in families wherein a member is severely mentally ill. One of the primary things to be gained from in-depth examination of a single case is a detailed account of the graphic, ongoing frustrations and interactional challenges that characterize severe mental illness. Lachenmeyer is unable to provide this type of information, especially during the last six years of his father's life when they were not in contact. While it is possible that this was a stylistic choice on the part of the author, the reconstructed history he presents is rather mechanistic and generalized; it clearly illustrates how mental illness can lead to unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, but these changes are distilled, with few exceptions, from the firsthand experiences of a family torn apart by schizophrenia. This issue is particularly important because it calls attention to two additional questions which are central to the book and yet remain unclear: Is Charles Lachenmeyer essentially more similar to, or more different from, other people with schizophrenia? By extension, who is the

intended audience of this book?

In an Author's Note at the beginning of the book, Lachenmeyer presents a three-page description of schizophrenia, including its causes, symptoms, treatments, and costs to society. Based on this introduction, I assumed his primary goal was to provide an extended case description of how schizophrenia affected his father, himself, and their family relations. In many ways, however, Lachenmeyer presents his father as atypical of mentally ill people and systematically avoids elaborating unattractive characteristics that normally accompany serious mental illness. For example, he revisits on several occasions the topic of Charles's intelligence and education, and how, at times, he was able to present himself in a coherent and impressive way in the midst of an otherwise delusionary period. In this way, he was sometimes able to secure employment and avoid hospitalization. Implicit in Lachenmeyer's description of these events is the idea that his father was unique in these abilities. While Charles was [end page 278] certainly a demographic outlier to the general population in terms of his educational level, and likely in his intelligence as well, this tendency to transition in and out of lucidity is relatively common among people with schizophrenia. Based on the author's presentation of these events, it is unclear whether we are to understand Charles's experiences as typical or extraordinary of schizophrenia. If it is the former, that issue remains vague in the text, obscuring points that might be made about schizophrenia more generally. If it is the latter, the relevance of schizophrenia becomes ambiguous.

Another example is Lachenmeyer's point that his father only stole food on two occasions, despite his prolonged homelessness. This characterization of Charles as particularly honest implicitly compares him with other people who might be more inclined to steal food under similar circumstances. Again, it is unclear whether the author views his father as relatively typical or relatively exceptional among other people with schizophrenia. If Lachenmeyer intends the former, the connection between his father and the population of people with schizophrenia is unclear; if he intends the latter, the book is less instructional about mental illness and more a narrative about his particular family. It remains ambiguous, however, whether these aspects of the presentation are stylistic choices or artifacts of the reconstruction of Charles's history — is the story told this way because Lachenmeyer avoids a negative characterization of his father, or simply because they had too little interaction for him to tell that story?

On the last page of the book, Lachenmeyer writes, "If I could have one wish, it would be that my father were still alive and that there would have never been any reason for me to write this book." This quotation suggests that the primary impetus for the book is Charles's death, not his schizophrenia. While mental illness is intimately tied to Charles's homelessness and death, it seems by the end of the book that mental illness is secondary to Lachenmeyer's interest in understanding his father's life more broadly. This theme of familial struggle stands, albeit subtly, in contrast to the focus on mental illness presented at the beginning of the book and in its title.

Of course, the issues I describe here are primarily differences in emphasis, which are salient to audiences — both academic and lay — in varying ways. For example, many aspects of Lachenmeyer's work would be of interest to scholars of family, deviance, and social psychology. Most generally, this book tells a story of family trauma and how individual members attempt to manage discrepancies and distortions within the family while simultaneously attending to an outside world untouched by their drama. Lachenmeyer's emotional journey, while treated as a subtext in the book, provides a firsthand account of struggling to manage his identity as the son of a severely mentally ill man — in many ways, his story could have been told by a child touched by other types of deviance such as substance abuse, domestic violence, or incarceration. Family scholars interested in absent family members (e.g., soldiers missing in action, traveling salesmen), for example, might also find parallels in Lachenmeyer's experience of dealing with a father absent

due to mental illness. Additionally, this work provides a clear description of how mental illness can lead to homelessness, which is useful to audiences interested in stratification, urban studies, or mental disorder. Ultimately, however, these connections are tethered to aspects of Lachenmeyer's work that are secondary to his focus on reconstructing the events of his father's life. While it is useful to have a detailed articulation of how mentally ill people may experience massive changes in their socioeconomic status, *The Outsider* is not as strong a resource for understanding schizophrenia as some other pieces based on more direct, sustained interactional experience with a mentally ill family member (cf. *Angelhead: My Brother's Descent into Madness* by Greg Bottoms, Crown Press, 2000). It remains, however, an impressively-researched and introspective detailing of one person's struggle to understand events that fragmented his family and shaped his identity.

#### ENDNOTE

\* Direct correspondence to Professor Karen Lutfey, University of Minnesota, Department of Sociology, 909 Social Sciences Building, 267-19<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455 (E-mail: [lutfey@soc.umn.edu](mailto:lutfey@soc.umn.edu)). Professor Lutfey's research interests include social psychology, mental illness, medical sociology, and deviance. [end page 279]