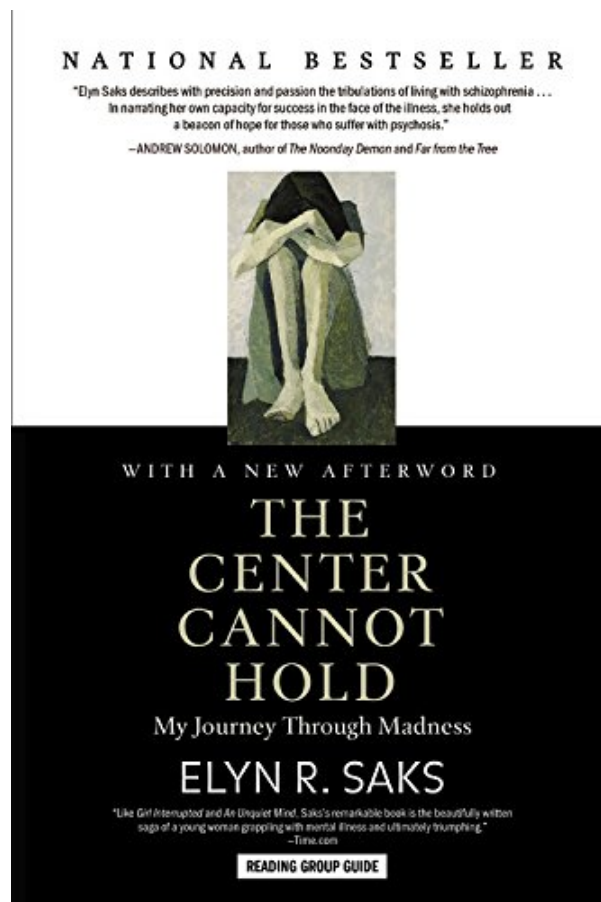


THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD: MY JOURNEY THROUGH MADNESS BY ELYN R. SAKS



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NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"Elyn Saks describes with precision and passion the tribulations of living with schizophrenia . . . In narrating her own capacity for success in the face of the illness, she holds out a beacon of hope for those who suffer with psychosis."

—ANDREW SOLOMON, author of *The Noonday Demon* and *Far from the Tree*



WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

My Journey Through Madness

ELYN R. SAKS

"Like *Girl Interrupted* and *An Unquiet Mind*, Saks's remarkable book is the beautifully written saga of a young woman grappling with mental illness and ultimately triumphing."
—*Time*.com

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From Publishers Weekly

In this engrossing memoir, Saks, a professor of law and psychiatry at the University of Southern California, demonstrates a novelist's skill of creating character, dialogue and suspense. From her extraordinary perspective as both expert and sufferer (diagnosis: Chronic paranoid schizophrenia with acute exacerbation; prognosis: Grave), Saks carries the reader from the early little quirks to the full blown falling apart, flying apart, exploding psychosis. Schizophrenia rolls in like a slow fog, as Saks shows, becoming imperceptibly thicker as time goes on.- Along the way to stability (treatment, not cure), Saks is treated with a pharmacopeia of drugs and by a chorus of therapists. In her jargon-free style, she describes the workings of the drugs (getting med-free, a constant motif) and the ideas of the therapists and physicians (psychologist, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, cardiologist, endocrinologist). Her personal experience of a world in which she is both frightened and frightening is graphically drawn and leads directly to her advocacy of mental patients' civil rights as they confront compulsory medication, civil commitment, the abuse of restraints and the absurdities of the mental care system. She is a strong proponent of talk therapy (While medication had kept me alive, it had been psychoanalysis that helped me find a life worth living). This is heavy reading, but Saks's account will certainly stand out in its field.

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THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD: MY JOURNEY THROUGH MADNESS BY ELYN R. SAKS PDF

Elyn R. Saks is an esteemed professor, lawyer, and psychiatrist and is the Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Law School, yet she has suffered from schizophrenia for most of her life, and still has ongoing major episodes of the illness. *The Center Cannot Hold* is the eloquent, moving story of Elyn's life, from the first time that she heard voices speaking to her as a young teenager, to attempted suicides in college, through learning to live on her own as an adult in an often terrifying world. Saks discusses frankly the paranoia, the inability to tell imaginary fears from real ones, the voices in her head telling her to kill herself (and to harm others); as well the incredibly difficult obstacles she overcame to become a highly respected professional. This beautifully written memoir is destined to become a classic in its genre.

The title is a line from "The Second Coming," a poem by William Butler Yeats, which is alluded to in the book.

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Review

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138 of 145 people found the following review helpful.

Other Than That, It Was An Uneventful Flight

By Andrew Schonbek

What's the "that" referenced above? The answer is provided in the previous sentences, "Over and over, I replayed the previous five years, trying frantically every single moment to keep the demons in my head from invading the plane and savaging the other passengers. From time to time, I considered asking the flight attendant whether she would mind if I jumped out the emergency door".

This is a book about living with schizophrenia, and it is a great book, remarkable in many respects.

Elyn Saks, endowed professor at USC's Gould School of Law, has written a gripping memoir of a life spent grappling with and eventually coming to terms with this disease.

Here's her description of what she was up against, "Schizophrenia rolls in like a slow fog, becoming imperceptively thicker as time goes on. At first, the day is bright enough, the sky is clear, the sunlight warms your shoulders. But soon, you notice a haze beginning to gather around you, and the air feels not quite so warm. After a while, the sun is a dim light bulb behind a heavy cloth. The horizon has vanished into a grey mist, and you feel a thick dampness in your lungs as you stand, cold and wet, in the afternoon dark."

Or said another way, "Consciousness gradually loses its coherence. One's center gives way. The center cannot hold. The "me" becomes a haze, and the solid center from which one experiences reality breaks up like a bad radio signal. There is no longer a sturdy vantage point from which to look out, take things in, assess what's happening. No core holds things together, providing the lens through which to see the world, to make judgments and comprehend risk".

The juxtaposition of the uncanny on the mundane is stark and arresting. Saks writes, "Completely delusional, I still understood essential aspects of how the world worked. For example I was getting my schoolwork done, and I vaguely understood the rule that in a social setting, even with the people I most trusted, I could not ramble on about my psychotic thoughts. To talk about killing children, or burning whole worlds, or being

able to destroy cities with my mind was not part of polite conversation".

In the end this tenacious woman overcomes and is able to lead a full and successful life. However, she remains aware of a razor's edge that just won't go away, "My brain was the instrument of my success and my pride, but it also carried all the tools for my destruction".

Highly recommended.

124 of 135 people found the following review helpful.

A memoir with appeal to patients, family, the psychiatry community, and the public as a whole

By Jessica Lux

Elyn R. Saks is an accomplished USC professor of law and psychology. She is working on her PhD in psychiatry, has dual appointments in academia, graduated with honors from Yale Law School, and was a Marshall scholar at Oxford. The publication of her memoir of a life with schizophrenia and acute psychosis marks the first time that her colleagues in the professional world will know of her diagnosis. For decades, Saks lived as a mental patient (the Woman of the Charts), as a shy woman with a small circle of close friends, and as a high-achieving academic who protected her psychological privacy at all costs. Upon learning that she was writing a memoir, friends wondered if Elyn would be reduced to "that schizophrenic with a job" when her story hit the bookshelves.

Saks will never be "that schizophrenic with a job," and she has made a fantastic contribution for the psychiatry community, for patients suffering from social stigma, for anyone who interacts with those who have a diagnosed psychological disorder, and for fans of memoirs. Saks writes candidly about the workings of her mind, which made her such a success in philosophy, law, and psychology, but which also crippled her with delusions and hallucinations. She had a formative experience at a 1970's drug rehab camp (after a minor indiscretion with marijuana) which taught her that drugs were bad and any obstacle could be overcome with sheer force of will. For a schizophrenic, of course, medicine is an absolute necessity, and the disorder can not be overcome with will. Nevertheless, Saks spent decades trying to do just that, fighting her doctor's prescriptions at every turn, secretly reducing her dosages, until finally settling into her career in California with a low dosage of modern medicine and on-going talk therapy. She has stated that the more she accepted her illness, the less her illness defined her, because she was no longer fighting the rip currents of schizophrenia, and instead moving through them.

Saks writes, "While medication had kept me alive, it had been psychoanalysis that helped me find a life worth living." Her illness became full-blown at Oxford, during which time she had to take time off from school (fortunately, she was performing independent study) to go through psychoanalysis. Saks makes profound observations about the differences between mental treatment in the U.K. and the U.S.--restraints are almost never used in the U.K., and certainly not as a punishment for misbehavior, as they are frequently used in the U.S. Also, doctors at Oxford made recommendations, not orders, on patient treatment, and the right of the patient to refuse was a sacred cornerstone. In her legal studies back stateside, Saks focused on the right on patients to refuse medication, as well as the effectiveness and humaneness of using restraints on mental patients. While working as a legal scholar, Saks went through her own personal struggles to find solid psychoanalysis and create a support system in case of psychotic episodes.

For years, schizophrenia was regarded as a grave life sentence. Mothers were even blamed for creating schizophrenic children. Saks notes that while there are many case studies and folk stories about successful people with bipolar disorder, the stories about accomplished schizophrenics are few. Thank you, Ms. Saks, for giving us this story of hope and triumph.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent book

By Ordinary Consumer

It is estimated that one in 100 people have a form of schizophrenia. This book sheds light on these people and other people with mental health problems. If everyone read this or a book like this we would be more sympathetic, empathetic, and kinder to those suffering from any form of mental illness. It is also helpful to clinicians to know how to help people with mental illness's in a more productive way. Thank you Elyn for your candor and for the courage it took to write this book.

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