

The Vegetarian

By Han Kang

Portobello Books, 2015, £7.99, pb, 160 pp.
ISBN 9781846276033

This short novel, winner of the Man Booker International Prize 2016, is translated from Korean and tells the story of Yeong-hye, a young woman in modern day South Korea. It is a fascinating and thought-provoking narrative that starts with Yeong-hye choosing to become vegetarian. This seemingly unremarkable and straightforward choice turns out to be nothing of the sort – vegetarianism is almost unheard of in Korea but, more importantly, Yeong-hye is on the verge of serious mental illness. Yeong-hye's stance is challenged by all of those around her, but she remains steadfast. It transpires that becoming vegetarian is the prodromal seed of an all-encompassing psychosis which will take Yeong-hye on a journey from being vegetarian to believing that she is vegetal in nature and therefore food is superfluous to her needs.

Clinicians will be acquainted with the somewhat perplexing process by which this intricate and emotive story develops. Information appears not in neat chronological order but in a tangle that needs some work to unpick. Yeong-hye's story is told in three parts. We hear first from her husband, then her brother-in-law and finally her sister, all the while following the unravelling of Yeong-hye's internal and external world, in a tale that deepens in complexity and darkness as it unfolds. Interspersed italicised monologues allow us a brief glimpse of Yeong-hye's muddled (and muddling) mind. By portraying thoughts that mingle with dreams and memories in a way that confuses the reader as to what is real and what is not, Kang elegantly conveys something of Yeong-hye's mental state. We don't hear much about Yeong-hye's premorbid adult life, other than through her husband, who says she was 'ordinary' and functioned to his liking. We can, however, sense the weight of the oppression she is subject to and guess that although becoming vegetarian may have marked an important transition point in her illness, it is unlikely to have been the beginning of it. The husband's account of Yeong-hye's condition reveals, through the lens of his own narcissism, a shocking lack of concern for his wife beyond her role in satisfying his immediate needs. He views Yeong-hye as an object and a possession, and this is most apparent in his remorseless and matter-of-fact description of raping her. A meal with her husband's boss tells us something about society's inflexible expectations and demonstrates that the lack of compassion experienced by Yeong-hye is multifaceted. We see Yeong-hye's father in action and learn a little about her upbringing; as a result, the degree to which she has been repressed and forced to endure throughout her life becomes clearer, and the powerful, subversive resistance enacted through her illness begins to make sense.

The second part of the book is equally disturbing and leads us to the brother-in-law, a less than successful video-artist who becomes obsessed with Yeong-hye's pre-pubertal appearance and whose paraphilic behaviour uncomfortably exposes her vulnerability.

In the final part of the book, several years later, we join Yeong-hye's sister In-hye as she visits her in a psychiatric hospital. In-hye now faces the repercussions of preceding events and the resulting family disintegration. We hear more

about the sisters' childhood and the abuse which they experienced; we learn that In-hye continues to suffer her own anguish as a corollary and that she in some way envies her sister's position.

This is an astonishing book. Strange, surreal and beautifully written. The idea that people could find themselves surrounded by such brutal inhumanity and lack of connection that they reject their current existence and instead opt for transformation into a life form that does not involve thought or feeling is indescribably sad, but probably not beyond imagination for most psychiatrists. Readers will find that they must piece together the jigsaw of Yeong-hye's life, and as hard as they try, the image is not clear and the final pieces can never be found – an experience to which most of us surely relate.

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The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire: Health, Law, Freedom, and Society

Edited by J. Harold Ellens and Thomas B. Roberts
ABC-CLIO, 2015, \$73.00, hb, 423 pp.
ISBN 9781440839702

The resurgence of psychedelic research has opened up a new realm of possibilities in consciousness research. However, public policy surrounding the use of psychedelics has struggled to acknowledge that they may be effective therapeutic treatments or tools for enhancing self-awareness and exploring consciousness. Highlighting the need for redress, this anthology argues that current international public policy is not scientifically or culturally informed and is thus divorced from the empirical evidence that is supposed to inform its construction and implementation.

The book examines the complex policy issues surrounding psychedelic-based healing modalities and calls for an urgent shift in policy regulating the research and application of psychedelic substances. At its core, it is a scathing criticism of legal frameworks and regulatory policies that control the use of and research on psychedelics, and goes so far as to suggest that current structures and mechanisms impose a status quo of consciousness, thereby preventing people from fully enacting their right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience. At the very least, policy makers and ethicists need to give due attention to medical and psychotherapeutic research on psychedelics and the role they have in facilitating direct spiritual experiences. This includes acknowledging the transformative effect that experience may have on the self, as well as the right of all people to freedom of religion, thought and conscience.

Any book that rates these substances highly as a connection between the individual, society and the human race

as a whole will find its detractors. That being said, *The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire* presents a strong case for the notion that psychedelics have transcended seemingly outdated legal, academic, cultural and spiritual paradigms. Although – by the editors' own admission – this volume is by no means definitive, it will undoubtedly prove to be a lightning rod in the academic community. With its focus on research and policy that maximise the benefits of the use of psychedelics, reduce the potential dangers of misuse and remove impediments to achieving these ends, it is inevitable that this book will be a catalyst for lively and robust debate. Recommended to academics and researchers in various fields, including psychology, psychiatry, anthropology and the arts, this work should challenge many long-held assumptions about these fascinating substances.

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Spirituality and Narrative in Psychiatric Practice: Stories of Mind and Soul

Edited by Christopher C. H. Cook, Andrew Powell and Andrew Sims.

RCPsych Publications, 2016, £30.00 (£27.00 for College members), pb, 204 pp.
ISBN: 9781909726451

Telling stories is probably as old as human culture. Our ancestors used storytelling to entertain, instruct and make sense of their experience. A psychiatric history, when well taken, should be more than a fact-finding mission to provide a diagnosis and treatment plan. To be effective in providing treatment, helping with healing and promoting recovery, we need to know what matters to our patients. This includes the realm of belief and practice encompassed by the broad term spirituality. A book then that explores both spirituality and narrative is welcome.

Spirituality and Narrative in Psychiatric Practice, like the term spirituality, is broad in its scope. On the one hand, we

have agnostic atheist Jeremy Holmes describing in his chapter "Meaning without 'believing'" the spiritual nature of mentalising. As he puts it, 'an intensely practical and loving pathway to spiritual aliveness'. On the other hand, there are writers from a theistic background, such as mental health chaplain Beaumont Stevenson, who considers how God or a higher power may manifest in the everyday stories of patients, providing a greater frame of reference than the story of self that often limits a human's potential. The early chapters give a range of perspectives on narrative. With characteristic clarity Andrew Sims indicates how through careful psychopathological appraisal from attending to the patient's story, it is possible to distinguish between spiritual experiences and psychiatric symptoms. Later chapters explore narrative and spirituality in a wide variety of themes such as affective disorders, offending behaviour, psychosis and the end of life.

The subtitle of the book is *Stories of Mind and Soul* and it is the stories that really shine. To preserve anonymity some are composite – made up from several people's histories or typical examples – and therefore feel somewhat artificial; nevertheless, they engage the reader and serve didactic purposes well. Others are the words of individuals who have been willing to share their stories, and these have a greater ring of authenticity. In particular, the chapter by Jo Barber stands out as an honest and moving account of someone who has struggled with mental health problems and for whom spirituality has been important – at times problematic but often a resource that has supported her ongoing journey of recovery.

As the editors note in their concluding chapter, pressures on service delivery may get in the way of the time and space to listen well to patients' narratives. However, for good psychiatric practice, not taking a good history is a short-cut we can ill afford. This work is a timely reminder of the importance of the fundamental tool of psychiatry and a welcome enjoiner to attend to what is significant to our patients.

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