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Asylum: The Magazine for Democratic Society

Phil Verden
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Asylum was first launched in 1986 at 50p per issue but free to 'inmates'. Influenced by the anti-psychiatry movement it captured and capitalized on the zeitgeist that was the evolving consumer/survivor/ex-patient/activist movement and the promise of a revolution in mental health care. The first edition included an interview with Ronnie Lange and a discussion of the democratic psychiatry movement in Italy. The revolution may have been fairly subdued but a stream of volunteers over the years kept Asylum alive and a virtual flag staff for a range of disparate organizations and individuals from within and outside psychiatry including the critical psychiatry, hearing voices and paranoia networks, mind survivors and mad pride. Asylum has come to represent is the tolerance of many voices, differing viewpoints, and a commitment to self-help and mental health service reform.

In 2007, Terry McLaughlin, the executive editor of many years stood down due to illness and passed away. Asylum has just been re-released in digital and paper form. It is distributed by PCCS Books (www.pccs-books.co.uk), purveyors of a range of interesting and inexpensive mental

health therapy literature (my wallet was considerably lighter after visiting). The new edition with the theme of paranoia continues the long tradition of mixing articles of biography (his and her-stories), critical commentary on the theme from professionals as well as survivors/activists, book reviews and news from activist groups. As one might expect, the writing styles of articles are mixed, with the scholarly interspersed with passionate rants and political statements. One can't argue with people's stories, which are often engaging and liberating. Commentary is frequently critical of oppressive, dismissive or arrogant psychiatric practices, arguing instead for sensitive, empathic, engagement and choice in care and treatment. These are hardly radical ideas today, and while space continues to be given to 'railing against' the dark, more space is given to holding up a candle in terms of celebrating self-help and community.

It is difficult to know what the future holds for a magazine such as Asylum, given that the Internet now offers unprecedented access to ideas critical of psychiatry and affords opportunities to share stories and connect with others in more intimate and immediate ways. Social movements are now rapidly built and promoted via Internet networking technologies and not magazines. However, I enjoy the visceral feeling of a magazine, the opportunity to turn a page, to scribble on the margins, to read it on a bus (thus making a political statement) and to recycle it to a friend. This magazine is colourful and well produced with a mix of interesting and provocative articles that I think will appeal to, or more importantly, will provoke discussion between service users, carers, professionals and activists alike.

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