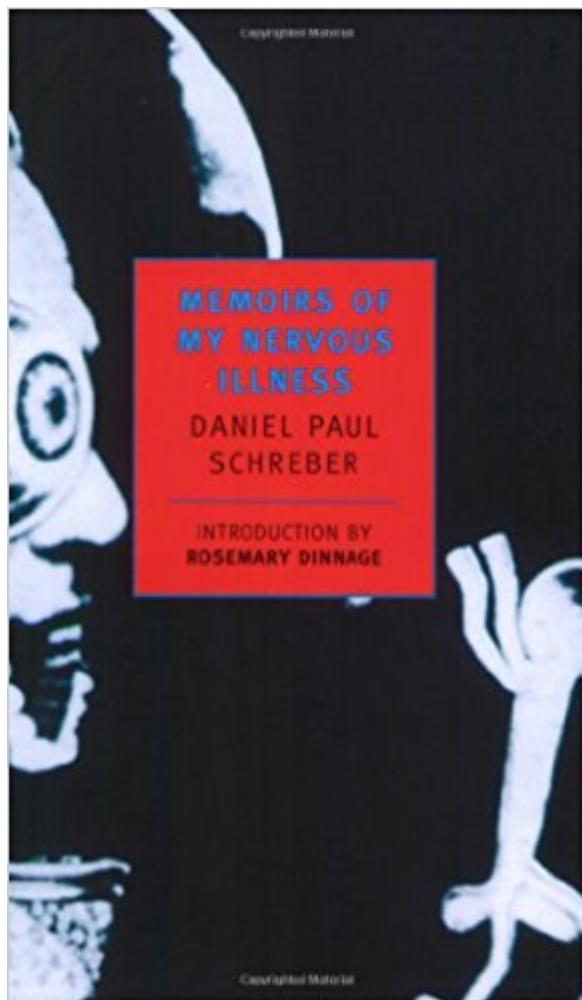


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Memoirs Of My Nervous Illness (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

In 1884, the distinguished German jurist Daniel Paul Schreber suffered the first of a series of mental collapses that would afflict him for the rest of his life. In his madness, the world was revealed to him as an enormous architecture of nerves, dominated by a predatory God. It became clear to Schreber that his personal crisis was implicated in what he called a "crisis in God's realm," one that had transformed the rest of humanity into a race of fantasms. There was only one remedy; as his doctor noted: Schreber "considered himself chosen to redeem the world, and to restore to it the lost state of Blessedness. This, however, he could only do by first being transformed from a man into a woman...."

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Customer Reviews

Shortly after the death of Daniel Paul Schreber, Sigmund Freud used his (Schreber's) memoirs as the basis for a fantasy of his own. Everyday readers are lucky that Schreber wrote down so much of what he saw, heard and felt during his many years in German mental asylums, for his own observations are far more artistic and harrowing than anything Freud ever wrote. In this book, Schreber takes us into his world--the world of the genuine schizophrenic. He writes of the "little men" who come to invade his body and of the stars from which they came. That these "little men" choose to invade Schreber's body in more ways than one only makes his story all the more harrowing. At night, he tells us, they would drip down onto his head by the thousands, although he warned them against approaching him. Schreber's story is not the only thing that is disquieting about

this book. His style of writing is, too. It is made up of the ravings of a madman, yet it contains a fluidity and lucidity that rival that of any "logical" person. It only takes a few pages before we become enmeshed in the strange smells, tastes, insights and visions he describes so vividly. Much of this book is hallucinatory; for example, Schreber writes of how the sun follows him as he moves around the room, depending on the direction of his movements. And, although we know the sun was not following Schreber, his explanation makes sense, in an eerie sort of way. What Schreber has really done is to capture the sheer poetry of insanity and madness in such a way that we, as his readers, feel ourselves being swept along with him into his world of fantasy. It is a world without anchors, a world where the human soul is simply left to drift and survive as best it can.

To begin with, the reader should be forewarned that what the author suffers from is not the idiomatic English "nervous illness," or mild neurosis, but a fundamentally different way of seeing the world, stated best by the author at the beginning of Chapter 5: "Apart from normal human language there is also a kind of nerve language of which, as a rule, the healthy human being is not aware." The book's profundity and the author's depth of insight are such that, after reading a few pages of the first chapter, one is reminded of nothing so much as Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*: "Souls' greatest happiness lies in continual reveling in pleasure combined with recollections of their human past."....But, after this, the book becomes as disturbing as Proust is essentially soothing. For the author feels himself utterly isolated from other men, not even deigning to recognize them as men at all but as "fleeting-improvised-men" which "creates a feeling in me at times as if I were moving among walking corpses." (Ch. 15) What I found so disturbing about the elaboration of the author's viewpoint and recounting of his tribulations in the asylum is that there is something in his viewpoint that rings essentially true: We do not and can not know even those closest to us on the deep spiritual or "nerve language" level the author exists on in perpetuum. It is this essential truth combined with the author's matter-of-fact, almost cheery, tone that made reading this work such a strange experience for me.

One of my most cherished books in my library. This book is easy to misunderstand, in its intent and its revelation. I cannot even claim any authoritative knowledge, so this is only an interpretation. I think that the history of horrible and sadistic abuse at the hands of his father and the fact that his elder brother became mentally ill as well and then committed suicide only overshadows the importance of Schreber's experience and message. Knowing his history allows the reader to be dismissive about the authenticity of his experience. And that is exactly what one should not do. What

should strike the reader is how "sane" Schreber comes across as with the rational, almost objective and detached, and lucid way he writes about his illness and experience in the book. He is most definitely in control of his cognitive functions and he proves this to be the case by being freed from institutionalization and returning to the bench. That said, he is still utterly convinced of the truth of his experience, and while able to function quite normally, he refuses to see his experience as delusional, that is, he still believes in the authenticity of his experience and his religious and metaphysical claims. It was this point that intrigued me the most. Now, if you were to be institutionalized for paranoid delusions, you would not be released if you maintained that your delusions were real and not delusions (at least, the doctors would not recommend you leaving even if you checked in voluntarily). How is the reader to take the paradox that Schreber presents: is he truly mentally fit by the end of the book or is he still ill due to his insistence upon the reality of his delusions?

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