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TITLE INFORMATION

MY FLUORESCENT GOD

A psychotherapist confronts his most challenging case--his own

Guppy, Joe

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BOOK REVIEW

With illuminating clarity, a psychotherapist describes how he suffered a paranoid psychotic mental breakdown as a young man and how he recovered.

In 1979, when Joe Guppy was 23, he returned home to Seattle from a trip to Mexico and went insane. Suddenly, his perceptions underwent terrifying alterations. His family seemed demonic, and the most ordinary things were menacing: A Dire Straits song's "crackling blue guitar solo cuts through my brain like a wire egg slicer." At the hospital, he was diagnosed (he discovered later) as suffering psychotic depression with paranoid features. After six months of inpatient treatment, medications and therapies, Joe was ready to move out to a group home and, finally, to take up normal life. In his debut work, Guppy, now a psychotherapist in private practice, writes with astonishing clarity about his mental processes and the perceptual shifts involved both in going mad and in getting better. In paranoia, the misplaced significance that can fester is oddly similar to religious thinking: "God speaks in mysterious ways, in signs to be read by those with eyes to see"—signs like the doorknobs being too high or a staircase taking an extra turn. Guppy is particularly insightful in showing how paranoid delusions can be hard to give up, as when he asks himself whom he'd rather interact with: "An overburdened nurse, annoyed and bored...[or a] wily demon?...To the nurse I am one more warehoused loser. To the demon I am a special person, deserving special treatment." As he progresses, Guppy is able to develop a more nurturing spirituality than the terrifying, punitive Catholicism of his childhood, especially after some deeply touching moments of feeling close to and loved by God. He learns that he can control his thoughts, reactions and interpretations and convincingly shows the limitations of one-size-fits-all therapeutic approaches versus the growth and healing to be found in talk therapy and by connecting with other patients.

Beautifully written, honest, enlightening, hope-giving and valuable—essential for anyone interested in or struggling with mental health issues.

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