

Modern Day Bedlam: Upstairs in the Crazy House

In a heartening tale of hope and triumph, Pat Capponi relates her experiences in Channon Court, a boarding house for released psychiatric patients. Unlike most of her neighbours, Capponi was able to transcend the harsh realities of post-hospital life and has gone on to try to ameliorate them.

***Upstairs in the Crazy House* by Pat Capponi.
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By Sara Borins

Today, one seldom calls the dwelling for psychiatric patients a "crazy house." This term is associated with another era—a less enlightened time when the mentally ill were hastily classified as insane and left abandoned in large mental hospitals or private madhouses. And "crazy houses," like Bedlam, the popular name for the infamously appalling conditions of London's Bethlehem Royal Hospital, were to have disappeared with the advent of modern psychiatry.

Pat Capponi's tale of survival, *Upstairs in the Crazy House*, breaks ground by challenging the conception that the lives of psychiatric patients have dramatically ameliorated since the days of Bedlam. Crazy houses still exist. Ironically, however, the crazy house is not a clinical psychiatric ward nor mental hospital. It is the aftermath of hospital life, the boarding houses where psychiatric patients go after being released from treatment. Capponi's story chronicles a modern-day madhouse, a Bedlam we all forget.

Her upbringing in Montreal, dominated by an unspeakably abusive father, left Capponi suicidal. There followed a series of hospitalizations in Montreal and a move to Toronto where, once again, after a mental breakdown, she found herself in a psychiatric ward. When she was released, Capponi arrived at Channon Court, a boarding house for ex-psychiatric patients, in Toronto's Parkdale.

"It's Not Good to be in the Hospital Too Long"

Her transition from hospital to boarding house was an overwhelmingly difficult adjustment. For years, Capponi was told that she had to be locked up. Physically, she grew comfortable with her controlled and routine life. Capponi's hospital was her home. Its staff and patients were her siblings. In the clean and caring medical environment, she was offered meals (as well as tobacco rations) on a daily basis. Capponi became used to the idea that she was where she belonged.

Capponi challenges her readers to imagine being set in such a pattern and then, one day, hearing that "it's not good to be in the hospital too long." She demands we consider what it is like to be sent out into the world with nothing other than the address of a boarding house and the possible comfort that a welfare worker might soon be by. Capponi's words for the released patient who faces such prospects are "Good Luck." All of a sudden, the taste of swallowing a concept called freedom is little other than medicinal.

At Channon Court, Capponi found herself living with seventy ex-psychiatric patients. Her story is their story, how she relates to the madness of those around her. We are introduced to characters like the clever and spoiled Andrea, who "had chosen to go mad to destroy her family for whatever obscure wrong haunted her." When Andrea's mother no longer calls for her at Channon Court, she throws away her clothing. In the dead of winter, Andrea parades barefoot, up and down King Street, wearing only a sheet.

Upstairs in the Crazy House is also the story of Debbie, a gangly ill-favoured apparition in over-sized men's trousers and a stained shirt, brought to Channon Court one afternoon by a determinedly cheerful social worker. Capponi paints a vivid picture of discovering Debbie in the basement only a few hours after her arrival. There Debbie sat in the dark by a man with pants down around his thighs and a large, uncapped bottle of PineSol at his foot. "With one hand," Capponi describes, "she flailed in the direction of the gulps, struggling against him now, looking for the bottle which he held just beyond her reach."

Between the tragedies, Capponi sprinkles her chronicle with humorous vignettes. She tells the tale of Antony, who never receives any calls, but is convinced of his need for a personal phone. After it is installed, Antony spends hours handing out his phone number to anyone in the house who will take it. When no calls come, he resorts to telephoning Capponi at the Channon office, where she had begun to work for the landlord. Antony insists he has to telephone Capponi continually to see if anyone is trying to contact him. The police, he claims, are on his trail. Later, when Antony is arrested for trying to rob a bank (he attempts a stick-up by pointing his finger under his shirt) he is hardly upset. Finally, he is able to prove his point to Capponi.

An Activist Renewed

What rings clear throughout the book is that although Capponi lives at Channon Court, she is an outsider. Capponi's story is one of hope and triumph because she is able to transcend her environment. Within

a few short months of her arrival, Capponi starts working in the Channon Court office and caring for its residents. What seems to give Capponi her strength is that she arrived at Channon Court already a social activist.

In Montreal, at high school and university, Capponi had helped fight for change when she saw change was needed. She recalls standing up for people who were nervous about the consequences of standing up for themselves. Interestingly, Capponi claims she was motivated by a need to "expiate a lot of the guilt I carried, guilt shared by most abused children for not preventing the violence the six of us suffered."

At Channon Court, Capponi did not share most other residents' intense level of psychiatric malaise. She did, however, share their inadequate living conditions. Capponi recounts her shock of first walking into the dining room, where seventy residents are crammed into an excruciatingly small space. The scene is out of a crazy house. Capponi watches the woman beside her first sniff at her food and mutter suspiciously then slash the man across from her with a fork. At the next table, a man pours tea over his plate before spooning the soggy mixture into his mouth.

Channon Court was a place with no calendars or clocks. It was a place where many days were swept away by the profusion of psychotropic medication lying around everywhere. It was a squalid environment where bulbs were bare and rooms had no locks. In these conditions, the residents had no desire to bathe, no desire to hope. There was no night or day, all activity merged into one chaotic form.

Capponi has not only exposed this forgotten Bedlam, she has also improved it. After leaving Channon Court, she became the driving force behind the city's Parkdale Working Group on Roomers and Boarders. Through Capponi's efforts, the government was alerted that something had gone wrong with their policy of emptying the back wards of psychiatric hospitals. As a result, groups such as the Supportive Housing Coalition were established, made up of front-line workers. Capponi also served on the advisory committee to the City of Toronto's Mayor's Action Task Force on Discharged Psychiatric Patients which led to the Gerstein Crisis Centre where she is now based.