

Synopsis

Elyn R. Saks is an esteemed professor, lawyer, and psychiatrist and is the Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Law School, yet she has suffered from schizophrenia for most of her life, and still has ongoing major episodes of the illness. *THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD* is the eloquent, moving story of Elyn's life, from the first time that she heard voices speaking to her as a young teenager, to attempted suicides in college, through learning to live on her own as an adult in an often terrifying world. Saks discusses frankly the paranoia, the inability to tell imaginary fears from real ones, the voices in her head telling her to kill herself (and to harm others); as well the incredibly difficult obstacles she overcame to become a highly respected professional. This beautifully written memoir is destined to become a classic in its genre. The title is a line from "The Second Coming," a poem by William Butler Yeats, which is alluded to in the book.

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Customer Reviews

In "The Second Coming," Yeats writes: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is

loosed upon the world." From this evocative poem comes the title of this searing "journey through madness," by the brilliant and courageous Elyn Saks. The author had an idyllic childhood in a loving and prosperous Miami home. However, when she was eight, she began to experience intense compulsions, night terrors, and most frightening of all, a feeling that her mind "was like a sand castle with all the sand sliding away." "Sights, sounds, thoughts, and feelings [didn't] go together." When she was twelve, she stopped eating properly and lost an alarming amount of weight. Elyn feared that something was terribly wrong with her, and she did her utmost to hide her condition from her friends and family. When she was a teenager, Saks experimented briefly with drugs, and this brought on more unpleasant symptoms. Things deteriorated further when she entered Vanderbilt University, where "schizophrenia [rolled] in like a slow fog," and she began to neglect her personal hygiene, forgetting to bathe and change her clothes. As a college freshman, she miraculously earned top grades while she struggled to keep her hallucinations at bay. Her "illness was beginning to poke through the shell" that helped her separate fantasy from reality. As long as the shell was intact, she could fool the world. When the shell broke down, so did she. In "The Center Cannot Hold," Saks describes a see-saw existence in which she excelled at her studies while trying to keep her mental illness from disabling her.

What's the "that" referenced above? The answer is provided in the previous sentences, "Over and over, I replayed the previous five years, trying frantically every single moment to keep the demons in my head from invading the plane and savaging the other passengers. From time to time, I considered asking the flight attendant whether she would mind if I jumped out the emergency door". This is a book about living with schizophrenia, and it is a great book, remarkable in many respects. Elyn Saks, endowed professor at USC's Gould School of Law, has written a gripping memoir of a life spent grappling with and eventually coming to terms with this disease. Here's her description of what she was up against, "Schizophrenia rolls in like a slow fog, becoming imperceptively thicker as time goes on. At first, the day is bright enough, the sky is clear, the sunlight warms your shoulders. But soon, you notice a haze beginning to gather around you, and the air feels not quite so warm. After a while, the sun is a dim light bulb behind a heavy cloth. The horizon has vanished into a grey mist, and you feel a thick dampness in your lungs as you stand, cold and wet, in the afternoon dark." Or said another way, "Consciousness gradually loses its coherence. One's center gives way. The center cannot hold. The "me" becomes a haze, and the solid center from which one experiences reality breaks up like a bad radio signal. There is no longer a sturdy vantage point from which to look out, take things in, assess what's happening. No core

holds things together, providing the lens through which to see the world, to make judgments and comprehend risk". The juxtaposition of the uncanny on the mundane is stark and arresting.

Elyn R. Saks is an accomplished USC professor of law and psychology. She is working on her PhD in psychiatry, has dual appointments in academia, graduated with honors from Yale Law School, and was a Marshall scholar at Oxford. The publication of her memoir of a life with schizophrenia and acute psychosis marks the first time that her colleagues in the professional world will know of her diagnosis. For decades, Saks lived as a mental patient (the Woman of the Charts), as a shy woman with a small circle of close friends, and as a high-achieving academic who protected her psychological privacy at all costs. Upon learning that she was writing a memoir, friends wondered if Elyn would be reduced to "that schizophrenic with a job" when her story hit the bookshelves. Saks will never be "that schizophrenic with a job," and she has made a fantastic contribution for the psychiatry community, for patients suffering from social stigma, for anyone who interacts with those who have a diagnosed psychological disorder, and for fans of memoirs. Saks writes candidly about the workings of her mind, which made her such a success in philosophy, law, and psychology, but which also crippled her with delusions and hallucinations. She had a formative experience at a 1970's drug rehab camp (after a minor indiscretion with marijuana) which taught her that drugs were bad and any obstacle could be overcome with sheer force of will. For a schizophrenic, of course, medicine is an absolute necessity, and the disorder can not be overcome with will. Nevertheless, Saks spent decades trying to do just that, fighting her doctor's prescriptions at every turn, secretly reducing her dosages, until finally settling into her career in California with a low dosage of modern medicine and on-going talk therapy.

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