

The Poetry of Madness

T. M. Luhrmann

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Yesterday I met a young man so interesting but so disturbing that he has haunted my thoughts and it has occurred to me that he may be of interest to you who write on the darker side of fiction. I am an anthropologist, and among other pursuits (magic, spirituality) I study madness. Today I spent a couple of hours with someone who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Most people who meet criteria for this diagnosis hear voices. That is, they hear people speaking the way you would hear my voice if we were talking: as if from outside, with their ears, as audible as any ordinary voice. This may prompt their development of the strange beliefs—delusions—for which schizophrenia is known. People who hear voices may believe that the CIA has implanted computer chips in their dental fillings, or that the government is beaming down rays on their head, because it is the way they come to account for their sense of being followed and talked about and above all known. They often have the shocking experience that their minds are not longer private, because the voices intuit and broadcast their thoughts. This was something the young man said. He hated the fact that his mind was not his own any more. The voices got to his thoughts before he did, and told him what his thoughts had said.

For the young man, the voices came on the wings of other sound. When he was driving, he would hear voices from the other cars. When the room was noisy, individual sounds would break off and form themselves into voices. When the room was quiet, he heard less, but a muffled echo would become a man in the other room. When he moved his leg, it could speak to him. When his stomach grumbled, it became an angry reprimand. The voices were like the aftertrace of color images, as if he waved his hand upon the air and left language in its wake. Horrifying language: words which sneered and drawled. He knew these voices were symptoms of an illness, but they sounded real to him, and he could not dismiss the possibility that they were people. No one knows why people hear voices, but at least part of the story is that those who do read patterns into ambiguity, one reason that people hear voices in cars and find God on the bus. But I have never before met a man who could thrum his fingers into voice and feel that as he moved the air became dense with words.

The Ted K Archive

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