



Book review: All Sky, Mirror Ocean - A Healing Manifesto

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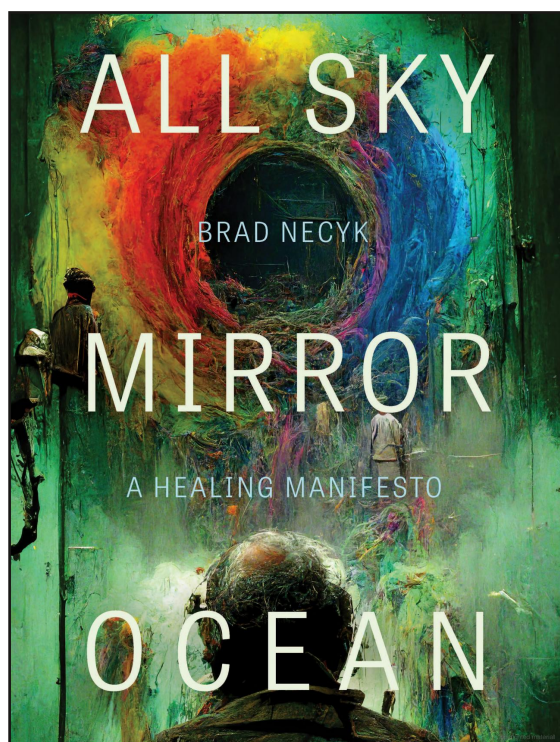
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All Sky, Mirror Ocean- A Healing Manifesto

Publisher: University of Alberta Press
Author: Brad Necyk

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This book is an experience, a journey, an awakening to a different way of looking at health and illness - both physical and mental illness. I was curious about it - a poetry book with a stunning other-worldly cover and an intriguing title, but when I started reading it, I suddenly wasn't sure that I wanted to continue. I wasn't sure that I'd make it through the 264 pages of text (not counting the pages that listed references).

I needn't have worried. The stories draw you in. They demand an immersion into the poet-author's world, they convince you to embrace vulnerability and to travel to the edge of the abyss; and, having come this far, they further push [tempt] you to summon the courage to stare into the abyss.

Let me try and explain in the poet's own words, given that this moving, complex

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exploration is their lived experience through chronic physical illness, through bipolar affective disorder, through recovery, and through love. It is an autoethnography, and a love story, but it is just as much “an act of creation” for “knowledge generation” - or creation-as-research (pages 139, 235, 236). This book is a must read for all of these reasons. It is meant for healthcare professionals with an inclination towards art, poetry, and philosophy, but also for caregivers without a leaning towards the humanities, because:

- Everyone experiences strife and struggle, but some of us may mask up, may bury deep the memory of those troubling things, maybe in a misguided attempt to protect ourselves, but that risks us losing our empathy. We are in the busy-ness of healing. This book may open us up to a different way of healing
- “This is what the world needs right now. New ways to Be.” (page 139);
- “all art is the act of healing and is a fallen field note from that activity.” (page 251)
- “We make art, but we also make trust, create it. Trust to sense and feel together, gaze into CANCER, lay with pain, hurt, loneliness, suffering. Story it otherwise.” (page 143)
- “Stories have the power to transform our world. Art creates stories.” (page 241)
- Want a different world? Tell a different story.” (page 60)
- “The kinds of stories we tell ourselves about illness...we can see here how much it matters what stories we use to explain our worlds.” (page 250)

Necyk invites us into his story, and also shares with ethics, humility, and gentleness, the stories of others - those with mental illness, or with head and neck cancer, or Indigenous, vulnerable, and historically

marginalised people:

“I now sense trust, trust to tell tough stories, stories we don’t always want to hear. Stories that aren’t my own, but handed to me like a jewel.” (page 124)

These stories remind us how patients, care providers, care givers, and entire communities - everyone - carries the responsibility to listen carefully to stories of pain and struggle, and to hold them in ways that honor and benefit the storyteller.

Necyk’s storytelling style is fragmented, non-linear, and as unpredictable as life or as illness. The strife of existing in and traveling through such an uncertain universe is candidly illustrated:

“...resurrection, illumination,
death,
resurrection, illumination,
death,
resurrection, illumination,
madness, fire,
resurrection, dreaming,
incarnation, hallucination,
suffering, compassion...” (page 177)

He writes about depression:

“The depths of one’s mind turned in on itself. The most concealing concealed you can be from Being.” (page 173)

“No pain, but ALL PAIN.” (page 173)

“BLACK COLOR, NONE NUMBER” (page 262)

While mania is:

“ALL COLOR, INFINITY.” (page 263)

The strength of this lyrical and philosophical book for me is that Necyk doesn’t profess to have answers and solutions. Instead, he makes you witness and feel, and then he offers the “jewel” that is his deep reflection

on and his learning from strife. I was particularly taken by the concept of Strife, Unconcealment, Being, Knowing, and the Abyss:

“Suffering is the cause to bring about its end.” (pages 47, 238)

“Both joy and suffering push us to Know ourselves, through their conflict, through their strife.” (page 47)

“~~You~~”, where the strikethrough signifies “...an erasure of you, or the self; the unravelling, the emptiness that is unconcealed after becoming nobody, ego death, awakening, or enlightenment. It is the purest you.” (page 257)

“You come to Know through strife and what greater strife is there than to sleep with life and death in the same bed.” (page 224)

“Sometimes you create art, sometimes not. Then, sometimes, you are creating yourself—to erect and dissolve You, to Become, to Heal.” (page 46)

Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s and Timothy Morton’s concept of an abyss:

“...a vast space, a psychic landscape, occluded by not unknowable, inhabitable by beings for exchange: a site we could learn new ways to Be, new orientations to Being, filled with all generations past and all the generations yet to be born, and all of everything.” (page 242)

“A relationship with the abyss unconceals Being, reorients us into the open. To be in the open is to be with and within Being—flowing and becoming. The abyss is a teacher: with awe, terror, and love, it teaches you to remove your Self, to become a mirror that holds on to nothing....” (page 46)

This arts-based inquiry cannot have been easy to write:

“I am writing this to be with suffering. To sense it, to feel it course through my body, blister my mind, feeling for a rupture, a hemorrhage. Maybe I will cry.”

It certainly was not easy to read, but it was thought-provoking, broken, courageous, transformative, beautiful. I visited many pages more than once, and I probably will visit again.