

life inside

a memoir



MINDY LEWIS

"[A] moving, poignant and emerging, yet redemptive account of one woman's refusal to accept victimization . . . powerfully told in vivid, poetic prose."
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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Life Inside: A Memoir

Mindy Lewis

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Life Inside: A Memoir Mindy Lewis

The patient is an ascetically pretty 15½-year-old white female. She is intelligent, fearful, extremely anxious, and depressed. Her rage is poorly controlled and inappropriately expressed.

Diagnostic Impression: Program for social recovery in a supportive and structured environment appears favorable.

Life Inside

In 1967, three months before her sixteenth birthday, Mindy Lewis was sent to a state psychiatric hospital by court order. She had been skipping school, smoking pot, and listening to too much Dylan. Her mother, at a loss for what else to do, decided that Mindy remain in state custody until she turned eighteen and became a legal, law-abiding, "healthy" adult.

Life Inside is Mindy's story about her coming-of-age during those tumultuous years. In honest, unflinching prose, she paints a richly textured portrait of her stay on a psychiatric ward—the close bonds and rivalries among adolescent patients, the politics and routines of institutional life, the extensive use of medication, and the prevalence of life-altering misdiagnoses. But this memoir also takes readers on a journey of recovery as Lewis describes her emergence into adulthood and her struggle to transcend the stigma of institutionalization. Bracingly told, and often terrifying in its truths, *Life Inside* is a life-affirming memoir that informs as it inspires.

Life Inside: A Memoir Details

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Denise MacDonald says

Wow! What a book! Obviously this is a memoir. Mindy spent years of her adolescent life on a locked psychiatric ward, admitted because she was rebellious and uncontrollable (as reported by her mother). The rest of her life is affected by the experiences she has while on that ward. She tells her memories along with providing excerpts from her medical files.

She speaks of misdiagnosis, overly medicated patients, shock treatments, disassociated staff members and the overwhelming need to just be accepted for who she was. She also provides the flip side of her memories by visiting with the staff and doctors who worked on the floor she lived on and asking them about their memories from that time. She speaks about being surprised to learn that the staff had really cared for them and she ponders how different her life may have been if staff members had been allowed to express those feelings instead of being ordered to hide them.

Another issue I picked up on while reading this book is the disturbing fact the psychiatrists tend to follow trends, that they don't think for themselves and dig deep into patients lives to simply label and diagnose, to rely on medication to fix something that may not even be broken. A person becomes a thing to be fixed rather than a person with hopes, dreams and feelings.

Every now and then I read a book that changes my view on life, that gives me new tools to use when interacting with others (whether it be people in general or the youth I work with). This was one of those books. I really hope Mindy's story is read by many people in the helping profession.

holly says

I really enjoyed this book.....it's not for everyone.....Mindy Lewis was committed to a psychiatric institute in the late 60's 'simply' because she was being rebellious and got involved in drugs. It's interesting to read about her experience, along with many of the close friends she made. One wonders how differently they would have been treated in current times, and how their lives may have ended up differently - perhaps better, perhaps worse.

Marissa says

Spoilers!!!!

A lot of people complain about the second half of the book but it's as important as the first part. It may not have been as interesting but you found out her true nature.

I love this book. If you're interested in psychology this is a must read.

Christine M. says

I find Mindy Lewis and this brilliantly written memoir highly inspiring. It takes great courage for one to open up the door to revisit a crisis in their lives that caused so much damage. I highly admire you, Ms. Lewis, for sharing your story with the world. Not only have you inspired, but I've learned a great deal about the human spirit and what makes us tick from you. Excellent book.

Ally says

I first picked up this book because I am interested in mental illness in general and asylums in particular. I got more than I was expecting. The book is reasonably well-written for someone who is admittedly more of a visual artist than a writer. The first part of the book is actually about her time in a mental institution as a teenager in the late sixties. After that, however, she continues with an account of her life after she left, and this takes up most of the book. At first I found this part tedious and unnecessary, but after a while it takes shape and really brings home the message of the book.

This book may take a bit more patience than the ordinary "mental-illness memoir", but I believe it's worth it.

Chris Blocker says

I had many mixed feelings about this book. I'm not much of a reader of "memoirs"; personally, I don't see the point to them. What is a memoir but an autobiography of a person no one knows? And it seems to me that if no one already knows your life story, then there is power in turning your life experiences into "fiction." The few memoirs I've read have had their highlights, but I've always been able to identify a fictional story of the same subject that resonated so much more with me.

Here is a memoir by an author who seems quite talented. I think Mindy Lewis could write fiction. Her story all tied together, her prose was equally relevant and poetic. Sure you could say there is power in the fact that this story was the truth (or near truth), but isn't most fiction true, as well? Perhaps sometimes even more truthful than the "truth." And how much more of an audience would this memoir have received if it had been marketed as fiction?

Perhaps these comments only pronounce by bias: I love fiction.

Regardless of my prejudices, I thought *Life Inside* started out great. Lewis' story of being committed as a teenager to a New York psychiatric ward in the 1960s was interesting. The pace is perfect as she starts right in the action of being admitted against her will and fills in backstory as it is relevant. The horrors and loves of her stay shine through. The reader can easily fall in love with those Lewis loves, hate those whom Lewis hates, and feel ambivalent to everyone else. We really can see this ward, especially the people, through Lewis' eyes.

This works well for more than a hundred pages. Then the pacing changes. It speeds up. Suddenly, everything is on fast forward. Months pass in the span of a few pages. The reader no longer has time to fall in love, she just wants to get out of this place. Although not as compelling, this section works well, as it is likely the way Lewis saw things. *Just get me out of here.*

Unfortunately for the purposes of enjoying this book, she does get out. Much too early. Just a few pages after the half way mark, Lewis is released and the following half crams together the story of the next thirty-five years of her life. While these latter years have their engaging moments, they are few and far between. There were times when I wanted to be done with this book--throw it aside and say, I got all I could from this. Instead, I plodded forward. And I was glad I did. The ending ties everything up exceptionally well and was highly moving. Here again was Lewis showing off her story telling abilities.

Overall, I enjoyed *Life Inside*. Lewis has creative talent and has a really fabulous story to tell. The one thing that really drags down this story is that middle section. From approximately pages 150 to 280, I really couldn't care enough to continue--the only reason I did is my stubbornness to complete the books I read. Other readers may not have the same drive.

Lisa Rau says

I followed Mindy Lewis through my own cloudy teenage path and emerged with a more artistic appreciation for the stumbles and regrets we make as dumb teenagers. I have since then read this book just shy of a dozen times.

Liz says

I'm a little thrown off while reading this book, but am unable to gether my thoughts as to WHY. One thing that struck me was in the beginning she stated she was here (hospitalized) by mistake, an act gone too far. Is it in the hospital that Mindy truly loses herself, sanity? I'm unsure.

Rachel Karyo says

Once I started reading *Life Inside*, I could not put it down. The vivid, intimate writing transported me completely.

Mindy Lewis' memoir paints a clear picture of everyday life on the fifth-floor ward of the NY State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. *Life Inside* also dramatizes a sensitive teenage girl's coming of age during the turbulent 1960s. The second half of the memoir, "Life After," discusses the particular challenges of adjusting to life outside, after twenty-eight months of hospitalization.

Throughout *Life Inside*, Mindy Lewis faces painful memories openly and honestly, and I admire her courage. She is a strong, hopeful and determined individual, and her memoir offers much inspiration. It also raises important questions about the nature of human emotions and the dangers of unchecked institutional authority. Ultimately, *Life Inside* celebrates the healing powers of art, music and literature, of self-reflection and friendship.

Scott Avery says

why five stars? because I was there sharing some of these adolescent adventures with Mindy back in the day. a great memoir well worth reading

Jan Byrne says

hard to believe that's what they did with "unruly" kids vack then... sad. tough to read

Sarah Brannon says

I love true stories and this one is an up-close look at life in a mental institution in the days where putting unruly kids in said facility was a common solution to "dealing with the problem." It does drag quite a bit, but I usually don't count off too much for that when reviewing an autobiographical account.

Mindy Lewis says

I'm the author, so I can't review it, except to say that aside from being my story, it's also the story of an era in psychiatry and a cautionary tale about misdiagnosis, as well as an exploration of adolescence. Writing this book changed my life, and I will never write another like it. Thank you for reading and reviewing it.

Bird Trungma says

In reading Mindy's book, I wanted to shout out loud, "Yes! Yes! That is exactly how it was!" so many times, since I was also locked away on a mental ward and mislabeled a "chronic undifferentiated schizophrenic." Her skill in telling her story and my story and the story of so many other young people who went through the experience of being locked up and drugged and brainwashed with self-doubt, and then fought through the even much tougher experience of building some sort of a sane, decent life afterward is diamond-like. By "diamond-like," I mean her writing is clean and sharp, not dull; she uses her pen like a sword which does not have any blunt edge. Mindy is at once an artist and a warrior. I am thankful for each word that she has written.

Ava says

I wanted to give this more stars because I really did enjoy the first half, but toward the end I definitely lost interest/stopped really caring.

