



The Hospital Always Wins: A Memoir

Issa Ibrahim

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Issa Ibrahim's memoir details in searing prose his development of severe mental illness leading to a horrific family tragedy, his acquittal by reason of insanity, and his subsequent commission to a mental hospital for nearly twenty years.

Raised in an idyllic creative environment, mom and dad cultivating his talent, Issa watches his family's descent into chaos in the drug-crazed late 1980s. Following his father's death, Issa, grief-stricken and vulnerable, travels down a road that leads to psychosis—and to one of the most nightmarish scenarios conceivable.

Issa receives the insanity plea and is committed to an insane asylum with no release date. But that is only the beginning of his odyssey. Institutional and sexual sins cause further punishments, culminating in a heated legal battle for freedom.

Written with great verve and immediacy, *The Hospital Always Wins* paints a detailed picture of a broken mental health system but also reveals the power of art, when nurtured in a benign environment, to provide a resource for recovery. Ultimately this is a story about survival and atonement through creativity and courage against almost insurmountable odds.

The Hospital Always Wins: A Memoir Details

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Author : Issa Ibrahim

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From Reader Review *The Hospital Always Wins: A Memoir* for online ebook

Alison Donnelly says

It's not really true to say I liked this book. Ibrahim's story is overwhelming and disturbing. Two narratives are interwoven, his early years leading up to his psychosis and subsequent horrific crime and his twenty year stay in state psychiatric hospitals. Both are devastating and reveal a man who somehow survived and a critique of shocking staff and clinician misconduct in mental health facilities. Not for the faint hearted. At all.

Jenny says

The take-away for me was that marijuana can actually trigger psychosis and schizophrenia in some people. Very well written and pretty horrifying.

Heather says

Nope. Just not for me. I found this writing pretentious and dull. Half way into the book, I admit, I skimmed. I fully understand that you don't always have to like your protagonists (even in non-fiction), but you should at least be interested. I'm not. After two months of trying to read this, I'm done.

****I received this copy via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review**** (less)

Ally says

A very sad and meaningful read. As many of you know, mental illness memoirs are some of my favourite (if that's the right word) types of memoirs to read. I find it absolutely fascinating to be in the head of someone experiencing life in an entirely different and unique way. Previous stories I've read, though shocking and scary (see, *Wasted*, *Manic*) almost paled in comparison to this young man's story. This is not at all to belittle anyone's experience of their own mental illness, but more to point out that previous memoirs I've read have related more closely to self-harm than harm to others, especially loved ones, which I found particularly horrific in this case.

That being said, I didn't love the overall structure and style of this book. I understand why it was structured as it was, and I agree that it made it much easier for the reader not to prejudge this young man for the terrible crime he committed; however, I think just a year as the title of the Chapter would have made everything much clearer. Sometimes I had no idea if we were pre-hospital or not. I have seen this done effectively in other books, particularly *Madness: A Bipolar Life*, and *Manic*, but it really didn't work here for me.

But I think the real and very important story here is Issa's experience of being hospitalized in a system determined to keep him locked up rather than to contribute to meaningful therapy and a transition into a

'normal' life. It is absolutely abhorrent that psychiatrists and psychologists continue to get away with kind of behaviour that only serves to retrench power dynamics in psychiatric institutions and likely further contributes to feelings of low self worth and depression. This is an important story about a man who overcame these obstacles, and fought for the life he deserved.

Definitely worth a read if you're interested in drug-induced psychosis and experiences in the psychiatric ward.

An advanced review copy was provided by Netgalley in exchange for an honest review

Keeley says

I received this one from NetGalley for review.

I have really mixed feelings about this one. I did really enjoy the writing style, but had some difficulty with the content. I'm finding that I'm not a huge fan of memoirs so this one may not be receiving a totally fair review from me.

The Hospital Always Wins is a reflection on Issa Ibrahim's life growing up in a household full of both music and marijuana use as well as his time spent in psychiatric facilities after being found not guilty by reason of insanity (not the exact words but he was able to use an insanity plea) after killing his mother.

He had a traumatic childhood which definitely can't be ignored when looking into what led him to where he ended up and that is something that the author also attempts to reckon with throughout the book. He is frequently blamed for his behavior while also excused for it because of the power differentials that exist between him and the other people involved.

I didn't love this one and at times it made me really uncomfortable. Had it been a fiction novel I think I would have an easier time rating it, but since it's supposed to be a true account of what the author experienced I have to change my rating system and I'm apparently not good at that.

If you're interested in reading memoirs about mental health issues, I would definitely recommend this one.

Whitney says

Full review with hyperlinks and whatnot on the blog: <https://brownbooksandgreentea.com/201...>

Issa Ibrahim is institutionalized for a very specific reason: readers will find out the details later, but it's not a spoiler to reveal that he's murdered his mother. According to him, it was a marijuana-induced psychosis, i.e. the drugs were a deadly choice for someone with potential preexisting mental health issues.

Because of this, Issa Ibrahim spends some time on Rikers Island, wins an insanity plea, and gets transferred to Creedmoor Hospital. Here, he stays nearly two decades, learning to live with his crime, and move toward a life beyond Creedmoor's walls.

The Hospital Always Wins, perhaps a play on “the house always wins,” illustrates what an insanity plea really means. It’s an insider look at how the criminal justice system fails the mentally ill by placing them in facilities just as flawed as regular prisons. Ibrahim describes both sexual relationships and assaults between patients and staff, as well as bureaucratic conspiracies to keep patients under lock down. It’s not pretty. In fact, on many occasions, it’s wholly disgusting.

Effectively disowned by his remaining family, Ibrahim immerses himself in his art. He’s commissioned by staff to illustrate tattoo designs and uses the money to increase his stockpile of art supplies. Art takes him far, and his art shows become one of few ways he’s allowed to leave the Creedmoor campus (escorted by male staff, of course).

Ibrahim’s artist statement: “My interest in the politics of race, mental illness, and popular culture informs my range of subject matter. I am telling a parallel narrative. My life as a psych patient, a flawed Superman, learning to navigate the many identities I had to assume in the system in order to survive various barriers to freedom, in addition to exposing the Everyman in the world at large. We are living in a comic strip, with plenty of super villains and heroes, love stories, cliffhangers, absurdist comedy and heartbreaking tragedy. With equal parts whimsy and warning, I use familiar icons in historical settings as reflections and metaphors for our own bankrupt culture.”

Ibrahim intersperses the recollection of his time at Creedmoor with memories of his mother, the most loving figure in his life. It’s an effective storytelling tactic, that builds to the crescendo— when he recounts exactly what happened the night of her death. It would be crass to end there, but Ibrahim also discusses how he begins to find closure.

The Hospital Always Wins is a purposefully cringe-inducing look behind a mental institution’s tightly closed doors. While Issa Ibrahim, for many reasons, is perhaps one of few who could tell this story, I found the people on the periphery a bit more interesting. I was personally turned off by what I interpreted as Ibrahim’s problematic relationship with women, with whom he seemed unable to build nonsexual bonds.

For those interested in Issa Ibrahim, I’m a much bigger advocate of his work elsewhere, including this article, and this appearance in an HBO documentary from several years back. In the recommended links, you’ll find engrossing details about his crime, diagnosis, and institutionalization. Heavy on the serious content and light on the schoolboy sexual details about him and the hospital staff.

I’d love to hear from some people who felt this book spoke to them. There is a discussion worth having about how mental health issues are handled in the criminal justice system, but this book missed a great opportunity to bring them to the fore.

Disclaimer: I was given this book in exchange for an honest review.

Snem says

This was an interesting exploration of one man's mental illness and commentary on issues throughout the mental health system. The description of the madness during the actual killing of his mother was disturbing and really well done.

While this was really interesting, it's written a little too wordy and overworked. I didn't find the author

particularly likeable or compelling. Structurally the timeline jumping does reflect the psychosis of the author, but is jarring for this reader. I wish it was written in chronological sequence. The relationships with all the women in this book was disturbingly manipulative on the part of all parties including the author.

Creedmoor holds a special place in my heart, but I only recommend this if you have a strong interest in mental illness books.

Book Riot Community says

I can't express how awesome I thought this book was. It's morally complex, vivid in setting and character development, and the pacing of this memoir kept me turning pages into the night. I found it somehow reminiscent of *On the Road*, even though it wasn't about a road trip; maybe more like if Kerouac, Richard Wright, and Vincent van Gogh had all gotten together and written *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. (Never mind that it's temporally impossible for that to have happened.)

– Susie Rodarme

from The Best Books We Read In April: <http://bookriot.com/2016/04/29/riot-r...>

Allison says

A memoir fan, this book was very interesting to me. Sad, disturbing at times, overall educational to me.

Katy says

Issa is an awesome writer, but he plays the victim way too much for me to fully sympathize. I completely understand that mental illness can take over rational thoughts and actions and I don't doubt that he wasn't in his right mind when he murdered his mom. He should be treated with compassion, but to feel slighted because you can't have your freedom after voices in your head made you murder is a bit too much.

Elyse Walters says

"The Hospital Always Wins", is written by an absolutely extraordinary graphic artist. Issa Ibrahim is also winner of the prestigious Edward R. Murrow & Third Coast 2014 Awards for Best News Documentary NPR's "The Hospital Always Wins"....(an hour long feature)

This book is a powerful memoir of incarceration, rebellion, sex, drug, death, race, and art. With peppery-high spirited prose he shares of his home life...and his institution life. Issa's parents were often using marijuana and he grew up in a chaotic drugcrazed environment. He developments severe mental illness as a young teenager....which leads to an accidental killing of his

mother. He received the insanity plea and was committed to an insane asylum with no release date.

We get the inside story of what a broken Mental health system looks like from the eyes of Issa who spent 20 years of his life in the 'asylum environment'.

There were years when he was punished for sexual sins. There were legal battles for freedom...but my favorite parts of the book was when Issa begins to blossom from the power of his artwork. His art generously gets nurtured by the hospital staff...and it helps Issa with his recovery. It's really beautiful...it's a turning point of something positive within the hospital walls...(replenished my faith in humanity).

Creedmoor Psychiatric Hospital in Queens County, New York, is where Issa spent his years. They have one notable program which allowed Issa to thrive and showcase his work...called "The Living Museum".

The Living Museum is an art Studio dedicated to presenting the art produced by patients at the Creedmoor Center.

Issa's life story was very sad...but his spirit is very inspiring. The guy is a survivor. It was clear to me that he loved his mother deeply. Her death is a deep scar... but my God...he has repented. I had the feeling that even his mother knew it was an accident and forgave him immediately...whereas Issa spent his entire life making peace with himself.

No matter what I or anyone thinks of this story - or of things read about within the hospital walls ... the biggest lasting message - for me- is that it was a horrific mistake that Issa spent 20 years inside an institution. Insane... completely insane!

Bless this talented artist, this man! ...may the rest of his life be fill with love - art - great friendships - and much joy!

Thank You Chicago Review Press, Netgalley, and Issa Ibrahim,

Megalion says

NOTE: I don't feel comfortable rating this particular memoir in any official way because I feel that my 2 star reaction is specific to me and not quite indicative of how others might enjoy or not enjoy it.

I was really looking forward to this book as I'm always wanting to read about how other people have dealt with being bipolar.

I just could not get into it though. As I noted in my status update a couple months ago, I was having a hard time following the scattered narrative. Usually that's not a problem for me but I suspect that my inability to relate to his story was the main culprit.

I set it aside intending to return but after two months of dreading trying to get into it again, I'm letting myself off the hook.

One reason for not relating, I wasn't feeling any sympathy or empathy for his end. Augusten Burroughs similarly behaves like a brat at points in his childhood memoirs but in the context of his environment, it made sense that I remained intrigued by his story.

However, I would like to strongly emphasize that this is a Your Mileage May Vary (YMMV) situation. Others have really gotten a lot out of this book and you may too. This is simply my personal reaction to a memoir that is volatile enough to go either way for people.

Thank you to the publisher for the free copy of this book in exchange for my honest review.

Jessica says

eye opening read. this was not a page turner, but I learned a lot about the interaction between the Justice system and mental health system. there's a lot of sexual acts in this story.

Mark Syron says

When Issa got to talking about his Mom at the beginning of the book I realized where this was headed. I could see it a mile away all be not quite sure that it was all due to drugs. My guess was a psychotic break from reality but I did not realize it will all be linked back to weed. But I do have to say once the excessive weed use of the family was described then I saw the connection. I personally have not tried weed. I don't know how to roll a roach but I do know that weed, in some people, can create psychosis. Or worsen psychosis in a person already dealing with that condition. Issa was the former and it turned deadly to him.

Knowing all that he did while locked up. The sex, for instance, made me want to stop the book. How could a hospital let this go on to patient/person of power relationships go on for these lengths? But I went on to hear this book out literally since I listened to this book through the audiobook. The text can be enriching at times but then becomes too wordy and try hard to impress the reader. The book focused more on how the staff treated Issa rather than what therapy was like when regarding day to day therapy unless I had something to do with scandal or whatever report knocking Issa down.

Overall I was drawn in by being in a hospital for such an extended time but left with a somewhat satisfied listen to. Wish more about the day was like- like therapies throughout the day- but ended up being okay with how it panned out.

Paul Spence says

Issa Ibrahim tells of his upbringing and ultimate incarceration in mental institutions due to a terrible crime he committed. His family life had a great influence on him as he turned to drugs, which may or may not have been a factor in his mental illness. But this story isn't merely about drug use and mental illness, it's also about rehabilitation and repentance.

Growing up in a family environment that nurtured caring and creativity, Issa's loose family life also enabled him to be introduced to the drug culture of the 80's. Possibly his drug contributed to his mental illness which led to his committing a terrible crime and his ultimate plea of insanity. The book documents his "incarceration" in mental institutions along with his recovery from his illness. His road to recovery was long and not as straight as it could have been.

Briefly jailed in hellish Rikers Island, Ibrahim was ruled not guilty by reason of insanity and spent most of his years at Creedmoor, a huge state mental hospital in Queens Village, New York. He writes scathingly of its violence, homosexual sex, staff unprofessionalism, and administrative ineptitude. His talent for painting eventually got him to Creedmoor's Living Museum, an art studio and sanctuary for patients, where he flourished.

Issa's compelling story was a good read. He is an intelligent and interesting man with a lot to share. Some things you may wish he hadn't. Never knowing his crime until near the end made this a page turner. His story is quite thought provoking and may, or may not, change your opinion of the insanity plea and the role our mental institutions play in returning mentally disturbed individuals to a normal lifestyle.

This occasionally overwhelming torrent of words reveals both an irrepressible individual with a talent for survival and a mental health system in dire need of repair.

I would definitely recommend this book.
