

Moral Treatment

Stephanie Carpenter

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Stephanie Carpenter's compelling novel *Moral Treatment* explores curative and troubling therapies in a Michigan psychiatric hospital alongside the institutionalization of a young patient.

In 1889, seventeen-year-old Amy is certified "insane," requiring her psychiatric hospitalization. Her history of impulsive, self-harming behavior intensified following her mother's suicide. Under the care of James, the supervising doctor at a public psychiatric facility, Amy receives the "moral treatment" of "pure food, adequate rest," and "wholesome influences." But Amy is resistant to her new environment. She feels abandoned by her family; she even steals a daguerreotype from James's wife and pretends that the pictured man is her secret friend.

The alternating narrative flows with surety from Amy's often agitated, claustrophobic perspective to James's inner thoughts as he struggles to manage patient rounds and administrative duties. James is also perturbed by his ambitious younger colleague, Dr. Ingstrom, who aspires to treat certain mental disorders with surgical methods.

After befriending another patient, Letitia, Amy participates in a therapy program working with vegetable seedlings in the hospital's large greenhouse. Spring's arrival after a frozen Michigan winter is contrasted with Amy's gradual improvement; as she thrives "like a plant," her perspective broadens to show increasing resilience and concern for others. Meanwhile, combative Letitia, who bears the scars of an earlier operation to remove her ovaries, is transferred to a cage-like ward.

The book's engrossing setting features box cameras, antimacassars, and the impassioned Women's Christian Temperance Union. Further historical accuracy is conveyed by the generally unchallenged authority of the doctors to institutionalize, sterilize, and confine women while prescribing addictive doses of morphine.

With luminous complexity, the affecting novel *Moral Treatment* recounts an era of progressive advancements and clinical abominations in American mental health care.

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