

Shmanners 330: Victorian Asylums

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Travis: Hello, internet, I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: ... for ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: Uh, I'm getting better. I drank my coffee way too fast and it felt like my eyes were shaking.

Travis: Oh, boy.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Also had a little bit of a rumbly-tumbly from that.

Travis: Mm.

Teresa: Don't drink your coffee so fast. Don't do that.

Travis: Oh, yes.

Teresa: First-hand experience, do not recommend.

Travis: Okay, well, if I catch you doing it again, it's straight to the asylum

with you.

Teresa: [laughs] Yes, indeed.

Travis: No, that's a joke. I would never let you get medical help of any kind, let alone psychiatric.

Teresa: Well, that was a great lead in because we are talking about a very spooky topic.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Victorian asylums.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: This is a thing. I have, uh, I wouldn't say it's like it's in every book I've ever read, but it's one of those things that from just kind of collected, you know, understanding of stories and stuff, it seems like a thing that husbands were constantly just sending like, "Oh, this lady talked back to me; she's got hysteria, get in there," or, "She's got ideas about women being able to vote," or whatever. Woo, time for asylums.

Teresa: It is a pretty common trope within movies and TVs and books, especially like the murder mysteries and stuff that you like to listen to.

Travis: A lot of asylum things.

Teresa: Asylum things. And hysteria, the actual, like, medical diagnosis of hysteria was not really the thing at this point. That's a very ancient Greek feeling.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: The idea that the uterus was actually causing problems by moving around the body. They pretty much figured that one out. They were like,

mm, no.

Travis: Now we know that it actually causes problems by staying too still. And it's like, "Hey, we got to wake up that uterus. Let's get that uterus moving around." If the uterus stays in place for too long, it grows moss. And then once that moss grows, oh, you're gonna feel bad. Belly moss.

Teresa: Anyway, but insanity. did have very, very loose definitions at the time. And you're right that there were definitely some behaviors that were deemed unacceptable by society or husbands. And this did often get people who didn't have any kind of, like, let's say financial stake in the relationship, it would get them take, uh, like, committed.

Travis: Okay. So what are we actually talking— What are we talking about today?

Teresa: Well today, I'd like to talk about, first of all how asylums came to be...

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: ... and then how one might get committed to an asylum.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: For example, if you had a, quote, 'successful séance,' and talked about your ghosts and the things that you saw, you could get committed.

Travis: Really? Even when spiritualism was a big thing?

Teresa: I know. Isn't that so terrible? Like the idea that if you bought in too much, right? Everybody kind of understood that it was a little bit like, just fashion, right?

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: But if you bought in too much, that was a problem. Anyway, so asylums weren't originally meant, at their conception, to be desolate and

terrible places.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Okay? The first large-scale asylums popped up in the early 1800s, although before that, there were certainly places that people who had money could send the people they were concerned about, usually older family members or people who had some other type of, maybe disability, physical, mental. Any of that sort of thing, something that the family felt they couldn't handle, right?

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And so you either could send them away to be cared for discreetly, you could buy care to be paid for, to care for them at home, or if you didn't have money, what oftentimes happened is these poor people ended up on the streets.

Travis: Oh, okay.

Teresa: And so prisons and workhouses were also. places where disadvantaged people ended up.

Travis: And let's, you know what? I'm just gonna put the tag around the table and yell at it to say, that is not *not* what happens now. You know what I mean?

Teresa: That's true.

Travis: This idea of poor people who can't afford to get help when they need it, ending up being on the street or in prison is sadly not gone away.

Teresa: But the word asylum actually means retreat, refuge, or sanctuary. And there were certainly sanctuaries run by religious figures as shelters for the mentally ill. One of the oldest ones dates back to 1247.

Travis: Wow.

Teresa: And was started as part of the Priority of the New Order of Our Lady of Bethlehem in the City of London.

Travis: They need to come up with a shorter title for that.

Teresa: I know, it's way too long.

Travis: Yeah, man.

Teresa: [laughs] But...

Travis: Not good SEO on that either. Too many words in there.

Teresa: But the ones that we're talking about, mainly in the 1800s, were supposed to be kind of like psychiatric hospitals.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Right? The idea was that treatment could be applied to people to rehabilitate, to reintroduce them to society. But that's not exactly what happened, because many patients were treated as and often referred to as inmates at these facilities because the fact of the matter is even the best doctors at the time did not know how to help these people and some of them didn't even care about it.

Travis: Well, it also should be noted, like, if rich family is paying like, "I'm going to send my person there to have them taken care of," you are then incentivized as the place getting paid the money, right?

If you are unscrupulous, you're incentivized to be like, "Yeah, they need to stay longer." Right? So you keep getting that money.

Teresa: Sure, absolutely, that definitely happened. And so one of the things that was used as quote, treatment, but was probably not really treatment, was the use of restraints. And restraints can be helpful if someone is an actual danger to themselves.

Not really a danger to others, there's different things that you can do for

that. But especially if they are incapable of preventing physical harm to themselves, restraint in periods can be useful. But a lot of the time, it was just, well, let's kind of just put a person in a strait jacket and then put them in a room and they're fine.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And that's not how it works. And one of the— There was actually a major reform in 1829. A patient at the Lincoln Asylum in England was left in a restraint overnight and perished from the restraint. And so that facility, because of that tragedy, abolished the use of all physical restraints.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Which I suppose is a sort of bright spot in this dark stain, right? But they weren't all nightmares. This legislation that I talked about helped to shift the national attitude toward actual mental health care. And this is referred to as the shift from custody to care.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And so, you know... If they could not help people reintegrate into society, they could at least alleviate pain, right...

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: ... was this idea of caring for people. And so mental illness began to be recognized as something that could be alleviated or even cured. And the different states began to sponsor asylums. Before they were pretty much privately owned, right?

Which led to the kind of, like, extortion that you were talking about. But without that incentive of the private money, I mean, if the state takes care of it, that's the idea, right? Is that you can't extort people like that. And so there was definitely scientific knowledge being gained at the time. And so it was supposed to be a move towards actual healthcare.

Travis: Got it.

Teresa: And there are plenty of people throughout history who actually devoted their lives. to a more empathetic and humane form of mental health care. One person named William Tuke founded a private mental institution outside of York called the Retreat in the late 1700s.

So this is just before the heyday and the reformation kind of mental asylums. And he pioneered the idea of non-restraint even before it was deemed unnecessary and cruel, um, because he believed that people with mental illness should be treated like everyone else and patients were expected to dine at a table, make polite tea conversation, do regular chores, things like that.

I mean, it was flawed because they were heavily scrutinized and supervised and there were punishments if you didn't do these things and stuff like that. So it wasn't perfect, obviously, um, but it wasn't the kind of, like, haunted house fodder...

Travis: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Teresa: ... that we think of when we think of like an asylum, right? Harriet Martineau was another important character at this time of social reform. She's actually hailed as one of the first female social scientists. She was a prolific writer and researcher.

She talked about early feminism and she commentaried a lot on American politics and the horrors of slavery. And she was one of the many champions who wrote about mental health reform, especially about running asylums at the time.

And it's, you know, it was something— It was an idea I think that maybe came from a good place but was not good at all in practice. I do wanna talk a little bit about Nellie Bly.

Travis: I wanna talk about Nellie Bly too, but first, how about a word from some other Max Fun shows?

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Speaker: You're in a theater, the lights go down. You're about to get swept up by the characters and all their little details and interpersonal dramas. You look at them and think, "That person is so obviously in love with their best friend. Wait, am I in love with my best friend? That character's mom is so overbearing. Why doesn't she just stand up to her? Oh God, do I need to stand up to my own mother?"

If you've ever recognized yourself in a movie, then join me, Jordan Crucchiola, for the podcast Feeling Seen. We've talked to author Susan Orlean on realizing her own marriage was falling apart after watching *Adaptation*, an adaptation of her own work, and comedian Hari Kondabolu on why *Harold and Kumar* was a depressingly important movie for Southeast Asians. So join me every Thursday for the Feeling Seen podcast here on Maximum Fun.

Speaker 2: Her Majesty served Great Britain and the Commonwealth loyally for over seventy years. And while of course we feel a profound sadness, we must remember she lived a long life and died in such a way that I think many of us would want for ourselves.

She was at home, surrounded by her family. And of course... she was listening to the Beef and Dairy Network podcast. The Beef and Dairy Network podcast is a multi-award winning comedy podcast and you can find it at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

[ad break ends]

Travis: So here is what I know about Nellie Bly.

Teresa: From?

Travis: Drunk History.

Teresa: I love it, yes.

Travis: Well, can I tell you what's— There's a moment in Drunk History, and this happens quite often, in Drunk History where the guy is telling a story and his name is JD-something.

And I know him from a web series called Yacht Rock that he was in where he played a young Michael McDonald. And he's drunk and talking to his dog, he goes, "You crazy Nellie, you crazy." And I think about that all the time.

Teresa: [laughing]

Travis: But here's what I remember. Nellie Bly was an investigative journalist in a time especially where it was rare to be, to have an investigative journalist that was a woman, let alone good at their job and that cared and wasn't just like, getting paid money to do a thing.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And she sat out to do an exposé exposing, hence the term, the mental health facilities and their treatment of women, specifically.

Teresa: So she went to Blackwell Island, which is off the coast of New York. It's a very infamous asylum.

Travis: Yeah, she had herself committed. And then like—

Teresa: By doing the very, like, very bare minimum of strange actions. So apparently all she really did was she changed her name and got a room at a boarding house. And she wandered the halls, yelled incoherently, and refused to go to sleep.

Travis: Got committed?

Teresa: Yep, that was it. They called the police and the police took her to the asylum.

Travis: Okay. And then she had a deal with her, like the editor, the people at hired her, that after a couple of days, they would come get her out.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: So then they got her out and were like, "Actually, this is Nellie Bly, ha ha. She got you!" And she wrote about the experience. People were like, "Oh, that's bad. This is bad. And it led to reform?"

Teresa: Right.

Travis: This is where it starts to get kind of drunk history-esque.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay, so while she was in there, some of the things that she discovered is that a lot of the people who were in there who were women, were women who did not speak English.

Travis: Mm...

Teresa: So they had no way of communicating or advocating for themselves. And so this is just where they were... they ended up, right? And there was no way for them to convince anyone that they should be somewhere. They didn't have anyone on the outside trying to get them.

Travis: There were no translators...

Teresa: There was no translation available, nothing. And she found that the, you know. It was a very— There were very terrible conditions, things like people being forced to eat spoiled food, take freezing baths, sit for hours at a time without moving.

And most of the people did not have any, like, I'm not gonna say that they didn't have any mental illness, but they didn't have mental illness that was debilitating enough to warrant around the clock care, right?

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And so, What we really found out is that this is where a lot of marginalized people at the time ended up in an attempt to quote, "Clean up the streets."

Travis: Oh, okay.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: So some BS.

Teresa: Indeed, indeed. And then of course, what we were talking about a little earlier was the idea that these were people being committed by their husbands or fathers or just their guardians because they didn't, quote, "Behave."

Travis: Right.

Teresa: Right? Um, and so here are some of the most unsettling reasons why someone could be committed.

Travis: Okay, brace yourself?

Teresa: Yeah. You were assertive and ambitious.

Travis: Okay, well, okay.

Teresa: You smoked.

Travis: Now, it should also, I assume here, we're talking about when you say people could be committed...

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Women.

Teresa: Women. I mean, mostly women.

Travis: Because I think just like that, you were assertive doesn't feel like a thing they'd be like, "That young man's assertive. Put him in a strait jacket." That doesn't feel like something that would have happened.

Teresa: If you were a minor and you were not behaving in the way that

your guardians thought that you would be, and you were quote, "too assertive," or not, you know, a rule breaker and wouldn't follow the rules and things like that, you could be admitted.

Travis: Oh. Okay.

Teresa: If you masturbated or liked sex.

Travis: Mm.

Teresa: Because that's not allowed. If you liked to read.

Travis: What?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: So if you were a reader, just pretend like, you hated it. Like, "Ugh, another book? I wish I had something else to do."

Teresa: I think it was more about that you preferred the company of books to anyone else, right?

Travis: Ohh.

Teresa: If your family already had been committed, making your madness hereditary.

Travis: Oh yeah, that's a thing too. If you, a lot of, like, detective novels from like, you know, turn of the century and stuff, or like movies up to a certain point where there's like, there's some weird going on, there's always the question of, is there a history of mental illness in your family?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: I'll be like, I don't, yeah, man, historically, probably yes. Everyone could say yes to some degree.

Teresa: You were too religious.

Travis: A religious fanatic.

Teresa: Or maybe zealot.

Travis: Or a religious fervor, one might say.

Teresa: Yeah. But like I said, if you were more into, like, the spiritualism than was fashionable, right? If you really believed that you had seen a ghost or things like that, there was just this fine line that somebody could say you had crossed, right?

Travis: Yeah, and when you say fine line, completely made up, completely arbitrary too.

Teresa: Yes, the arbitrary line.

Travis: This was another thing that I, you know, without researching, I feel confident saying that there were certain people in society whose word carried more weight than other people.

Teresa: Indeed.

Travis: So it also made it really, really difficult. And this is unfortunately true of a lot of cases of, like, people who someone's like, ah, they need to go be committed, is that in your denials of it. people would say like, "Ah, this is a symptom in and of itself."

And, you know, this thing of like, if I said, "Ah, she's too religious," or, you know, whatever, anything you say, right, doesn't carry as much weight as the thing I said of like, "Of course she would say that. Of course she would defend herself and lie, but you have to trust me, I'm not the one being committed here, so who are you going to trust more?"

Teresa: Right. So in reality, the way that you could get committed to an asylum was if somebody called a guy on you.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: You just call somebody and say, hey, take them away. Because, I mean, like you talked about, there's just no rhyme or reason to it. The idea of having mental healthcare, the science that they had didn't match up at all, right? So like, there was this guise of like helping people or whatever, but like they didn't know how, they didn't know how to do anything.

Travis: And there's also, you know, the horrible thing too, is I think a lot of it was, like, a proof in the— Like it's very cyclical proof, I think is what I'm trying to say like, well, why are we committing you? Because we're here, somebody called us.

So like, why would they call us if you didn't need committed, right? Like, so the evaluation process, it was their assumed guilty of like, well, clearly the person called us with cause, so...

The idea being we'll get you to a facility and then evaluate it's like, yeah, but once they're there, then it's that much more difficult to prove, especially as you put someone in horrible conditions, right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Where it's like, they're not going to act more rational as that happens.

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: Right? They're going to get frustrated, they're gonna get upset, they're gonna like. go through sleep deprivation and like hunger, and it's going to make them more erratic by the very nature of the facility. Now, I also wanna stress though, in all of this, I am a big fan of mental health professionals.

There are plenty of people who are operating now today as best they can in a system that is not always designed to function well. And so this is not like anybody who tries to help with someone's mental health is boo. That's not the case. But man, in any system, be it in 1800s, 1900s or now, there's always flaws in the system.

Teresa: Yeah, there's definitely room for improvement, even today.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: But I mean, this is why. This is why the idea of an asylum is such, like, Halloween fodder, right? It's just so spooky and kind of like, incomprehensible to understand exactly what is happening at some of these places and what happened to some of these people and it's very spooky, right?

Travis: Well, and I think that a lot of that fear, if you wanna like get to the heart of it, a lot of that fear is what we see represented in, you know, movies and TV shows and books.

And in some cases, historical fact is like, people who have suddenly been downgraded from humanity, from personhood. to like, no one will believe them, no one's advocating for them, no one is on their side. Like this feeling of, but what if that happened to me and no one believed me? What if that happened to me and I was ignored?

What if that happened to me and I was lost in the system, right? And this thing of, once again, I'll say again, still happens to people plenty, whether we're talking about mental health facilities, where we're talking about people experiencing homelessness, whether we're talking about people in the prison system.

So like, there is a reason why you could make a movie about someone falsely accused going to prison, and it will always be a movie that people will go see, right? Because I think that is the scary thing.

Teresa: Right, yeah, that's the psychological, definitely the psychological thriller part of a lot of spooky tales, and like I said, like, haunted house fodder, right?

Travis: Also, I think to jump back to Nellie Bly, the thing that makes that much more heroic to me is this thing of when you're talking about these facilities, it's so easy for it to be an out of sight, out of mind thing...

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: ... of like, clearly people weren't talking about it already. It wasn't like everyone's interested in what's going on in these facilities. So I wanna get in there because everyone's in. It's like, I think it's bad and no one's talking about it.

And so I wanna get in there and do an exposé because that is the thing when we talk about these facilities. Like I said, once you push someone off of society's central radar, then it's easy to be like, ah, okay. As you mentioned, this idea of cleaning up the streets, of this idea of like, you didn't do anything.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: You just scooted everybody to the side and made it easier for people who wanted to pretend like it wasn't happening to ignore it, right? And that is also scary, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: So next week, we will not be so scary. We'll talk about how to get out.

Travis: Oh, okay. That'll help. But thank you so much for listening. Thank you to our researcher and writer, Alexx, without whom we would not be able to make this show. Thank you to our editor, Rachel, without whom we would not be able to make this show.

And thank you for listening. We can make the show without you. But you know what? We wouldn't. We couldn't. We couldn't make the show without you. I changed— I don't know, maybe I'll feel different.

Teresa: I wouldn't do it.

Travis: But it would mean a lot to me if you kept coming back, please.

Teresa: Keep telling your friends!

Travis: Yeah, tell your friends, please share it on the social meds, the soc meds as they say, nobody says that.

Teresa: [laughing] Nobody.

Travis: Thank you to Max Fun, our podcast home. If you wanna check out all the cool McElroy merch, you can go to McElroyMerch.com. You can find out tour dates at bit.ly/McElroyTours.

I'm going to be, this is prerecorded. I don't know how to tell you folks, this isn't live. I'm currently in the UK. Partying, no, I'm doing D&D in a Castle, which I'm very excited about. Teresa, what else do we say?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "Brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. We thank Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. That's @shmannerscast, and we will be going back to another format where we ask questions of the audience very shortly.

So that is where you can follow us and get your questions answered. Also, thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan run, Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, that is where you should join today.

Um... Oh yeah, submit your topic ideas and your idioms and all that good stuff to our email, shmannerscast@gmail.com and say hi to Alex because she reads every one.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners. Get it?

[theme music plays]

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