

BOOK REVIEW

The Ancient Mariner Speaks: Examining Regimes of Truth in ADHD

Stordy, M. (2012). Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 103 pages.

Marion Stordy has written a very fine book in *The Ancient Mariner Speaks*. Her work takes the form of an "autoethnography"; that is, she grounds her investigative research concerning the mass societal phenomenon known as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in a thoughtful, compelling, and highly personalized narrative with the goal of writing "meaningfully and evocatively about topics that make a difference" (41). She frames the "tale" of her short book with an allusion to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; like the old seaman in that tale, Stordy feels compelled to speak to anyone who will hear the story of her struggles and of the suffering both she and others have endured under the weight of ADHD labelling -- a phenomenon she likens to the albatross hung about the Mariner's neck. Her hope throughout this book is that, by telling her story, she might be able to "contribute to the demise of this particular albatross, so that it will no longer haunt classrooms, crushing the spirit of countless innocent children" (9).

As a student, a teacher, a mother, and a grandmother who has lived through many challenges and seen many things change over the years, Stordy writes from a place of long experience both living with and loving children who have personality characteristics that have come to be known as ADHD; she writes how, over these self-same years, she has seen many educators "jumping on the bandwagon" of clinical assessment, and she details how she became increasingly concerned that "too many active, inquisitive, free-spirited children ... were now being tested, diagnosed, labelled ADHD and medicated." She points out that many of these children were boys, and that today the diagnosis of ADHD has almost become "an epidemic" (29). Stordy's great familiarity with the "free-spirited" children in her own family (first, her eldest son Larry, and later her grandson Ben) has taught her to question the injustices that this "pathological" labelling of children's different ways of being creates. Her book stands as a heartfelt testament to these experiences and observations, and she uses the work of Michel Foucault as a valuable interpretive lens to interrogate what she

exposes through careful analysis as the "regimes of truth" that underlie ADHD diagnosis; her straightforward and highly-accessible Foucauldian analysis identifies how these "regimes" have created unnecessary hardship and tremendous suffering for many young people suffering under the ADHD label in schools today.

Chapter One of Stordy's book begins with a high-interest, personal narration of her own life story. In this autoethnographic account, completely devoid of all academic pretence, she interrogates memories of her own upbringing, especially of her willingness to acquiesce in obedience to the societal power structures that established the "norms" and expectations for women and family life during her own youth and her early days as a new mother. But by far the most powerful parts of Stordy's entire book are her contrasting recollections of the school experiences of her eldest son, Larry, and her grandson Ben -- two "free-spirited" individuals with remarkably similar personal qualities, but whose interactions with school and the education system could not be more different. In both accounts, Stordy paints a carefully-detailed picture of the difficult challenges each faced as a result of his different way of being in contrast to siblings and other children. As a young mother prior to the era of ADHD labelling, Stordy's learning curve with her son Larry was steep, without many supports, and marked with its own fair share of trials; indeed, her rich accounting of these hair-raising incidents is rewarding for readers and offers a good chuckle (or two!) on each page. But the tribulations faced by Stordy and her son were certainly not insurmountable; in their own loving family life, and in the surrounding society at the time, they found fruitful means of working with her son's different ways of interacting with others and learning, such that Larry's experiences of the education system, although certainly not perfect, were mostly positive and rewarding. However, where Larry found his own way of fitting within the school system of his youth, his nephew Ben's experience was quite the opposite. Stordy's recounting of Ben's school days, unlike the tale told about Larry's, is full of heart-wrenching pain, frustration, and anguish; where Larry's "free spiritedness" was given avenues of freedom in which to grow and develop, Ben's "free-spiritedness" was not. Rather, in a changed educational climate, Ben's difference from the "norm" was labelled "pathological" as ADHD, effectively turning "a fearless confident five-year-old into a self-hating, school-hating nineteen-year-old who never wanted to see the inside of another learning institution and who still cannot drive onto school property without having those old familiar feelings of stupidity and worthlessness wash over him" (32). Chapter Two of Stordy's book invites readers to question "the manner in which ADHD has

come to be accepted as a regime of truth," and "to be more critical of ideas presented as truth by social institutions" (39).

In Chapter Three, Stordy offers readers a straightforward, easy-to-read introduction to the thought of Michel Foucault, and she shows them how Foucauldian analysis can be used to understand the power structures that are enforced as "regimes of truth" in ADHD labelling. Her exposition of Foucault's thought expresses in clear terms his views on how "truth" is manufactured and linked "in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (46). Carefully attending to the use of "surveillance" and "normalization" strategies such as "the examination" in schools, as well as by offering her readers a rich "genealogy" or history of the highly-contentious ADHD construct, Stordy deftly illustrates how the label "is not a fixed or universal truth but simply one of the regimes of truth our society has accepted and made function as true" (55).

Chapter Four extends Stordy's Foucauldian analysis of the ADHD label, exposing it as a means for the state to secure social control over populaces through "bio-power" -- that is, through the chemical and medical manipulation of the human body. Stordy points out how the rise of psychological testing and educational assessments based on clinical scales for childhood development have worked in tandem to medicalize and pathologize childhood differences. Her provocative work in Chapter Four is extended in Chapter Five where she argues powerfully that:

ADHD is an example of a twentieth-century regime of truth that has been constituted through education and medical discourse. It appears to have been talked and written into existence by educators, psychiatrists, psychologists and other professionals who have the power in their field, so they are the ones who are heard. They have their own ideas of how children should behave, as well as how they learn, and have managed to promote these ideas as "truth." (70)

Stordy ends Chapter Five by providing readers with further reasons to question the "truth" claims of ADHD labelling. For instance, she points out how such coding has the tendency to pathologize normal behaviour, to invite its victims no longer to take responsibility for their own actions (74), as well as to stifle creativity, imagination, and intellectual curiosity (80). Stordy's account is also careful to draw attention to the immense economic machine that has been built upon and that maintains the ADHD "regime of truth." Moreover, as an "enterprise," ADHD labelling provides billions of dollars to schools to fund the special needs of children. Consequently, there is a great

deal of resistance to questioning the legitimacy of the label inasmuch as considerable monies as well as educational, governmental, and pharmaceutical structures have been put in place to administer and to solidify this system as a "regime of truth." But all concerns with structural resistance aside, Stordy remains unshaken in her desire to expose the damaging ramifications of the labelling system; rather than supposing that our modern-day "epidemic" of ADHD is a problem with children today, Stordy's book insists that we should instead look at society as the problem, and begin to view children labelled ADHD as the proverbial "canaries in the coalmine." In her view, "changes in the child's environment, particularly in the education system, will be far more beneficial to the child than a Ritalin prescription" (77).

Stordy's book makes a fine contribution to scholarship on the subjects of education reform, special needs education, and educational labelling in particular. Being short and highly accessible, *The Ancient Mariner Speaks* will be welcome reading for current teachers as well as for parents who are experiencing troubles and anguish in the education of their children. Moreover, it seems reasonable to state that this book ought to be staple reading for education psychology students as well as for teachers-in-training who may very well be entering the education system soon, and who would do well to question their own unspoken assumptions about learning and their role as agents of state control. If this book has a weakness, it might be that Stordy's account doesn't deal with the happy stories of students who have perhaps benefited from ADHD labelling; as a teacher, I am aware of a few such stories. However, I am also aware of very many students who have suffered in the manner described by the author; and after all, Stordy cannot be blamed for telling *her* story, the story of her son, and the story of her grandson, rather than somebody else's. Readers must remember that her book speaks out about things that "affront your sense of justice or fairness" (93), and surely more books ought to do so; for even if there are many ADHD success stories not mentioned in Stordy's account, there are arguably a great number of people like her grandson Ben who had their freedom to realize their full potential "severely curtailed by a system of education which tried hard to impose on [them] a code of conduct [they] could not internalize" (68).

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