



From Paralysis to Fatigue: A History of Psychosomatic Illness in the Modern Era

By Edward Shorter

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In the 19th century, when gender roles were more confining, the dominant forms of psychosomatic illness were paralysis and hysteria. Today, when people experience confusion about the abundant possibilities available to them, when all is permitted, the dominant complaint is fatigue. Edward Shorter's history shows how patients throughout the centuries have produced symptoms in tandem with the cultural shifts of larger society. He argues that newly popularized diseases such as chronic fatigue syndrome are only the most recent examples of patients' ailments that express the deepest truths about the culture in which we live.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Shorter (history, Univ. of Toronto), whose most recent books include *Bedside Manners* (LJ 3/1/86) and *Women's Bodies* (Transaction Pubs., 1990), here catalogs the aches and pains of countless legions from the 18th century to the present. His hypothesis is that "historical eras shape their own symptoms" of illness and that "these various paradigms greatly influenced the way patients presented psychosomatic illness to their doctors." It's a run-on litany of vapors, hysteria, weakness, exhaustion, fatigue, loss of ambition, low vitality, weak spells, neurasthenia, and sometimes just your "garden-variety somatizer such as would be found in any medical practice." The question of to what extent the times and culture influence the socially correct expression of physical and mental ills is not without interest to several scholarly fields, but this reader was plum tuckered out by the end.

- *James Swanton, Albert Einstein Coll. of Medicine, New York*

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