

lieve that life is really possible outside New York City. Yet another common affliction is the paralyzing obsession with “moving out of the city.”

My screening question for suicide is, “Do you sometimes think of running away, wish you were dead, or think about hurting or killing yourself?” Most people can endorse running away, which enhances connection and relatedness and sets the stage for further discussion. The island of Maui, where I have been living for the past eight years, is filled with people who do not know that when you run away you take yourself with you.

Even if you do not feel like running away, are you seeking holiday reading? If so, *The Quality of Life Report* is light, mildly entertaining, and not badly written. This is the story of someone who did run away. High-pressured, fast-paced urban life is often characterized by a relentless, judgmental attitude. Associated with this is tremendous competition, high standards, and intensity. It takes a lot to keep your eye on the ball and not be corrupted by such an environment. And some people don't have what it takes. Each of us has to draw the line, know when the line has been crossed, and “just say no” when we are asked to do something that is illegal, immoral, or just in such poor taste that we cannot stomach it. The key to inner peace is acceptance. Even in a high-powered world, if you pick your battles and know who you are and what you are fighting for, it can work. For someone who hates her job, is insecure, cannot be alone, and is excessively needy and dependent and influenced by others, it is harder. It was so hard for Lucinda Trout that she ran away. And she was so insecure that she continued to put up with abuse. Everyone needs some separation from the circumstances of their origin to develop a sense of independence. Moving to a different place can be part of that separation.

In the background of this novel are issues of women's empowerment and criticism of the media, with television programs' “unofficial interview edict: make 'em cry, say good-bye.”

I empathized with Lucinda; after all, I got suckered into doing this review! If you read the book, you might empathize with her too, and also get a vicarious thrill out of imagining life in or outside of New York City. But

while some coming-of-age stories are charming, others, like this one, read like a case history—and in this case, the characters are not well developed. I could not empathize enough to truly enjoy this book.

A Mouthful of Air

by Amy Koppelman; San Francisco, MacAdam/Cage, 2003, 212 pages, \$23

Nancy Glimm, C.S.W.

How can a book—a first novel—that describes depression offer something of value to mental health care providers? Would a professional choose to read a novel about a depressed young woman, written by a nonprofessional, instead of going directly to clinical literature? *A Mouthful of Air*, by Amy Koppelman, answers these questions in a quiet and haunting way, exploring the day-to-day experience of Julie Davis, the book's main character. Koppelman is a recent graduate of Columbia's Master of Fine Arts program. She has written prose for magazines and journals. Married and the mother of two small children, in *A Mouthful of Air* she writes about a young married mother.

Julie Davis is a young adult whose life is unfolding. We might view Julie as privileged and exceptionally lucky. She has a kind, good, and successful husband who loves her. Her parents are both living, although divorced. She has one sibling, a brother. She has recently had a first child, a son who is almost one year old. She has financial security and friends. Conversely, she has had major depression, exacerbated by the birth of her son. She is receiving treatment from a psychiatrist and is taking medication. There are hints of sexual inappropriateness in her history—for example, possible abuse by her father. Julie struggles mightily just to stay alive, to feel that she is living. The author describes this state of depression with a

consistency that permeates the emotional core of this novel. For Julie, self-hating thoughts emerge out of the smallest challenge; she has irrational fears as well as obsessive and negative thoughts that border on command hallucinations. We sense a desperate struggle to keep her life going after a serious suicide attempt.

The novel invites the reader to inhabit Julie's mind, to experience her thoughts, feelings, and intentions as they arise. Koppelman writes with lightness, cultivating the desire to know her character. Julie's mind states are painful, but the reader is not averse to knowing her condition. There is considerable tension between the character the reader comes to care about and the illness that character struggles with. Events in Julie's life lead in a direction that allows the illness to gain force and power. We feel for Julie as she struggles to understand her illness. She attempts to control and overcome certain situations, while simultaneously the depression gains momentum and eventually engulfs her.

Therapy and treatment are very much in the background in this novel. Treatment is presented in a neutral manner. Still, the mental health care professional will find what is said about treatment and what is not said very interesting. Julie's depression and the form of care she receives leave much to think about. She never seems to be engaged in her own treatment. This disengagement is a pervasive quality that affects all her relationships. Her affective relationships appear disconnected and dissociated; it is unclear whether this is due to her

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depression or to her past traumatic relationships. We wonder what might have happened to Julie had her psychotherapist been more active in engaging her directly in solving her problems.

Julie drifts further and further away as her therapist, her husband, and her family take more and more responsibility away from her. This is the paradox and challenge when treating a seriously at-risk patient. Julie encounters a treater who appears to know what is best for her. The psychiatrist does not struggle directly with Julie to keep her in charge of her own treatment. Is it essential to step in and manage an at-risk patient or, better, to attempt to fully engage the patient in the discovery of his or her own healing?

This short novel illuminates the psychic pain of a major depression. We are reminded that patients come to treatment in the hope of receiving relief. *A Mouthful of Air* describes

this suffering and the consequences that treatment can have when the bond between the therapist and the client are not fully developed. The role played by parental narcissism and sexual abuse in the establishment of chronic destructive patterns is subtly illustrated.

This is a novel to share with a colleague. It can be used in clinical discussions of depression, sexual abuse, sexual inappropriateness, and work with disengaged patients. It is a story that reminds us to care deeply about our patients. We really do not know how they feel. *A Mouthful of Air* is a cautionary tale, a wake-up call about the ever-important task of relationship building between therapist and patient. The patient is always the expert on his or her illness. We as providers are there to bear witness, to assist in the discovery of what is important and enduring in the patient's healing.

you read on, the conversations between the narrator and her young friend, known only as "the boy," begin to take on a droning quality. As an avid consumer of literature, I am inclined only to praise and admire anyone who can write a coherent book of any kind. This novel is smart, informed, witty, and most engaging. Alas, I admit to requiring more shape and, yes, case history in my reading material. I found myself thinking, "Enough cleverness! Enough despair! Give me some meat and potatoes!" To those who read looking for sustenance, this novel is slim pickings.

In his comprehensive and lucid review of *The Unprofessionals* in the *New York Times Book Review* of September 28, 2003, Richard Eder indicates that he is very willing to read between the lines and use his imagination to piece together the novel's plot and character development. To me, it wasn't entirely clear who this woman is and how she has gotten involved with the boy to the extent that he seems to become her lifeline. Eder's review is titled "Dangling Conversations," which certainly describes the strange, disconnected quality to this vital link between two people who seem to be sinking fast. The narrator and the boy see themselves as outsiders, almost desperados, but how they got that way is unclear. We can see that the boy is truly an original human being, but we do not know in the least what makes him tick.

Julie Hecht is astute and intelligent. She gets it right about so many things: David Letterman is our cultural guru. People worship their pets. The pursuit of fitness and youth supercedes the need for manners and order. The narcissism of the narrator is a reflection of our culture's preoccupation with self. The avoidance of pain, we learn, can be achieved by concentrating obsessively on life's seemingly irrelevant details. Only moments after hearing some gut-wrenching news about the boy, the narrator ruminates about manners, etiquette, and old movies. We are in familiar territory. The boy's heroin addiction is a huge problem that is largely undiscussed but that looms

The Unprofessionals

by Julie Hecht; New York, Random House, 2003, 228 pages, \$23.95

Susan Jampel

With *The Unprofessionals*, Julie Hecht has written a striking first novel, the title of which is very likely intended to include those of us who are reading this journal. She has previously authored *Do the Windows Open?*, a bestselling collection of short stories, and *Was This Man a Genius?: Talks With Andy Kaufman*. The latter gives us a clue to Hecht's fascination with the iconoclastic, the perverse, and the absurd, which pervades her novel, for better or for worse. Andy Kaufman was certainly an original. Watching one of his performances was guaranteed to be an experience of both deeply resonant hilarity and white-knuckle suspense. You knew that at some point he was going to go way too far, and you couldn't decide whether to stay and watch or whether this was something

that you'd really rather not see. I found reading Hecht's novel to be a similar experience.

The narrator of *The Unprofessionals* is a middle-aged woman who is a wife and a successful photographer. No children are mentioned. This woman gets to know an 11-year-old boy through her relationship with the boy's parents and bonds with him around their mutually cataclysmic view of our culture and its values. Most of the novel takes place through telephone conversations that span about a decade.

Initially, *The Unprofessionals* is fresh and vibrant and invites one into an interior landscape that is both very funny and acutely perceptive, describing current cultural trends that remind one of the dissolution of our world so often depicted in environmental terms. You start off thinking that perhaps this will be a brilliantly hilarious cautionary tale. However, as

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