Asperger's syndrome looks set to be excluded from the world's leading psychiatric manual.

PSYCHIATRY

A very sad story

David Dobbs enjoys a brilliant look at the making of *DSM-5*, the new 'psychiatrists' Bible'.

When it is published this month, the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, *DSM-5*, will mark well over a century of formal guides to psychiatric diagnosis. The first two psychiatric taxonomies were produced by Emil Kraepelin in 1893 and Thomas Salmon in 1918. Kraepelin's included not only schizophrenia and what we now know as bipolar disorder, but also "masturbatory insanity" and (hopefully unrelated) "wedding night psychosis", both of which soon fell out of favour. Salmon's contained a mere 20 diagnoses. The *DSM-5*, intended to be the primary US guide to mental-health diagnoses, is expected to include some 300. These will reportedly include new entries aimed at hoarding and binge eating, and a relaxed depression diagnosis that allows therapists to classify someone grieving a loved one's death for more than two weeks as depressed rather than, well, grieving.

Each such manual, *DSM* or others, has tried to improve on its predecessor. All have failed, says psychotherapist Gary Greenberg in his entertaining, biting and essential *The Book of Woe*. But none has failed so spectacularly as the *DSM-5*.

For the first quarter of this packed but swift-reading book, Greenberg reviews how these earlier manuals — including the 1952, 1968, 1980 and 1994 editions of the *DSM* — reflected and shaped psychiatry. The history

nicely sets up his main subject, which is the long, tangled efforts of the book's publisher, the American Psychiatric Association (APA), to create this fifth edition. Even as the APA started on the *DSM-5* more than a decade ago, psychiatry was suffering deep and painful divisions over issues such as overdiagnosis, overtreatment and overmedication; its problematic ties to the pharmaceuticals industry; and a shortage of demonstrable biological pathways for most diagnoses.

The APA, which depends heavily on revenue from the sale of the *DSM-IV*, responded to these controversies by vigorously defending the manual — while promising to create a fifth edition that would draw on new paradigms.

From the adventure in bookmaking-by-committee that followed, Greenberg builds a splendid and horrifying read. He digs up delicious dirt; extracts from the rivalrous main players a treasure chest of kvetching, backbiting, rebuttal, regret, sibling rivalry, Oedipal undercutting and just plain pithy talk. He relates gruesome sausage-making

The Book of Woe: The DSM and the Unmaking of Psychiatry
GARY GREENBERG
Blue Rider: 2013.
426 pp. \$28.95

stories about the APA's tortured attempts to refashion rusty diagnoses or forge shiny new ones. (The aetiology of that new temper-dysregulation disorder? You'll throw a fit.)

Greenberg even managed to become a tester in one of the draft manual's clinician field trials. The process proved so convoluted that he wanted to apologize to one patient for the "inadequacy, the pointlessness, the sheer idiocy of the exercise". He never got the chance: she never called again.

The *DSM*, Greenberg concludes, "dresses up symptoms as diseases that are not real and then claims to have named and described the true varieties of our suffering". Technically, the APA concurs, admitting *sotto voce* (for instance, in planning documents and public discussions for earlier versions of the *DSM*) that many psychiatric diagnoses are constructs of convenience rather than descriptions of biological ailments. This originates in an explicit decision the APA made, during the creation of *DSM-III*, to base diagnoses not on aetiology but on recognizable clusters of symptoms that seem problematic. The APA did so recognizing that this would mean stressing consistency among clinicians in recognizing symptom clusters rather than any other marker of a condition's origins.

A slippery deal, but essential. For by formalizing this scheme, psychiatry can claim medical legitimacy and accompanying insurance coverage and pay rates so that it can help people. Unfortunately, writes Greenberg, this scheme has led everyone, psychiatrists included, to talk about and treat *DSM*'s conceptual constructs as if they are biological illnesses — a habit that has bred troubles ranging from overconfidence to incestuous liaisons with Big Pharma.

Greenberg is in rough harmony with not just many clinicians but also long-time psychiatric leaders such as *DSM-IV* editor Allen Frances, whose own diatribe, *Saving Normal* (William Morrow), to be published this month, charges that the *DSM-5* will "turn overdiagnosis into hyperdiagnosis", and Thomas Insel, the psychiatrist who directs the US National Institute of Mental Health in Rockville, Maryland. Insel tells Greenberg that he hears constantly from psychiatrists who feel trapped by the *DSM*, and that perhaps it's time to "just sort of start over".

Or does the scheme work just well enough to stay afloat? As Greenberg notes, the *DSM*'s diagnoses sometimes work. For many people with Asperger's syndrome, for instance — a diagnosis introduced 19 years ago in the *DSM-IV* — the label helps them to forge a coherent identity, perhaps because it lies outside the norm from which they feel excluded. The differentiation centres rather than marginalizes them. Or, as one

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person with the condition tells Greenberg, “It meant I’m not an asshole. I’m just wired differently.”

The person who said this will probably face a dilemma on 22 May, when the *DSM-5* is published. By all reports, it will expunge Asperger’s, folding it into a tightened autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. Will that person still be wired differently? Studies suggest that anywhere from one-third to three-quarters of people with Asperger’s will fail to secure one of these new autism diagnoses and the accompanying health-insurance coverage and other benefits. And of those who do secure one, few are likely to find in the autism diagnosis the same satisfying fit between workable description and recognizable self-identity.

The annihilation of Asperger’s suggests what may be a key part of psychiatry’s tension. As Greenberg writes, the *DSM*, and psychiatry with it, increasingly “casts its subjects into dry, data-driven stories, freed from the vagaries of hope and desire, of prejudice and ignorance and fear, and anchored instead in the laws of nature”. Yet when psychiatry works, it often works less at a biological than at a humanistic, narrative level, by helping the sufferer to reframe the story of his life and of his place in the world into one that includes a sense of agency, strength and social connection. This is doubtless why a combination of drugs and talk therapy generally works better than just drugs. It also helps to explain why schizophrenia, as described in Ethan Watters’ *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (Free Press, 2010) and in work by Tanya Luhrmann, is much less disabling in cultures — or even treatment regimes — that cast its eccentricities more as variations in human nature than as biological dysfunction.

For more than 100 years, psychiatry has been getting by on pseudo-scientific explanations and confident nods while it waited for the day, always just around the corner, in which it could be a strictly biological undertaking. Part of the *DSM-5*’s long delay occurred because, a decade ago, APA leaders actually thought that advances in neuroscience would allow them write a brain-based *DSM*. Yet, as former APA front liner Michael First, a psychiatrist at Columbia University in New York, confirms on Greenberg’s last page, the discipline remains in its infancy.

Greenberg shows us vividly that psychiatry’s biggest problem may be a stubborn reluctance to admit its immaturity. And we all know how things go when you won’t admit your problems. ■

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Books in brief

The Lost Art of Finding Our Way

John Edward Huth BELKNAP 544 pp. \$35 (2013)

Humanity’s lust for exploring terra incognita shaped and tested our prodigious capacity for mental mapping. Now, with the advent of the Global Positioning System, wayfaring skills are on the wane. Physicist John Edward Huth turns explorer in this rich, wide-ranging and lucidly illustrated primer on how to find yourself in the middle of somewhere. Huth’s prescription for navigating fog, darkness, open ocean, thick forests or unknown terrain rests first on harnessing compass, Sun and stars; then on the subtleties of weather forecasting and decoding markers such as the wind, waves and tides.

The Burning Question: We Can’t Burn Half the World’s Oil, Coal and Gas. So How Do We Quit?

Mike Berners-Lee and Duncan Clark PROFILE 256 pp. £9.99 (2013)

Flabby political will and corridors of disempowerment have not dented the determination of energy writer Duncan Clark and carbon consultant Mike Berners-Lee. Arguing for a moratorium on fossil-fuel extraction, they explain why, citing the evidence on warming, the lack of an international climate-change deal, false energy ‘efficiency’ and the plethora of good techno-fixes. They probe the economic, social and psychological blocks to progress, and lay out a six-step solution — from pushing sustainables to capping carbon. Compelling.

Creation: The Origin of Life/The Future of Life

Adam Rutherford VIKING 272 pp. £20 (2013)

Geneticist and *Nature* editor Adam Rutherford’s two-in-one study cleverly twins the quest to understand how life emerged some 4 billion years ago with today’s race to bio-engineer new life forms. In *The Origin of Life*, he marshals science history and groundbreaking recent research to build up a scenario of proto-cells spontaneously generating in the deep ocean, with a little help from RNA, lipids and mineral deposits. *The Future of Life* focuses on the potential of synthetic biology to create novel, much-needed treatments, fuels and more. Thought-provoking, and double the fun.

My Backyard Jungle: The Adventures of an Urban Wildlife Lover Who Turned His Yard into Habitat and Learned to Live with It

James Barilla YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS 376 pp. \$28 (2013)

The much-probed nexus between humans and the wild gets yet another twist in this engaging chronicle. Environmental writer James Barilla certified his garden in South Carolina as a habitat with the US National Wildlife Federation. When the experiment turned into a feral free-for-all, he sallied forth to study urban wildlife, from the garbage-scoffing macaques of New Delhi to Brazil’s urban marmosets. The findings were unsettling. Ultimately, he argues, creating a “culture of coexistence” is as tough as it is necessary.

Odds Against Tomorrow: A Novel

Nathaniel Rich FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX 320 pp. \$26 (2013)

From Fukushima to Hurricane Sandy, catastrophes come at a hideously high price. Victims and governments feel it one way; insurers another. Nathaniel Rich lights the shadier corners of that number-crunching realm in this incisive novel. Quant Mitchell Zukor has mastered the maths of cataclysms, but his assessments are used to corrupt ends — and immersion in paper disasters fails to prepare him for the real thing. Amusing and petrifying by turns, this is near-future fiction with an edge of the real. [Barbara Kiser](#)