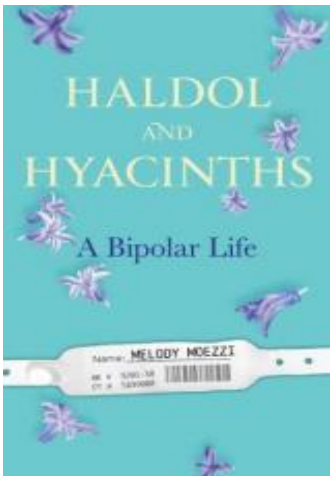
Haldol and Hyacinths

by Melody Moezzi



About the Book

At eighteen, when Melody Moezzi began battling a severe physical illness, her close-knit Iranian-American community stepped up, filling her hospital rooms with roses, lilies, and hyacinths. But when she attempted suicide and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder years later, there were no flowers. Despite several stays in psychiatric hospitals, she was encouraged to keep her illness a secret --- by both her family and an increasingly indifferent medical establishment. Melody quickly realized that ?there?s no pride in being a mental patient?. But in writing HALDOL AND HYACINTHS, she began to overcome her shame, fear and silence in the hopes of inspiring others to do the same.

At twenty-six, Melody was happily married to her college sweetheart, Matthew, nearing completion of her law and Master?s degrees, and finalizing work on her first book, WAR ON ERROR. To the outside world, she was not a candidate for suicide. But Melody had struggled with the highs and lows of undiagnosed and untreated manic-depression for years by that point. Desperate to escape the torment, she tried to take her own life. But she failed, instead finding herself on her first psychiatric ward.

At the time, her greatest concern wasn?t her health or liberty. Rather, it was the possibility of being outed: ??It?s just really important that none of the Iranians find out,?? she told Matthew.

Born to Persian parents at the height of the Islamic Revolution and raised amid a large and vibrant Iranian diaspora in Dayton, Ohio, Melody fit the stereotype of the overachieving child of immigrants to a tee. Now she feared becoming the object of gossip among the community. Mental illness was not something that was discussed among the Dayton Iranians --- despite the fact that the great majority of them were physicians, including both of Melody?s parents. In Melody?s words, Iranians are ?about as likely to discuss their psychological issues as they are to discuss their bowel movements".

So as Melody?s struggles culminated in ?three separate psychiatric hospitalizations and an ever-expanding personal pharmacy?, she remained terrified that her mental illness might become public knowledge, shaming her

family and shocking her community. In time, however, Melody realized that keeping quiet about mental illness doesn?t make it go away.

Since childhood, Melody has been ?an instinctive and intractable activist? (p. 45). So she couldn?t help but recognize that the ignorance, stigma and discrimination surrounding mental illness was no different than that surrounding race, religion, nationality, gender or sexual orientation. As an inveterate human rights activist, she had worked on all those issues, and by the time she went public with her illness in an online commentary for NPR some six months later, she knew that she had a new cause.

Today, through her writing and public speaking, Melody campaigns to raise awareness about mental illness for fellow-sufferers of all backgrounds. Blisteringly honest, poignant, and surprisingly funny, HALDOL AND HYACINTHS is the riveting and provocative first-person account of one bipolar survivor who ?swam to save the others, only to find, upon reaching shore, that they had saved 'her'?.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you or does anyone you know suffer from bipolar disorder? If so, how well does Melody capture what it?s like?

2. If you are a psychiatrist, psychologist, or employed in the field of mental health, did Melody?s experiences change your perspective on the patients in your care?

3. Do you or does anyone you know take psychopharmaceuticals? Have you noticed a discernable difference in your own or another person?s behavior on or off the drugs?

4. As a consumer, do you feel that drug companies provide adequate warning about a medication?s possible side effects?

5. Do you regard mental illness as something shameful or as a treatable malady? What do you feel shaped your opinion?

6. The intake counselor at Stillbrook tells Melody, ?I realize that humor is a coping mechanism for you. It can be helpful sometimes, but it can also be distracting and destructive? (p. 34). How well does Melody use humor to tell her story?

7. In addition to Iranians, many other groups feel that there is a stigma attached to mental illness and are consequently less likely to seek out help. What might be done to ease their fears?

8. Were you familiar with either Melody?s political commentary or her earlier book, War on Error, before reading **Haldol and Hyacinths**? If so, were you surprised to learn that she struggles with bipolar disorder?

9. Melody laments the fact that the mentally ill ?have no especially loud and high-profile advocates?. No pink boas or bracelets or ribbons or T-shirts? (p. 5). Why?at a time when an increasing number of people are taking psycho-pharmaceuticals?aren?t celebrities and other public figures more open about their own battles with mental illness?

10. Are books like **Prozac Diary**, **Noonday Demon**, and now **Haldol and Hyacinths** helping to demystify mental illness? How have attitudes toward mental illness changed since Melody was a girl in the 1980s?

11. While Melody dealt with the physical side of anorexia as a result of her pancreatic tumor and the pain she experienced after eating, she also became familiar with the psychological side when others began praising her for unnecessary weight loss due to her illness. While Melody overcame her struggles with anorexia after her tumor was removed, many others have not. Have you ever complimented someone on her or his weight loss and later learned that it was due to an eating disorder or other illness? Do you agree with Melody when she writes that ?In twenty-first-century America at least, there?s no more than a five-pound difference between [pretty and scary]?? (p. 63)

12. Melody writes that she ?used to believe that all crazy people had a hint of genius in them?or at least a handful of extraordinary insights? (p. 260). Why does our cultural stereotype of mental illness imagine that it walks hand-in-hand with genius or creativity? Does this perception affect the way we treat the mentally ill?

Author Bio

Melody Moezzi is a writer, activist, attorney, and award-winning author. She is a United Nations Global Expert with the U.N. Alliance of Civilizations; a member of the British Council?s Our Shared Future Opinion Leaders Network, and a member of the U.S. State Department?s Generation Change Initiative. Her first book, **War on Error: Real Stories of American Muslims**, earned her a Georgia Author of the Year Award and a Gustavus Myers Center for Bigotry and Human Rights Honorable Mention. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her partner in crime, Matthew, and their cats, Nazanin and Keshmesh.

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