

5.13 The Snake Pit, 1946

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. In addition, I would like to offer a content warning that I will be talking about mental illness and suicide, as well as mental hospitals of the mid-20th Century, and the procedures and practices that were used.

[sombre piano music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Welcome back to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[piano music fades out]

Introduction

Angourie [host]

Here's how I stumbled upon this book. I was in Vancouver, walking through a second-hand bookstore called MacLeod's. This is the type of second-hand bookstore where the shelves are ceiling high and jam-packed; books are stacked in piles on the floor, toppling out of boxes, and shoved into corners. In my big winter coat I feared accidentally bumping something and causing the whole place to crumble. In second-hand bookstores, I like to look for a book I know I'd have a tough time finding elsewhere. It doesn't have to be particularly rare or valuable – just something I've never seen before, something that's curious, something I want to know more about. Walking through MacLeod's, I laid my eyes on a brightly coloured paperback resting on a stack of old clothbound books. It didn't belong there – it was like someone had put the book down with a mind to put it elsewhere, but had forgotten about it. And it drew my attention not only because it was colourful, but because the cover was a 1940s-style illustration of a woman who looked like ... was that ... Ingrid Bergman? I picked up the book and looked at it more closely. *The Snake Pit* by Mary Jane Ward. The tagline: "A Beautiful Woman's Fight for Sanity." I turned it over and skimmed through the blurb. "...best-selling novel and Twentieth Century Fox film triumph, starring Olivia de Havilland." Ah, yes, now I saw it was Olivia de Havilland. That tagline intrigued me, and as I looked closer at the illustration on the front, I saw that Olivia de Havilland was behind a chain-link fence, and her head surrounded by a circle of numbers: 12, 8, 14, 33 ... was she in prison? No; a mental hospital.

I took the book with me as I continued my browse around the store, and finding nothing else as interesting as *The Snake Pit*, I took it to the counter.

"Oh, I've read this," said the gentleman at the counter.

"Is it good?" I asked.

"Yes, it's fascinating. Very interesting. Have you seen the movie?"

“No,” I said. “But I’ll read the book and then watch it.”

“It was revolutionary at the time, of course. People didn’t talk about mental health back then.”

The Book

If you haven’t been to *The Community Library* before; welcome. My name is Angourie, and I’m an actor and podcaster, and I love reading and talking about books. And I particularly love finding books that have an interesting – if somewhat forgotten – legacy, such as *The Snake Pit*. Published in 1946, this slim novel of only 188 pages was an instant success. Book of the Month Club selection, New York Times Bestseller, the rights to the movie were sold before it was even published, and when the film was released in 1948, it was nominated for six Academy Awards including Best Actress and Best Picture. And I had never even heard of it. Here’s what it’s about, according to the inside blurb of my 1949 edition:

About This Book

In all the current welter of books and movies about insanity and psychiatrists, Mary Jane Ward’s *The Snake Pit* stands out for its unusual authenticity and drama. Dr. Frederic Wertham, noted psychoanalyst, wrote in the *Nation*: “*The Snake Pit*, by Mary Jane Ward, is an excellent book. The author has evaded the current literary conventions about psychiatry and has risen above her material.”

The story of *The Snake Pit* is quite simple. Virginia Cunningham, pretty, happily married, a successful novelist, breaks down from too much work and worry and finds herself in Juniper Hill, a mental hospital. *The Snake Pit* is her story, told in moments of comparative sanity – the story of a diseased mind fighting to regain its health and freedom against the Kafkaesque tribulations and setbacks of a typical institution. Juniper Hill is no better and no worse than most such institutions – understaffed and still experimenting in the hidden depths of the human soul. What shock lies in the book consists in the average reader’s complacent lack of knowledge as to what goes on in such places.

That last sentence is interesting to me, now having read the book. “What shock lies in the book, consists in the average reader’s complacent lack of knowledge as to what goes on in such places.” The blurb was right about one thing: the overwhelming feeling I had while reading the book was indeed shock, but not entirely from the revelation of “what goes on in such places.” My shock was more that this brilliant gem of a book hadn’t solidified itself as a classic alongside *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *The Bell Jar*, or any of Virginia Woolf’s works. This book is so much more than an exposé of the practices and treatments that occurred in mental hospitals in the 1940s. Mary Jane Ward wrote in a critique of the film script: “The novel is primarily an adventure story. The protagonist’s adventures in a mental hospital are as strange and weird to her as Alice’s in Wonderland.” This is precisely what *The Snake Pit* is; it’s weird and wonderful, oddly comical, naturally heart-breaking. And it puts you in the shoes of a woman who doesn’t understand where she is; just like Alice, but is constantly confronted with Cheshire Cats telling her:

“we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

The narrative structure, too, is reminiscent of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As Virginia’s mental state worsens and betters and worsens again, she is moved from ward to ward, encountering strange characters in the patients and nurses. None of them have ever heard of the patients or nurses from the other wards: each ward is its own contained environment, and Virginia moves through each one as if in a dream.

But the audience is with her the whole way; we experience the whole thing through her perspective. The writing is so masterful because it confuses us in the same way it confuses Virginia. Slang specific to each ward is thrown in with no explanation, and Virginia and the reader both struggle to understand what it all means. Is Petey a name? No, it’s an abbreviation: P.T.. Parent Teacher Association? Oh, Physical Training. Tubs? Is that bath-time? No – it’s something much worse. Shock? Both Virginia and the reader realise that one is self-explanatory. Perspective in this story is everything. And so how did Mary Jane Ward do this? Through first person? Wait, no, it’s something more than that ... this part here is in second person. “[E]ven as you weep you know it will be only a few minutes before you will sink into the paraldehyde emptiness.” Mary Jane Ward achieves something spectacular by constantly switching between three perspectives. It was so seamless I didn’t notice it at first, but as I picked up on it I began to see how deftly Ward shifts between them, often within one paragraph, and sometimes within the same sentence.

[sombre piano music fades in]

Presently the rack of nightgowns was pushed in, but the nurse gave Virginia one of the Christmas gowns. Just inside of the neck, at the back, was one of the small labels which were so easy to sew on and which you had been unable to manage. A new number had been added to your label. The 14 was crossed off and now there was a 33. How swiftly I fly backward.

[piano music fades out]

In four sentences, we go through three perspectives. “The nurse gave Virginia one of the Christmas gowns,” that’s third person. “A new number had been added to your label,” that’s second person – a perspective that’s rarely used but can be very effective, as it is here. And finally, we get first person, as if we are Virginia: “How swiftly I fly backward.” Larry Lockridge writes:

The representation of her mind shifts from one pronominal station to another, leaving us with little sense of a single narrator. [...] Mary Jane Ward creates a representation of mental instability on the level of basic linguistic construction. Virginia isn’t clear who or where she is, maybe even *if* she is.

There’s a purposefulness in the writing that makes me think nothing in this story is a coincidence, including the name of our heroine. Another writer who played with shifting

perspectives and stream-of-consciousness writing was Virginia Woolf. She was also known to struggle with her mental health, experiencing depressive episodes, and modern psychiatrists have said she possibly had bipolar disorder. Though there's no scholarship on the connections between Virginia Woolf and *The Snake Pit*, it cannot be a coincidence that Ward gave her heroine a name so associated with women's literature and mental illness. Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941, the same year Mary Jane Ward was committed to Rockland State Psychiatric Hospital in upstate New York.

You see, Mary Jane Ward didn't make this story up. In 1941, she began experiencing insomnia and high stress to the point of becoming incoherent. She spent eight and a half months at Rockland, where she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. She was released in February of 1942, and by 1945 she had sent her manuscript of *The Snake Pit* to a publisher. Within a week of its publication in 1946, the book hit number 2 on the New York Times Best Seller list. At first, Mary Jane Ward denied any connection between herself and the book's subject, according to Lockridge, "writing in a book jacket blurb that 'none of the characters of *The Snake Pit* ever existed in real life.'" But later that same year, she revealed the semi-autobiographical nature of the book, as is evident from a 1946 newspaper clipping showing a picture of Mary Jane with the caption:

"The Snake Pit" is not autobiographical, but it was based in part on her own experience as a patient for nine months in a mental hospital. She says, "I have no more qualms about saying I had a nervous breakdown than if I'd had tuberculosis or any other illness."

Perhaps what sets this novel apart is its reality – not only in its basis on the author's real experience, but also in how it's written. Orville Prescott writes in his review for the *New York Times*: "[Miss Ward's] ability to make the plight of a patient in an insane asylum seem not just horrible or pitiful, but natural and understandable, is remarkable." It works because the novel is insular and personal, but also suggests that this story is much bigger than just Virginia Cunningham of New York. Its connection to Virginia Woolf comments on women's mental health in literature, and its similarity to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* expands the story even further to one of – as the author herself puts it – "adventure". It's an odyssey; it's twelve labours before freedom. It is – as the unpublished dedication reads – "to those who have no credit at the store."

[piano music fades in]

The Movie

How do you adapt a book like *The Snake Pit*? A book so rooted in a single perspective, and yet which also shifts pronominal viewpoint? A book that blends reality with hallucinations? A book so purposeful in placing the audience inside our protagonist's mind? I was half-way through writing this episode about the book when I sat down to watch the film. I went into it with what felt like a million questions, and I came out with only three. Is it a faithful adaptation? Is it a good adaptation? And is it a good film?

[opening titles music of *The Snake Pit* plays in the background: dramatic orchestral music with trombones and violins]

Darryl F. Zanuck
presents

Olivia
de Havilland

in
the snake
pit

[music fades out]

The film begins in the exact same way as the book; with Virginia sitting on a bench in the sun, confused and too hot, replying to a man who keeps asking her questions.

[the following audio clip is taken from the movie]

Man: “Do you hear voices?”
Virginia: “You think I’m deaf? Of course, I hear yours.”

Angourie

We hear three voices: the man’s, Virginia’s out-loud response to the man’s questions, and Virginia’s voice over narration, which clues the audience in to what she’s thinking. This is a frequent solution to the perpetual dilemma of translating a book character’s internal monologue onto the screen. But though all three elements of the book are there, there’s one crucial difference: we are watching Virginia from the outside. Of course we are – this is film, we’re talking about. But it’s more than that. In the opening scene of the book, the man’s voice turns into that of a young boy. Virginia turns to look and sees a young girl. The girl speaks with the man’s voice, but now it’s gibberish, and now he’s gone. The figures around her shapeshift, and everything is too bright and too hazy. In the film, we see none of this. Not the doctor, not the little girl. We instead stay focussed on Virginia in a medium close up. Even though we hear the voice of the doctor asking her questions, it’s echoey and distant. We know it’s happening in her head. We know she’s talking to herself. We know she’s crazy.

Is it a good adaptation?

In comparison to novels, film is a much more objective medium. The audience watches the action unfold not from inside a character’s head, but from a third party: the camera. This has always been the trouble with book to film adaptations; some books, like *The Snake Pit*, use perspective in a way that is integral to how the audience experiences the story. And when that’s gone, as a natural by-product of film adaptation, the way the audience experiences the story is completely different. The opening sequence of the film follows

Virginia being led back into the hospital. In the book, the audience is just as confused as she is. Because she's our only point of contact to what's happening, we experience the story through her skewed gaze. But with a film; the audience naturally notices and understands more than Virginia does.

There are times when the film leans into Virginia's perspective. There are POV shots when Virginia enters a new ward and meets the women there for the first time. We sometimes get visual representations of her hallucinations, and it's very striking and effective. But there are times when the story leaves Virginia behind completely. There are scenes of the doctors talking to each other about Virginia's case; there's even a whole flashback sequence of how Virginia first met her husband. If the book is a portrait of Virginia Cunningham, the film is more of a landscape of a mental hospital.

Does that make it a bad adaptation, I ask myself? No, I do not think it does. They worked with what they had: a book with a viewpoint that was difficult to adapt for the screen. And this shift in perspective was intentional. While the film was in production in 1947, Thomas F. Brady updated the readers of *The New York Times* on the direction the film was taking:

[T]he scenarists have departed from the author's subjective treatment of her experience in an insane asylum, and have written an objective photoplay. The director is avoiding montages and impressionistic photography, he said, and a large part of the action is being photographed from the viewpoint of the psychiatrist [...] who treats the heroine.

It's a different take on the story, one that offers the viewer a more objective understanding of how mental hospitals ran in the 1940s. But there is something I didn't like about the way the screenplay adapted the book, and that was the character of the aforementioned "psychiatrist who treats the heroine": Dr. Kik.

Is it a faithful adaptation?

Dr. Kik is Virginia's primary doctor. He's kind, he's on her side, he seems interested in her as a person, not just as another patient they need to get rid of to make room for more. He's one of only two other constant characters in the novel; the other being Virginia's husband Robert. But even so, Dr. Kik as a character is nebulous and hazy. He flits in and out of the narrative like a ghost – more of a presence than a real person. Because the novel isn't about Dr. Kik diagnosing Virginia and trying to figure out how to fix her. Isa Kapp writes in a 1946 review for *The New York Times*:

Miss Ward [...] is content to be minutely observant rather than analytical. Perhaps the qualities of tact and truth that one finds in "The Snake Pit" have something to do with Miss Ward's rejection of formal solutions.

The point of the story is not why she got sick or why she gets better. Mary Jane Ward hints at it at most; money problems and post-war depression possibly led to Virginia's break down, and a catalyst for her recovery is in the title. If throwing a sane person into a snake pit drives them insane, maybe putting an insane person in the pit shocks them into sanity.

Being thrown into a metaphorical snake pit full of women much sicker than her is perhaps what starts Virginia's recovery. But the book does not present these as factual reasons why; they are merely factors. Because the novel is just about Virginia's experience. The drama is found in Virginia wanting to get well, and the reader wanting her to get well, too.

But the film does care about these "formal solutions". The film is split into parallel storylines: Virginia's efforts to get well again, *and* Dr. Kik uncovering Virginia's backstory – which is unwilling to divulge. The film's emphasis on finding out the truth implies that Virginia will only get well once the doctors know the reason why she broke down – and, consequently, once Virginia faces the reason, herself. This is exactly what happens. As Bosley Crowther writes in his 1948 review of the film: "[B]y following, through flashbacks, the drama of her earlier life, [the film] gives a good Freudian explanation for her illness, on which to base her cure." Dr. Kik explains to Virginia that it all started when she was a child, her mother never gave her enough love, her father stepped into that caring role, and she never recovered when her father took her mother's side against her. Dr. Kik says: "[T]he patient's main problem happens to be a complete inability to accept [her husband's] love ... or the love of any man she could think of as a husband." But once she faces her Freudian relationship with her father, Virginia is able to heal and accept a man's love again. Problem, effect, solution, happily ever after. I think you can guess from my scornful tone that this is not in the book.

Dr. Kik in the novel does present a Freudian theory of sorts. The details are different, but it's the same in essence. But in the novel, the doctor's theory is not the revelation it is for movie-Virginia. Book-Virginia finds his theory ridiculous – embarrassing for him, even. She thinks his theory is "the sort of thing that would be nice in a book." She realises he's not the "man of science" she first thought him to be, rather, "a man of romance." It's a poignant moment of disillusion. In Mary Jane Ward's clever, sing-song writing style, Virginia thinks: "I do not like thee, Dr. Kik—now that I am not so sick." This ending reinforces the point of the book: it's not a psychoanalytic study, it's an exploration of compassion, understanding, and, ultimately, adventure. Dr. Kik turns out to not be the hero Virginia originally thought he was. But in the film, Dr. Kik is a bit of a hero. In a way that is, plot-wise, unfaithful to the book, but I think also unfaithful to the overall thesis and intention of the book.

Is it a good film?

But for all its Hollywood conventions of Freudian theory and female domesticity, I do think the film is good. It works as a self-contained, separate entity from the book. It's dramatic, it's emotional, and the performances are stellar. And almost seventy-five years later, I think the film is still quite confronting. Though all motion pictures at the time were bound by the restrictions of the Production Code, the film features really intense sequences of Virginia undergoing electroshock therapy, hydrotherapy, and being put into a straitjacket. Coupled with dramatic music and Olivia de Havilland's incredible performance, it has a powerful effect. It was also just surprising to see so many women in one movie – especially women of all ages, heights, sizes, all looking unglamorous. A shock to see Olivia de Havilland, too, with her hair so undone and her dress so ill-fitting – in comparison to other films of that era. The film had a huge impact when it was released, too. Not just in good reviews and award nominations, but also in the debate it stirred.

Debate

Bosley Crowther wrote a glowing review for *The New York Times*, only to follow it up ten days later with another article entitled “Question of Exhibition.” He didn’t rescind his positive comments, but wondered

whether this subject is apt for our screens which, as yet, make no general distinctions in the groups and ages to which they direct their appeals. [...] [I]t does seem a most precarious picture to shoot suddenly at a crowd of innocent movie-goers of all ages, dispositions and states of mind.

He suggested the film be shown “in theatres of limited capacities catering to an adult clientele.” What he really seems to be asking for is a standardised film rating system, and content warnings, but he’d have to wait twenty years for the former, and seventy-five years later and we’re still enduring debates about the latter. People in the UK also wanted to limit audiences seeing *The Snake Pit*, but for a different reason.

Special to *The New York Times* from London, March 28, 1949

In an attempt to prevent “The Snake Pit” [...] from being shown in Great Britain, 140 nurses and other members of the staffs of several mental hospitals sent a letter of protest to the British Board of Film Censors. The signers allege that the movie, if shown here would be detrimental to the British mental nurses. “As the general public is in almost complete ignorance of the care and attention given to patients in our hospitals,” the letter said, “they would associate American treatment with British hospitals.”

But after “a long fight to get the movie through British censorship,” the film opened in the UK on the 19th of May, 1949, albeit eight minutes shorter, and “licensed for exhibition to adults only.” What was in those eight minutes the British Board of Film Censors cut from the film? According to *Variety*: “the censor had deleted all sequences showing mental home inmates with straitjackets and lighter scenes which evoked audience laughter.” But even with these measures, the small English town of Swaffham still banned the film.

In response to all of the controversy surrounding the film’s release in the UK, the *New York Times* wrote that

[A] spokesman for Twentieth Century-Fox [...] declared that “it would be tragic if a protest of this kind prevented the people of the United Kingdom from seeing ‘The Snake Pit,’ which the whole American public has welcomed as a great stride toward breaking through the darkness that has clouded this theme.

That last statement might be a little bit of an exaggeration. As we saw with Bosley Crowther, the film was well-received, but also sparked debate, particularly in regards to the way mental hospitals were run. There is varying scholarship on how directly the film influenced changes in policies and increased budgets for mental hospitals, but there certainly was an

uptick in public interest and policy changes. Some, much like the nurses in the UK, were eager to prove their difference from the representation in the film.

The New York Times, April 29, 1949

100 VISITORS TOUR MENTAL HOSPITAL

After Seeing State Institution in Brooklyn, All Agree It Is Not a 'Snake Pit'

"It wasn't at all like the movie," said Mrs. Ida Silon of Manhattan Beach. "I would say, rather, it was very interesting." [...] Dr. Nina Ridenour, chairman of the newly created division of education of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, [...] said it was [...] important for the public to realize that patients in a mental hospital "had the same feelings as anyone else."

What happened?

There is no doubt this book and movie made a splash – a big one. And the conversations and debates I was reading about in these papers from seventy-five years ago were not so different from the op-eds I read today. But the strangest thing to me is that ... this fame didn't last. Why isn't *The Snake Pit* up there with *Catch-22* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? It preceded both of these novels by 20 years, was made into an Academy Award-winning film, and, just like *Catch-22*, it coined a phrase. "Snake Pit" became a synonym for a mental hospital, and later, a general state of chaotic disorder and distress. So what happened? How did we forget about it? Scanning through the *New York Times* archives, in the decade after its success, *The Snake Pit* was mostly referenced as a benchmark for all other books or films about mental illness, and very few lived up to the high standard it set. And then through the sixties it was referenced mostly in obituaries of people who worked on the film, or else in reviews of Mary Jane Ward's subsequent books. And then into the seventies, the book had merely become the phrase which it coined.

Perhaps I'm playing up its obscurity. Just because I've never heard of something, doesn't mean it's not well-known. But in comparison, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published just sixteen years later and also about patients in a mental hospital, is one I have heard of. Over 676,000 people have marked it as "read" on Goodreads, as opposed to *The Snake Pit's* 510. *Cuckoo* has been named one of the greatest novels of all time, was featured on TIME Magazine's 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005, and is studied in schools and universities. *The Snake Pit* novel, meanwhile, doesn't even have its own Wikipedia page.

It's still difficult to get your hands on the book now. The book was long out of print until its 75th Anniversary edition reprint in 2021 by the Library of America. But even then, you cannot get that edition in the UK or Australia. It makes me sad because I truly think this is not only an interesting book, but has an interesting story around it. And that's why I made this episode today. Though I did want to analyse this book and its film adaptation, I also wanted to share something that I stumbled upon. I did all the digging through archives so you don't have to; and I hope this inspires a bit of curiosity in you to try and find the book,

or watch the movie. Because this story sparked debate and discussion in social and political spheres, and I think, seventy-five years later, it still has a lot to say.

[twinkly piano and clarinet theme music fades in]

Outro

Thank you very much for listening, I hope you enjoyed this episode. If you liked it, I have more episodes on more recent book to film adaptations such as *Clueless*, *Percy Jackson* and *Twilight*, But if you prefer the old-timey stuff, I also have episodes on Shakespeare and Jane Austen, *The Great Gatsby*, and Marilyn Monroe. If you'd like to hear more from me, be sure to subscribe or follow or favourite on your podcast platform of choice, and you can also follow me on Instagram @the_community_library. I'll talk to you in two weeks' time. Bye.

[theme music fades out]