

# Writing, 'recovery' and madness. Conversations with Kathryn Littlewood.

by Phoebe Anson

## Introduction by Brendan Stone

Kathryn Littlewood is a Sheffield writer and artist. Her community enterprise Flippin' Mental Theatre is supported by the mental health charity Sheffield Flourish, of which I am a Director and Trustee. Kathryn's 2015 memoir *Cultivating Madcow* is an account of her experiences of mental illness and the aftermath of a near-fatal attempt to take her own life. The story it tells is dramatic and moving, but what marks it out as unusual in a genre we might broadly call 'recovery stories' are a number of striking motifs and characteristics. These include the memoir's highly imagistic and novelistic style, its use of dark anarchic humour, fantasy, and playful self-reference, the ways in which indicators of chaos and madness often cut through an orderly delineation of chronology or plot, and its overall sense of subversion. A strong sense of a messy, complex, and uncompromised individuality is evident in the interplay between Kathryn, the 'character', and Kathryn the narrator. The total effect, for me anyway, is of an implicit resistance to orthodoxies of how 'recovery' should happen, and to flattening, homogenising discourses about 'mental health'. Kathryn never preaches to her reader and there is no explicit 'message' here, but what I take from the book is an encouragement to identify and cherish our own passions and habits and eccentricities – to celebrate the quirks of our personalities imprinted on us by particular histories, cultures and geographies, while holding dear our relationships with others. Above all, we should seek to 'cultivate' our own singular voice and style, and describe our lives in terms we have chosen ourselves.

In the summer of 2020 I supervised a Sheffield Flourish project in which Phoebe Anson, a Sheffield Flourish volunteer and student of English Literature at the University of Sheffield, sought to understand more about Kathryn's work in order to draw out lessons and insights which might be of use to others. Phoebe's report is below. I'd like to thank Kathryn Littlewood for her support and Phoebe for the very intelligent and thoughtful way she approached this project during the middle of a global pandemic.

-----

## Writing, 'recovery' and madness

Phoebe Anson

*"The way we see ourselves is always influenced by how other people see us and you know, some people categorize you [...] in a way that isn't correct and is quite negative. And those negative opinions that other people hold of you, I guess can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and it's easier to start believing what other people label you as, you know?"*

Kathryn Littlewood

Perhaps writing and sharing a life story has the potential to enable individuals to work through what has happened or is still happening to them, and through the use of language to reshape selfhood as well as others' perceptions. Through Sheffield Flourish's Brendan Stone, I had the opportunity to meet, interview and learn about local writer and creator Kathryn Littlewood, and especially about her memoir *Cultivating Madcow*.

Kathryn's book defies all expectations of a memoir or a typical recovery story and delivers the message that writing, and any other form of self-expression, is a significant tool that should not be disregarded by mental health services. The book was written during a difficult period of Kathryn's life; it explores her mental health downward spiral, her attempted suicide, and the beginning of her recovery process. Within the book, the reader also gets to see the many strange and often amusing circumstances she found herself in. It opens with a humorous lament to a mental health service phone operator named Barry White, 'The occasional playboy, the occasional telephone counsellor.' The first chapter lays the groundwork for what is a stunningly chaotic and powerful take on the recovery story and a striking example of the value of creative expression.

### What do I mean by recovery story?

The idea of recovery is complex – there are also debates about whether the term is particularly helpful for people living with serious mental illnesses. For many, recovery is not at all simple and is actually a lifelong, ongoing and far from linear process. So while the recovery story (or the 'recovering' story) might theoretically be a useful tool to aid personal development it's important that its form and structure are not at odds with the often messy realities of recovering. While there is no right or wrong way to tell your story, arguably a set of genre conventions have emerged (eg a neutral, distanced authorial voice and formulaic plot structure). One might well be concerned that to stray too far from these conventions would not be well received, and the value of one's narrative disregarded.

Kathryn's book stands out as a very unusual 'recovery story'. Even from the title, you can tell it will not be typical. It almost seems like a novel as it is infused throughout with such an artistry of language, a unique voice, and even a very effective use of humour. The title *Cultivating Madcow* also demonstrates how she is reclaiming a word that has been used too often as a misogynistic insult as she embraces her eccentric identity. One of the things I spoke to Kathryn about was the book's unique voice and style:

*'None of this was written in a certain way because I wanted to have a unique voice. I think that happened organically. Everybody's [recovery story] is slightly different, but I guess my book is a little bit different in the way it is so incredibly raw and honest and has that element of humour in it as well, which I think is fairly absent from a lot of people's stories.'*

I also asked whether she knew she had to write the book to be able to get some resolution:

*'On reflection, I probably know more now [than] then about what the intention of my book actually was about. [...] For me, because of the organic process of it, and because I spoke very much from the heart with a natural train of thought, the book just kind of fell together the way it did, [...] mostly because I had a lot of written evidence that I used to put this book together which was written during my manic phase. And that helped create a timeline of events. But I wouldn't have been aware at the time that I was writing it as a recovery story. Looking back, yes. I do think it's a journey towards recovery.'*

Her book then encourages people to write in whatever style they are most comfortable with and stamp their personality all over it, as well as demonstrating the therapeutic value of writing about your experiences.

### The 'ramblings of a mad woman'

Kathryn and her book stand as advocates for the power of writing about your experiences, or even simply writing in general. In the book, Kathryn describes all the various forms of writing she would do during her manic period which include writing emails, chapters of books, and online posts. I spoke to her about her thoughts on writing and whether she felt it was somewhat detrimental to her health during her manic phase:

*'I guess, for me, it was a symptom of my illness rather than actually being the cause of it. So, if I hadn't had been writing, I might have been doing many other things manically. Some of my writing had consequences, for example, Barry being taken away from me, and for example, some of the emails that I sent out to people asking them to marry me. All of those things had a knock-on of other people's lives.'*

Despite the consequences she described, she maintains that writing, and any other form of self-expression, has many benefits in terms of healing yourself after mental trauma.

Kathryn also mentioned to me how her writing was disregarded by mental health services:

*'I was writing while it was happening to me. I was giving my writing over to the psychiatrist that saw me [...] and it was completely ignored. And I felt that the writing was a way of me expressing what I couldn't verbally express. And, in a lot of ways, the writing, even though it was a bit of a mess, it held the key to what was happening to me. And they just assumed that it was the ramblings of a mad woman. And I tend to think that that happens quite a lot in mental health care and treatment. I think that art is often rejected as something fanciful and a fanciful whim, or an irrelevant process of healing oneself.'*

Perhaps if language and writing, and many other forms of self-expression, were encouraged as valuable tools and not disregarded, more people would see the benefits and would feel less afraid to write and put their story out there and get their own feelings of resolution and healing

### Humour in a mental health recovery story?

One of the most notable aspects to Kathryn's book is its clever use of humour. As mentioned earlier, the very start of the book introduces Kathryn's use of dark humour as she describes Barry who worked for 'the Justice League of Lala Land, a government-sanctioned group of superheroes.' While some may prefer to maintain a more serious tone when discussing their mental health experiences, Kathryn shows that using humour in your recovery story does not make it less valid than others:

*'Humour doesn't take away the seriousness of what's happened, nor does it diminish other people's experiences. People are sometimes quite frightened of using humour in mental health and disability for fear of upsetting other people, but actually humour is a wonderful tool to disarm people and it helps to educate people and create equality also. [...] If the author controls the humour and tells it in a way that's funny, then that's okay. It's a hard balance to create a story from such a horrific event, and then to lace it with comic moments. But dark humour is a coping mechanism for me, from the horror of the world.'*

Humour can change a person's perspective of a situation and allow them to see it in a different light. It can often be uncomfortable for the reader but, when the humour is controlled by the author, as suggested by Kathryn, the reader is challenged to reframe their thoughts on a situation and see that humour is simply another acceptable way to cope with negative experiences.

Humour, in its many forms and styles, has allowed her to see and accept that, despite the serious situation she was in, there was indeed some humour in her experiences. Laughter is, after all, a survival tactic and can be very therapeutic. While using humour in a recovery story will not suit everyone, the incorporation of it in Kathryn's book suggests there is no right or wrong way to write and you should do what works best for you to help you get your resolution.

### The Value of Creativity

Something I have been very interested in while researching Kathryn's book is a philosophical notion that the self is in some way 'a work of art' – that is to say, we can choose to consciously and deliberately create, shape, and mould selfhood. For Kathryn, authorship has allowed her to choose how to shape her story and her identity:

*'Sometimes when incidents happen that are so esoteric and weird, like what happened to me, people start putting their own jigsaws together and really all the pieces are all wrong [...] They can't be right, because the only person who knows exactly what happened is the person that it happened to. And so, I wanted to take back control [...] not to control, [but] take ownership of my story by publishing my own book.'*

While all the events depicted in *Cultivating Madcow* are true, through her unique style of writing Kathryn was able to break down and reshape all perspectives of herself, reclaiming ownership of her life and her story.

As well as being able to take back control of her story, the writing of her book also helped her to 'recover', or at least kickstart her own recovery process. As mentioned earlier on, Kathryn discussed how art is often overlooked and disregarded in mental health services and not viewed as the vital tool it is. A mental health service professional even seemed shocked that Kathryn was able to write a book:

*'Everything about that, to me, shows the level of discrimination that some professionals harbour towards people with mental health problems. And therefore, I believe that placing our hands solely with mental health professionals would never be the right thing to do because it's more about connecting with [our] peer group.'*

This feeling of not being believed in demonstrates the discrimination in these services. But despite this, she believes in the significant therapeutic value of art.

A final, important thing I discussed with Kathryn was the importance of being believed in, being appreciated, and being respected for who you are:

*'It's about having somebody who believes in you. And I think that is the key to recovery: being believed in. [...] Those relationships are really, really important. And it's really important that people have the opportunity to come together and connect in different ways other than one to one support from somebody who may not have the answers for you.'*

Despite feeling belittled by mental health services, Kathryn had some very supportive people around her who believed in her ability to write and publish her book. She thus advocates for the importance of having these supportive groups and the difference that can be made by simply having support from your peers .

And it's not just writing she advocates for but any form of creativity or self-expression that suits you as a person and will help you cope with your negative experiences. Her book then stands as a message to anyone and everyone to write that book and create that artwork or do whatever you please to help you find some resolution and healing for yourself.

*'I started writing the book when I wasn't well and I knew that my story was really funny, even though it was also very dark, but I wanted people to know what had happened to me. I didn't think for one minute that it would help me recover, but, looking back now, I understand that I was actually trying to heal myself in the absence of any useful help from the mental health team, or indeed my GP practice when I was at the centre of my illness. So I guess on some instinctive level, I've always known from a very young age that expressing myself creatively has helped to soothe me and not creating things makes me poorly. So I think we're all kind of conditioned into thinking that there's a certain way of doing things and people don't try because they think there is this kind of invisible standard of writing or making art that people should conform to.'*

-----

## **Links**

Kathryn Littlewood's memoir *Cultivating Madcow* is [available to buy](#).

[Sheffield Flourish](#)

[Sheffield Suicide Support](#)