

# THE OUTWARD ROOM

By Millen Brand

Afterword by Peter Cameron

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“It is one of those firmly painted, exquisite miniatures of life, rare among modern books, that contrive to be unsparing and honest, and at the same time refreshing and lovely.” —Theodore Dreiser

**Millen Brand** (1906-1980) taught writing at New York University and worked as a book editor for Crown Publishers. His books include *Local Lives*, a book of poems about the Pennsylvania Dutch; *Savage Sleep*; *Peace March: Nagasaki to Hiroshima*; and *The Outward Room*. In 1948 he was nominated for an Oscar with Frank Partos for their adaptation of Mary Jane Ward’s novel *The Snake Pit*.

**Peter Cameron** is the author of several novels, including *Andorra*, *The Weekend*, and *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*. He lives in New York City.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*The Outward Room* is a spare, deft novel that traces one woman’s path from mental illness to trust, recovery and love. Harriet Demuth has spent the past seven years in a mental hospital, after suffering a nervous breakdown brought on by her older brother’s sudden death in a car accident. Her doctor’s strict Freudianism has done little to alleviate her condition, and so, Harriet decides to take matters into her own hands, escaping from the hospital one night and making her way, alone and completely broke, to New York City.

Once there, Harriet has to learn to make a life and a living for herself, while also braving harsh economic and social realities from which she had been insulated during her time in the hospital. Set against the backdrop of Depression-era New York, Harriet’s own search for self and stability is interwoven with a broader portrait of urban industrial poverty and struggle. Gradually, with the support and love of John, a machine-shop worker whom she meets one night at all-night cafeteria, Harriet is able to shape for herself a life of happiness, strength and sanity. Uplifting and wise, *The Outward Room* is a moving and incisive testament to the transformative power of love.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. Harriet organizes her world in terms of the people and things that are alive and those that are dead. Early on in the novel, when she is still at the mental hospital, we read that she “wanted to forget that there was any meaning to what [the other patients] did or said, and to think of Miss Cummings and the others only as dead.” Later, in the morning after she first sleeps with John, Harriet declares that “she had accepted life” [p. 128]. What does Harriet mean by the terms “life” and “death”? Why are these concepts so central and so pervasive for her?
2. Harriet had her breakdown following her brother’s sudden death. However, Harriet’s loss is not the only one portrayed in the novel. In the first rooming house she stays in, Harriet takes in for the night a woman whose lover has left her [pp. 76-7], and at the end of the novel, we witness John’s reaction to the news of his brother Jimmy’s death [pp. 229-30]. How is grief treated in *The Outward Room*? Do different individuals experience it in distinct ways?
3. When Harriet escapes from the hospital, she chooses for herself the new name Harriet Demuth, which combines Dr. Revlin’s wife’s first name with her own mother’s maiden name [p. 58]. What is the significance of this act of self-naming and of the source of the name’s components? Why do you think she chooses the name she does? Why does Brand never tell us Harriet’s birth name? What effect does this have on the novel’s first fifty-eight pages, when the heroine is referred to merely as “she”?

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**Cassandra at the Wedding**

by Dorothy Baker (afterword  
by Deborah Eisenberg)

**Hard Rain Falling**

by Don Carpenter (introduction  
by George Pelecanos)

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by Elaine Dundy (introduction  
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**A Journey Round My Skull**

by Frigyes Karinthy  
(introduction by Oliver Sacks)

**Part of Our Time: Some Ruins  
and Monuments of the Thirties**

by Murray Kempton  
(introduction by David  
Remnick)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Robertson Davies, *The Manticore*  
(Book 2 of the Deptford Trilogy)

Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

Homer Hickam, *Rocket Boys*

Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

4. Although she has spent the past seven years in a mental hospital isolated from the outside world, Harriet has an ability to make friends quickly and easily. She becomes fast friends with the new nurse Miss Child and, later on, develops a deep and lasting friendship with Anna, whom she knows only from the dressmaker's shop where she worked for less than two weeks. She also befriends Mrs. Helios and George from her first rooming house, the girl Mary from her neighborhood, and John, who takes her home with him after seeing her late at night in an all-night cafeteria. What is it about Harriet that makes her attractive to others? In what ways is she a good friend and companion?
5. Brand describes the development of Harriet and John's relationship in slow and deep detail. And yet, we never see them get into any arguments. Any relationship has its tensions, and theirs especially so, as Harriet is reorienting herself to the outside world and as she refuses to marry John since she fears a relapse. Why don't they fight? Is it a matter of temperament? Does it seem realistic?
6. How are gender roles portrayed in the novel? Are they different in the hospital, with its female patients and nurses and male doctors and guards, from the way they are in New York City? How does the role of working women relate to this? Why doesn't John want Harriet to work at the dressmaker's shop [p. 159]? Is it because she is a woman or is it simply because he is worried about her strength and the work conditions?
7. As soon as Harriet leaves the hospital, money and the cost of food and shelter become huge concerns for her. Brand describes exactly how much it costs her to buy each thing she needs. What effect does this stress on money have on the novel? How does it color the vision we have of the city and, later on, of John and his fellow workers' attempts to organize?
8. Much of the novel describes the physical spaces which Harriet inhabits, and both protagonist and reader spend a great deal of time in the two rooms that make up John's apartment. How does the sense of living in rooms rather than in larger, more open and varied spaces contribute to the urban landscape Brand depicts?
9. Although the city presents social, economic and psychological challenges to Harriet, it is not physically threatening. Even riding on the subway late at night, there is no sense of physical danger, no fear that she might be robbed or attacked. Why is this the case? Is Harriet simply unaware of a threat that does, in fact, exist, or is the city's poverty-stricken underbelly largely violence- and crime-free?
10. After Harriet tells John about her brother's death and her time at the mental hospital, he tells her, "I think I understand. You were brave to tell me what you did. It doesn't change things. I still love you. That's all that matters" [p. 130]. Does John really understand? Why does Harriet trust him so much and so early on?
11. At the end of the novel, as Harriet holds John in her arms, comforting him after his brother's death, she believes that now "her death was ended," and thinks to herself, "Now I can tell him that I know" that I am well and can marry him [p. 230]. Do you believe her? Is she really cured? Why or why not? Do you think that she and John will continue to be happy together?

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