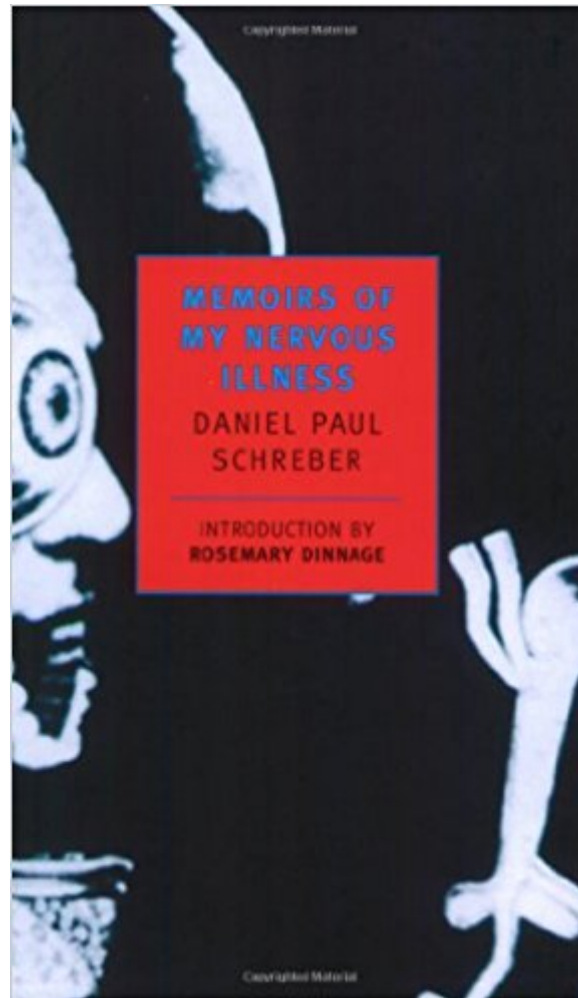




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# Memoirs Of My Nervous Illness (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

In 1884, the distinguished German jurist Daniel Paul Schreber suffered the first of a series of mental collapses that would afflict him for the rest of his life. In his madness, the world was revealed to him as an enormous architecture of nerves, dominated by a predatory God. It became clear to Schreber that his personal crisis was implicated in what he called a "crisis in God's realm," one that had transformed the rest of humanity into a race of fantasms. There was only one remedy; as his doctor noted: Schreber "considered himself chosen to redeem the world, and to restore to it the lost state of Blessedness. This, however, he could only do by first being transformed from a man into a woman...."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Daniel Paul Schreber began *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness* in February 1900 while confined in an asylum, as part of an appeal for release. Schreber, second son (the first committed suicide) of an abusive father, was at the peak of a brilliant career in Leipzig when he was appointed Presiding Judge of the Saxon High Court of Appeals. Alas, the stress of his new job proved too much for him, and before long he was hearing voices and feeling suicidal. Within weeks he was committed, having rapidly descended into madness, and was placed under the care of Dr. Paul Emil Flechsig. From the start, Schreber struggled to make sense of what he was seeing and hearing, and in fact *Memoirs* is so lucid and self-aware, so internally consistent and insightful, that he was released on

its strength. Still, reading this man's prose is a lesson in subjective reality, by turns funny and terrifying. I existed frequently without a stomach.... In the case of any other human being this would have resulted in natural pus formation with an inevitably fatal outcome; but the food pulp could not damage my body because all impure matter in it was soaked up again by the rays. As Christianity alone could not explain what seemed to be happening to him, Schreber pieced together a complex theology involving a divided God with dark and light incarnations, whose "rays" and "nerves" interacted in various ways with humans. God was also his personal tormentor, in league with Flechsig to commit "soul-murder" by manipulating his nerves. Further, Schreber believed that he was being literally "unmanned" so that God could sexually violate him and conceive a new human race: "But as soon as I am alone with God ... I must continually or at least at certain times strive to give divine rays the impression of a woman in the height of sexual delight..." Schreber had a hard time believing in the "fleeting-improvised-men" who flitted in and out of his life, and grew convinced that he was the only human left in a world of shadows. But he did know that something was wrong. He would hear the birds in the asylum's garden ask him, over and over, "Are you not ashamed?" And he was aware that his bellowing, banging on the piano, and other bodily manifestations of God's manipulation of his nerves (or "miracles") were startling to others, to say the least. Many of Schreber's delusions had to do with escaping his body--the constant babble of thousands of voices in his head were infuriating, as was his inability to cease thinking: The sound which reaches my own ear--hundreds of times every day--is so definite that it cannot be a hallucination. The genuine "cries of help" are always instantly followed by the phrase which has been learnt by rote: "If only the cursed cries of help would stop." *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* succeeds on many levels: as a memoir, as imaginative literature, and as a serious work of mythology. Flechsig makes a menacing and inscrutable villain, representing materialistic thinking and conventional reality--no help at all. Schreber, meanwhile, is the classic hero, struggling to stay sane in a cruel and capricious universe.

--Therese Littleton

Text: English, German --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I wonder what cases he was working on while he was a judge and wonder if his work on them had threatened anyone in power, and thus Schreber was targeted. If true, I don't think they expected Schreber to experience what he did and even less so, bravely and courageously write it down for all the world to see. What did he see? Perhaps the true state of one's being (the construct that is one's mind) that somehow got dislodged, which when it found itself outside the mind, didn't know quite

what to do about it.

Not finished yet. A very hard read. Not enthused about the writing style. I've been reading it for several months now and just can't quite get it done. But there are some very plausible concepts to what is being spoken about, for instance I see some correlations with some of the Seth concepts about reality, space and time. I guess overall it's an okay book, just time consuming.

One of my most cherished books in my library. This book is easy to misunderstand, in its intent and its revelation. I cannot even claim any authoritative knowledge, so this is only an interpretation. I think that the history of horrible and sadistic abuse at the hands of his father and the fact that his elder brother became mentally ill as well and then committed suicide only overshadows the importance of Schreber's experience and message. Knowing his history allows the reader to be dismissive about the authenticity of his experience. And that is exactly what one should not do. What should strike the reader is how "sane" Schreber comes across as with the rational, almost objective and detached, and lucid way he writes about his illness and experience in the book. He is most definitely in control of his cognitive functions and he proves this to be the case by being freed from institutionalization and returning to the bench. That said, he is still utterly convinced of the truth of his experience, and while able to function quite normally, he refuses to see his experience as delusional, that is, he still believes in the authenticity of his experience and his religious and metaphysical claims. It was this point that intrigued me the most. Now, if you were to be institutionalized for paranoid delusions, you would not be released if you maintained that your delusions were real and not delusions (at least, the doctors would not recommend you leaving even if you checked in voluntarily). How is the reader to take the paradox that Schreber presents: is he truly mentally fit by the end of the book or is he still ill due to his insistence upon the reality of his delusions? It is this problem that should make the reader begin to take Schreber more seriously and allow them to analyze the philosophy in his experience instead of glossing over it as sick fantasy. Or should we take Schreber seriously? In analyzing the world view in his memoirs I would say we should give him a charitable reading. Because of my conviction, I think of this book as more of a work of philosophy, specifically metaphysics, than the writings of a madman. While this memoir is an insightful look into the mental constructs of a paranoid schizophrenic it holds much more in its pages that needs to be accounted for. It is well known that schizophrenics have a tendency towards entertaining, as well as acting upon, strange religious constructs of their own mind (modulo the question why, that is for the psychotherapist to answer) but a treatment of Schreber's highly

developed and thorough system would not be a waste of time and should be taken up. Here are some particulars that come to mind: his incorporation of a misunderstood zoroastrianism, his developed cosmology/cosmogony that includes a concern of extraterrestrial states of the universe, his preoccupation with evil and redemption, concern over the state of affairs of reality versus his own, an insistence on his own existential import in abrogating any danger to others, an equal insistence on non-violence even when he thought his person to be under threat, a peculiar ontology that admits immaterial objects as having substance, a philosophy of mind that gives explanatory power to a theory on the mind-body problem, and etc. I say all this in order to put forth the idea that had Schreber not been a schizophrenic, his metaphysics would, or at least parts of it should, be taken serious from a philosophical standpoint. Instead we have clinicians giving theories on why he had such delusions rather than countenancing the importance or non-importance of them philosophically. If you want to chalk up his memoirs as just a horrible experience of a madman and not a carefully thought out system, then you can. But, you will have to give some account for the fact that when he fashioned the book for publication it was according to a thematic (not chronological, but instead analytic) system by a man in control of his cognitive abilities. And, you will also need to give an account of how a madman was cognitively able to write such an accomplishment when no schizophrenic since has been able to do the same. Regardless of my own convictions in why you should read the book (philosophy aside), this book is ultimately a sublime treatise on the perseverance of the human spirit. Despite the sometimes horrific experiences that Schreber relates (this book is not for the timid of heart), he is always positive and upbeat in his telling. The fact that he is convinced that he will get through it is uplifting; and even though he was re-institutionalized for the remainder of his life after the death of his wife eight years later, his indomitable spirit of hope for himself and mankind leaves the reader challenged to do the same in the face of extraordinary circumstances.

Great, fast

new

An extraordinary account by Daniel Paul Schreber of his breakdown, his "hallucinations", his journey. A classic book in psychiatry. It is thrilling. So many of the terms he uses vibrate with us today: soul murder, nerve rays, his connection with God which involves both control and surrender, the way his hallucinations enabled him to act out being a woman in sexual intercourse (something

he thought about just before he went mad). Freud spoke of hallucinations as restoring lost objects. Schreber spoke of a blackout in which the world (and self) were destroyed, then "miracled up" (his term) again in a new key. Freud's writings on Schreber (based on Schreber's memoir) are a must too. The two together make one of the most thrilling trips through a mad dimension that is relevant for every human being. I write of both Schreber and Freud from a contemporary viewpoint in my chapter on Schreber in *The Psychotic Core*. Right now I happen to be thinking of Phillip K Dick - the words that most appear in a word count of his writings were psychosis and schizophrenia. I don't know if he read Schreber or Freud's account of Schreber - but he would have loved them. Michael Eigen

Author, *Flames from the Unconscious*

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