Experts assess... books on drug treatment in the mental health field, the role of spirituality in social work and a professional's memoirs from 37 years' practice

I would recommend this as easy but challenging reading for any "illness"-based subscriber, and the content will ring true for users and psychiatric survivors as reassuring.

Tina Goldham is a national development consultant at the Health and Social Care Advisory Service

**Social Work and Spirituality**

*Ian Mathews*

Learning Matters
ISBN 978184451944

This is a most timely book by Ian Mathews, a respected lecturer with a long-standing record in practice, writes Peter Gilbert. Just as health and social care have become increasingly disillusioned with arid targets and oppressive and uninspiring managerialism, words and phrases such as spirituality and dignity are back on the agenda. Mathews addresses a major paradox, however, as to why social work "often seems to be oblivious" to spirituality as an agenda.

Psychiatrists, occupational therapists and nurses have been discussing spirituality and bringing it into practice over recent years, but social work, which prides itself as being a holistic profession, seems to find it a difficult subject to grapple with. Mathews argues that "social work is impoverished because of its lack of engagement with spirituality", and that we all need to be aware of our own inner spirit and that of those we work with.

Mathews sets spirituality within the national occupational standards, which students and practitioners will find helpful. He starts by defining spirituality, and its differences and congruences with organised religion. As the cultural mix of the UK broadens, a person's religion will be an increasingly important element in care. But many people define themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" and respected commentators such as Moss, Holloway and Gilligan have pointed to this unmet need.

The book has helpful chapters on the cultural context of spirituality, communities, and on working with older people, people with disabilities, those in mental distress and children. Researchers such as David Hay have pointed to the innate spirituality of children and how this is often ignored to the detriment of child care.

My only slight disappointment is that the book does not refer to some of the North American approaches to social work and spirituality, but this is a minor quibble.

As research by the National Institute for Mental Health in England has found, service users are increasingly wanting attention to their spiritual and/or religious dimension. Social work students are also voicing an increasing desire to discuss this as a part of their professional practice.

My thanks to Ian Mathews for addressing this need so cogently.

Peter Gilbert is professor of spirituality at Staffordshire University, and former director of social services for Worcestershire

**Are you the Lady from the Welfare?**

*Alison Thompson*

Pen Press
ISBN 9781906701053: £8.99

Memoirs written by social workers should make for powerful books, writes Rob Fountain. Working with people in vulnerable situations gives a social worker access to the extremes of the human condition. Alison Thompson's reflections on her career are certainly full of anecdotes, revealing the good, the bad and the ugly that pass through a statutory fieldwork office.

What is the audience for such an account, though? Social workers all collect their own stories so, although there may be some interest in sporting "I had one like that", reading about another practitioner's caustics is ultimately unfufilling.

This book, promoted as a defence of a beleaguered profession, appears to be aimed at non-social workers. Readers will certainly gain a sense of the challenges faced by statutory workers and will meet interesting people and situations they may otherwise never encounter.

In pursuit (presumably) of accessibility the depth of explanation is, though, often superficial. Indeed, in several places, the lack of analysis or lazy acceptance of a layman's interpretation may even reinforce negative views that see defects, not individuals, or view complex organisational decisions as unthinkingly or callously arrived at.

Most interesting is the changing context that Thompson witnessed in her 37-year career. In particular, the experience of generic and specialist teams and the practicalities of covering a rural patch raise issues relevant to current debates about the organisation of social care. Rob Fountain is head of training at short breaks charity Shared Care Network

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