

a comprehensive coverage without much overlap between chapters. The book ends with a thought-provoking chapter by Koslyn & Plomin on neurocognitive genetics. They argue convincingly that imaging studies designed to delineate individual differences in brain structure and function might bridge the gap between genes and behaviour. Their chapter was apparently written before the publication of the study by Egan *et al* (2001) demonstrating the influence of variation in the gene specifying the enzyme catechol-O-methyltransferase on dopaminergic modulation of frontal lobe function. That study ushered in a potentially exciting era in which the complementary use of neuroimaging and genetic strategies offers the prospect of major advances in understanding of the causes and mechanisms of mental disorders.

Egan, M. F., Goldberg, T. E., Kolachana, B. S., et al (2001) Effect of COMT Val108/158 Met genotype on frontal lobe function and risk for schizophrenia. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, **98**, 6917–6922.

Peter F. Liddle Professor of Psychiatry, School of Community Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham NG7 2UH, UK

Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal

By John MacGregor. New York: Delano Greenidge Editions. 2002. 736 pp. \$85.00 (hb). ISBN 0 929445 15 5

John MacGregor, the foremost authority on outsider art, long famous for the acclaimed classic *The Discovery of the Art*

of the Insane (1989), now offers us his *magnum opus*.

The subject of this book, Henry Darger, personified bizarre fantasy, isolation and awesome industry. Largely uneducated and a recluse, he left his Chicago rented room after 31 years in 1972, to die in a nursing home. His unsuspecting landlord, throwing out the accumulated garbage of a marginal lifetime, sensationally discovered the fictional and artistic work arguably of a genius.

Henry Darger had the features of Asperger syndrome, the diagnosis suggested to MacGregor when he spoke on Darger at the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) Madrid Conference. Darger's mother had died from puerperal septicaemia after giving birth to his sister before he was 4. The sister was put up for adoption by his harried father, who eventually also gave up raising his increasingly unruly son. Darger claimed never to have known his mother's name (or his sister's). On account of 'self-abuse' his father put him in an asylum for 'feeble-minded children'. In later life he kept himself as a hospital dishwasher and cleaner. Darger had never mentioned, let alone shown, his pictures and writings, of between the ages of 19 and 79, to anyone.

MacGregor's all but insurmountable problem is the sheer magnitude of Darger's mostly unpublished pictorial and narrative oeuvre. MacGregor estimates that he read two-thirds of *In the Realms of the Unreal*, scrutinising certain sections in their entirety. *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* extends over 15 immense densely typed volumes, and at 15 145 pages is 'unquestionably the longest known work of fiction

ever written'. *Realms* is accompanied by three bound volumes of several hundred illustrations, scroll-like watercolour paintings on paper, the work of six decades, derived from magazines and colouring books. In addition, Darger wrote an eight-volume, 5084-page autobiography, *The History of my Life*; a 10-year daily weather journal; assorted diaries; and a second work of fiction, provisionally entitled *Crazy House*, of over 10 000 handwritten pages (also featuring the major characters in *Realms*, the seven Vivian sisters and their companion/secret brother, Penrod).

In his fiction, Darger depicts a whole world rent by mammoth struggles between angelic morality (the Vivian girls) and the horrific violence inflicted by men known as Glandelinians, who subject the children to strangulation, crucifixion, evisceration and more unmentionable horrors.

An amazing anatomical fact is that the young girls have penises and testicles. MacGregor postulates that this is because Darger's bizarre and isolated existence precluded him from ever grasping that the genders differ physically.

The Darger publication is a landmark, in outsider art, in art history, and certainly in psychiatry, as the record of phenomenal creative engagement, the triumph of the human spirit, under conditions of isolation and profound social deprivation. Condensation is the name of the game: the heroic author distilled acres generated by the prodigious creator; I have reduced the author to a fragment, hopefully illuminating, to the *Journal* reader at any rate.

MacGregor, J. (1989) *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Henry Walton Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at the University of Edinburgh, 38 Blacket Place, Edinburgh EH9 1RL, UK