The Fasting Girl: A True Victorian Medical Mystery

Michelle Stacey
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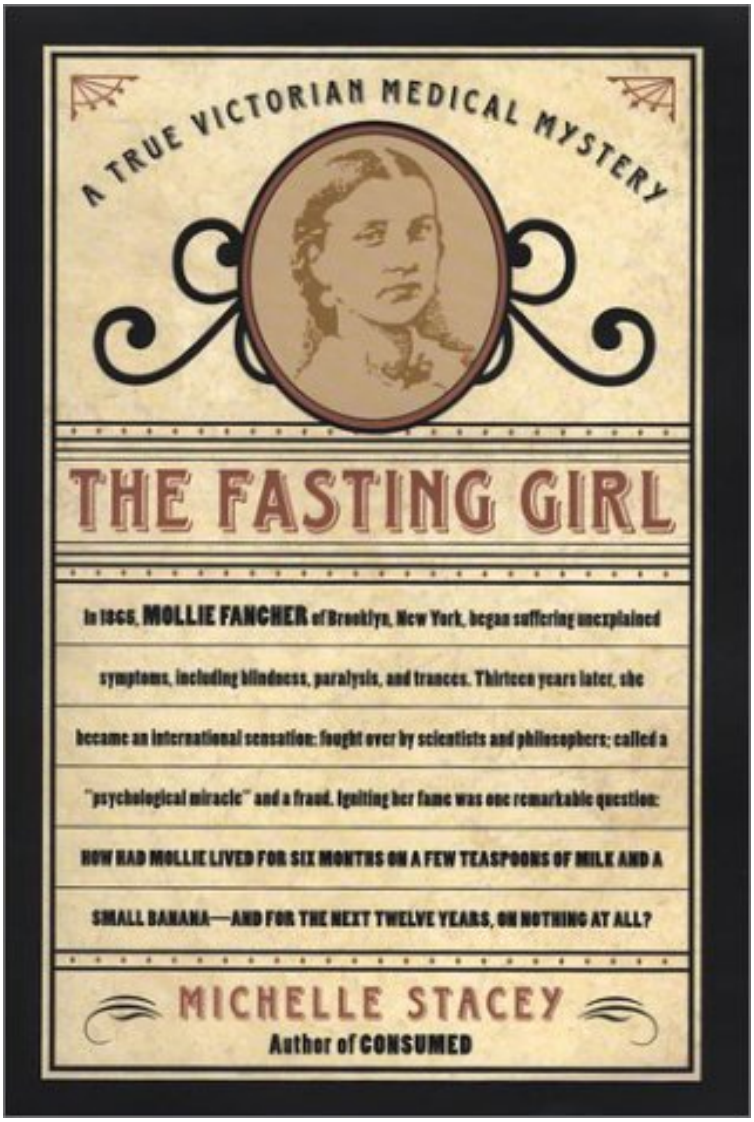

#2549602 in Books Tarcher 2002-04-01 2002-04-01Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.32 x 1.27 x 6.28l, #File Name: 1585421359256 pages | File size: 53.Mb

Michelle Stacey : The Fasting Girl: A True Victorian Medical Mystery before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Fasting Girl: A True Victorian Medical Mystery:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. An ample dose of Victorian America...By K. L SadlerThis was a very different book...with different meaning in a good way. Stacey did a tremendous amount of research into both the family of Mollie Fancher, and the times in which she lived. Just as in a hundred years when people read about the predominance of anorexia nervosa, they will not totally understand the mechanisms and stressors behind girls of our time literally starving themselves to death...we cannot possibly understand the workings of Mollie Fancher's decisions

to alter the controls of her own life without understanding the immense pressures she was under. There is this prevailing concept now that things were 'easier in the good old days' because our own world is so complex and often so violent. Yet, we too quickly forget that the 'old days' including frequent deaths by bear children, terrible diseases that took the lives of children who lived past the first year and adults, crowded and polluted conditions in cities, and total lack of respect for women as shown in how little say they had in their own lives.Mollie had experienced almost all of these things by the time she reached sixteen. From a middle class family, she lost her mother early to childbirth, she had lost brothers/sisters to disease, her father remarried and abandoned the original family (which seemed to happen a lot according to my eugenics research), Mollie was fast approaching the age where she would be required to leave school, and marry and have children. The final straw was getting her long skirts entangled in a street car upon leaving it, and getting dragged for a long period of time.Stacey makes it clear that the decisions Mollie made to remain bedridden were probably not consciously overt decisions. Mollie must have retained a phobia concerning childbirth after seeing what it did to her beloved mother, and she was given a pretty good education only to be expected to submerge that education and her independence upon marriage. By choosing to invalid herself, she managed to retain some control over her own life...but at costs not only to others like her family who had to take care of her, but also to herself. Mollie was not a traditional anorexic as we are familiar with all too well these days. She may have gone through an early stage of fasting and food avoidance, but her invalidism did not have a significant effect on her length of life. Her photos look like she was fairly well-fed and at middle life, was heavy as so many of us women get. The mystery in this book is not concerned as much with the claim by others mainly that she lived on relatively little food. She may have not eaten a lot, but being bed-ridden with no exercise would certainly not have demanded that she eat a lot to retain a decent figure of health. The real mystery has to do with the reaction of society towards Mollie, the scientists who fought to prove she was a 'fake' though she was relatively uninterested in celebrity, and the absolute fascination that the press and society with Mollie's abilities and her problems.That Mollie was fooling herself is discernible in Stacey's fine writing. That others allowed Mollie's sure belief in herself to close their own eyes to reality is also obvious. As usual, scientists (usually minor ones too) were quick to jump on any available media soapbox to promote their own 'scientific' ideas against any possible spiritual reason for Mollie's continued existence. Not much has changed in 140 years. Scientists are still jumping on any available media soapbox to promote their ideas...and the quacks with their speculations, unproven theories, risky practices, and self-conceit are all around us again (including some Nobel prize winners who make ridiculous statements to the press!).I found the history of all this incredibly fascinating. Stacey wandered a bit from Mollie's story, yet the wanderings were interesting and added to the general understanding of Mollie's frame of mind, as well as that of the scientists and her own rabid supporters. One thing this book does it make you look at your own beliefs and prejudices to see if they hold up under inspection.I remember 'hearing' that anorexics were using food as both an attention-getter and as a power struggle within the family and society. To an extent, I think the power theory has validation, but I no longer believe that these girls (and occasionally men) do this as an attention getter. They are actually the opposite...sneaky, trying to avoid eating at all costs, using any means to void the body of nutritional benefit. These people truly do not understand after a certain point their own self-destructive behavior. Though Mollie may not have been a traditional anorexic, she also did not totally understand her own unconscious decisions...because in letters and statements she had made to others it is clear she 'missed' being able to do certain things. Karen Sadler,Science Education,University of Pittsburgh2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. One for the AgesBy Rebecca LovellIn the late 1800's, a girl named Mollie Fancher became a strange sort of celebrity when she purportedly went over 12 years on nothing more than a few sips of milk and a small banana following a bizarre horsecar accident. She never again left her bed, and in doing so became known as the "Brooklyn Enigma." Although this book is a nonfiction account of Miss Fancher's life and celebrity, Michelle Stacey writes it as if it was a mystery novel. She gives just enough information to entice the reader to the next chapter, interspersing the details of Mollie's life with background information on the Victorian era, early Brooklyn, and the history of neurosis. Despite the enthralling nature of the subject, Stacey's writing sometimes drags. The reader finds herself wondering why we need to know this particular piece of information and whether we'll be getting back to the point anytime soon. In light of this, however, I would still recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a good medical mystery. Unfortunately, Mollie died before revealing the secret behind her 14 year fast, so this mystery must remain one for the ages.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. No mystery here...By The StoicThere's no actual mystery here, the author reveals around page 70 or so that the subject of the narrative suffered from what we now know to be schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. Given the poor girl's disastrous childhood, it's no wonder. The writing style is compelling, full of interesting Victorian details and observations but my interest waned after the 'mystery' was solved less than 100 pages in.Kind of ironic that some reviewers here say the actual truth of this 'medical marvel' will never be known - they're just as gullible today as the Victorians were back then.

A modern investigation of the case of a young Victorian woman who claimed to have survived for twelve years without food. In 1865, eighteen-year-old Mollie Fancher began suffering a myriad of ailments that included paralysis, spasms, blindness, and trances. Treated with electric shocks, rolled in wet sheets, and fitted with an "ice jacket,"

Mollie took to her bed in Brooklyn, New York, and stayed there for the rest of her life. Her story became an international sensation. Fought over by scientists and philosophers, called a "psychological marvel" and a fraud, Mollie was, for more than a decade, reportedly able to "live on air." In one six-month period alone, she apparently ate nothing more than four teaspoons of milk punch, two teaspoons of wine, one small banana, and a cracker. But what really happened in Mollie's home? How, and how much, did she eat? Was she willfully deceptive or simply hysterical, emotionally disturbed, delusional? In The Fasting Girl, Michelle Stacey searches for the true story of the Fancher case, delving into such fascinating phenomena as medieval anorexia mirabilis (fasting saints), the tragic wave of copycat Victorian fasting girls, and the dawn of the Age of Neurosis. This riveting literary history evokes such bestsellers as The Professor and the Madman and The Murder of Helen Jewett as it explores the social and technological upheaval of a post-Darwinian, doubting era that very much mirrors our own.

From Publishers WeeklyIn 1878, a Brooklynite named Mollie Fancher, bedridden and afflicted with mysterious symptoms after a serious accident with a street car, claimed to have eaten next to nothing for more than a decade following the accident. Fancher's apparent ability to survive without sustenance earned her such renown that an estimated 75,000-100,000 visitors trooped through her bedroom over the course of three decades. Yet Stacey (Consumed: Why Americans Love, Hate and Fear Food) maintains that Fancher's significance lies "in what she ignited" which was a great deal of intense debate between religious and scientific leaders. Calling Fancher "a lightning rod for some of the largest intellectual storms of her time," Stacey explains that the "fasting girl" embodied many of the strongest anxieties and most pervasive cultural fantasies of her day. Most notably, her survival without nourishment which the author acknowledges was impossible appeared to validate religious beliefs that there were mysteries beyond the ken of modern science. And at the dawn of the age of psychotherapy, Fancher's case was also indicative of the ostensibly new phenomenon whereby the stresses of everyday life in an urban, industrial society were severe enough to induce what today some would call profound neuroses. More a cultural history of late 19th-century America than a biography of Fancher, this is a fascinating account of the intellectual currents that shaped the way the nation understood itself and of the cultural pressures that often made it difficult for young women like Fancher to feel stable or secure about their identities or their place in the world. Touching on topics ranging from spiritualism to hysteria to anorexia, Stacey deftly captures both the excitement and the fear that surrounded such topics, drawing subtle parallels between Fancher's age and our own. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.From Library JournalIn 1865, 18-year-old Mollie Fancher was thrown to the ground when descending from a Brooklyn trolley car. Her long skirt caught on a protruding hook and she was dragged behind the car on paving stones for nearly a block. After the accident, she took to her bed, where she remained for 50 years while controversy swirled around her. According to newspaper reports, Mollie ate almost nothing for an improbable 12 years but never appeared emaciated. She reportedly fell into trances and demonstrated clairvoyant powers, yet she also executed fine needlework and received visitors. Stacey (Consumed: Why Americans Love, Hate and Fear Food), a fashion magazine contributor, compares Mollie with medieval self-starving religious women as well as with modern anorexics. The book explores the hysteria phenomenon, starvation, fads in fasting, the treatment of neurosis, and conflicts between science and faith, among other big subjects. Unfortunately, the text is mired in irrelevant details and often loses its focus. Poor organization, repetitiousness, and occasional lapses into pop psychology in place of historical digging make reading this study somewhat arduous. An optional purchase. Elaine Machleder, Bronx, N.Y.Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.From The New England Journal of MedicineIn 1865, an 18-year-old woman named Mollie Fancher began her career as "the Brooklyn Enigma." For more than a decade after a horsecar accident, Fancher exhibited symptoms that included blindness, trance, memory loss, paralysis, seizures, and clairvoyance -- what modern psychiatry would call dissociative disorder -- and claimed to survive without food. At the same time, like any other Victorian gentlewoman, Fancher wrote thousands of letters, produced countless pieces of embroidery and wax flowers, and spent much of her time in social conversation. Fancher not only became the darling of the 19th-century New York press, reaching a peak of fame in the late 1870s, but also energized debates about how long humans could survive without nourishment. More substantially, she catalyzed public discussions about how we should interpret symptoms like hers. Were they signs of a physical illness precipitated by organic lesions, or did they indicate a disorder of the emotions, spirit, or moral sensibilities? Who was qualified to treat her -- a physician or a spiritualist? In 1860s New York, the distinction between physical and mental illness was cloudy, and cases like Fancher's acted as catalysts for arguments about defining, diagnosing, and treating illness. Michelle Stacey's book offers us the Fancher case with an emphasis on these debates and their connections to our own time, when illness is being reexamined for its anchors in the body and mind and many are reconsidering the troubled dichotomy on which diagnosis often rests. Stacey's account of the disputes about Fancher's condition, especially the veracity of her claim to survive without food, centers on two doctors who sought to expose her as a fraud and to explain her behavior. George Miller Beard wrote American Nervousness (1881), a key work about neurasthenia, as well as books on sleep problems and other "nervous" disorders; William Alexander Hammond, author of Fasting Girls: Their Physiology and Pathology (1879), was a prolific American physician-writer on the topic of anorexia and other conditions that were considered to be

subtypes of hysteria (itself a subtype of neurasthenia). Stacey makes the two doctors' efforts to unmask Fancher or to diagnose her condition incredibly suspenseful, given that any 21st-century reader knows definitively from the start that she could not have lived on air. The suspense derives partly from Stacey's lively characterizations of the doctors and the patient they never treated, but it is also in part the result of Stacey's use of the case to figure larger debates about medical professionalism during an era in which university-trained physicians in the United States and abroad sought vigorously to distinguish themselves from quacks and other less-educated healers. Partly because of their engagement in these larger conflicts, Beard and Hammond wanted to assess Mollie Fancher either as a patient whose case was explicable by modern scientific medicine or else as a delusional or mendacious person. Their interest in Fancher's case also reflected their participation in the transition in American medicine from thinking about nervous disorders as conditions of the body to classifying them as conditions of the mind and emotions. The public argument about the mysteries and possible deceptions produced by a young woman highlights the development of modern psychiatry and the post-Darwinian craze for spiritualism at the end of the 19th century, all of which Stacey offers as relevant contexts for Fancher's case. Furthermore, as Stacey argues with support from scholars like Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Rudolph Bell, Fancher's situation is particularly inflected by issues of sex roles. This "fasting girl" gestures both to 19th-century debates about anorexia and to several studies in the past 20-odd years that have made connections between the pervasive eating disorders of our own time and those of earlier generations. Exploring the "holy anorexia" or "anorexia mirabilis" of medieval saints and the "fashionable women's diseases" of the 19th and 20th or 21st centuries, scholars of anorexia have suggested that the refusal of food has worked throughout history as a possible way for young women to opt out of expected and damaging social roles and to exert control over their lives. Stacey discovered Fancher in Brumberg's discussion of anorexia and continues to position her in relation to these scholarly debates. As should be evident by now, this is an extremely ambitious book whose weaknesses come from overreaching. On the cusp between the popular and the scholarly, Stacey's study draws so heavily on more clearly academic works that she might have simply directed us in a footnote to Brumberg or to other authors who discuss the cultural history of anorexia, such as Caroline Walker Bynum or Susan Bordo. By taking on so many contexts in which to read Fancher, including anorexia and religion, the physiology of starvation, the changing face of Victorian medicine, and the rise and fall of spiritualism, Stacey leads us on a wild ride through history; as a result, she cannot develop any of these themes all that well. Nor can she work out the important ways in which each way of framing Fancher resonates with the others. Sex roles, for example, are a central feature of the discussion of anorexia but disappear by the book's intelligent conclusion about the debates over professionalism in the 19th century and our own. They may, however, be even more relevant to the latter discussion. Thus, although Stacey gestures intelligently toward connections other scholars have spent decades developing and brings their ideas to the attention of general readers, she understandably has difficulty synthesizing all the issues she has raised by the end of the book. In fact, The Fasting Girl does not need to gesture as broadly as it does. Stacey not only gives us clear and lively prose telling a rich and fascinating story of illness and healing in American culture, but also invites us to think about the cultural history of the press and its active role in medical debates -- a role that physicians like Beard used to their advantage. The Fancher case, with its local and journalistic history, is riveting in its own right and would have been a more reasonable focus for this memorable book. Martha Stoddard Holmes, Ph.D.