

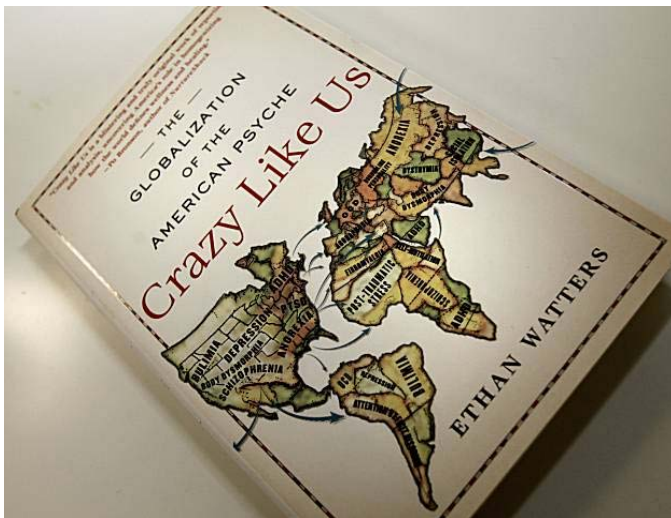
# Ethan Watters on America’s crazy exports

Julian Guthrie, Chronicle Staff Writer Monday, February 8, 2010



Ethan Watters Photo: Brant Ward / The Chronicle

Western psychology tramples on otherculture’s beliefs, author says



Ethan Watters has written a new book,  
“Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche.”

Ethan Watters’ first book was an indictment of the recovered-memory movement. His second book exposed a lineage of mistakes in psychotherapy dating back to Freud. In his new book, “Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche,” the San Francisco author takes on something bigger: How America peddles its treatment of mental illness across the globe and in doing so, shapes those illnesses themselves.

From Africa to China, Japan to Sri Lanka, Watters looks unflinchingly at how Western mental health experts often trample on the beliefs and customs of other cultures.

“I was acting very much like an anthropologist, looking at how other cultures think of the human mind and human self,” said Watters, a journalist for 20 years who co-founded the San Francisco Writers’ Grotto in 1994.

What Watters found is that the golden arches of the United States are hardly the most damaging of the West's exports.

"Rather," Watters says, "it is how we are flattening the landscape of the human psyche itself. We are engaged in the grand project of Americanizing the world's understanding of the human mind."

In "Crazy Like Us," published in January, Watters, 46, tells the stories of four diseases in four countries.

In Zanzibar, he tells the tale of two families struggling with schizophrenia, one adopting approaches from the West and the other steeped in local traditions. In China, he looks at a case of anorexia that represents a particularly Western form of the disease. In Sri Lanka, he delves into the impact of trauma counselors who rushed in after the 2004 tsunami. And in Japan, he deconstructs the marketing of the antidepressant Paxil.

"What I found in all four cases is that we are not only taking our ideas to the rest of the world and selling them or pushing them onto other cultures, but other cultures are reaching out to us and expecting scientific innovation," he said.

"They expect our science to be valid and our cures to be useful. Oftentimes, we're overselling our cures and presenting them as science when in fact they are only a social trend or a drug company marketing a drug."

As an example of what he sees as invalid science, Watters reconstructs the interventions in Sri Lanka. Western trauma experts arriving on the scene employed a seven-step "critical incident debriefing" system, where the traumatized were asked to talk about what they have witnessed, to "make the whole incident come to life again."

### **Sri Lanka's traumas**

"There was an assumption that Sri Lankans don't know how to deal with trauma," said Watters. "But these are people who have lived through a 30-year civil war." Their way of dealing with trauma, Watters said, was not to talk about it, as that would "reinvent the violence."

"You are playing with fire if you come in and say truth-telling is the only way to go here," Watters said. "Critical incident debriefing is not backed by science."

He added, "The traumatologists all wanted to express upon me their cultural sensitivities. They didn't want to see themselves as a part of this West-to-East transfer of knowledge. But how culturally sensitive can you be when you don't know the language, when you don't know the history, and when you say you've learned about the culture and traditions in one week?"

As part of his research, Watters traveled to Zanzibar, a small island off the coast of East Africa. He wanted to understand why a schizophrenic patient there will often fare better than someone diagnosed with the disease in the United States.

What he found is that schizophrenia "presents differently across cultures." In Zanzibar - where belief in spirit possession is prevalent - locals saw the illness as the work of an outside force. As such, "it was understood as an affliction for the sufferer but not as an identity."

These beliefs "indirectly helped control the course of the illness," Watters said. "Besides keeping the sick individual in the social group, the religious beliefs in Zanzibar also allowed for a type of calmness and acquiescence in the face of the illness rarely witnessed in the West."

## **Downside to intentions**

Sitting in the conference room at the Grotto, a collective of offices for writers and artists, Watters said that he did not set out to castigate healers. "I profiled people who were well intentioned. But I'm suggesting there is a downside to the good intentions."

Watters, who has two young children, said that his marriage survived the book. His wife, Rebecca Watters, is a practicing psychiatrist.

"We did have some long and silent car rides because of topics we disagreed on," he said.

As for future projects, Watters mused, "I always promise myself the next thing I write will be a great adventure book where someone climbs a mountain and dies. Then I get pulled into a more intellectual book. At some point, I will break out of this - at least for one book."

E-mail Julian Guthrie at [jguthrie@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jguthrie@sfchronicle.com).

*<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/02/08/DDRI1BNOGC.DTL>*

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