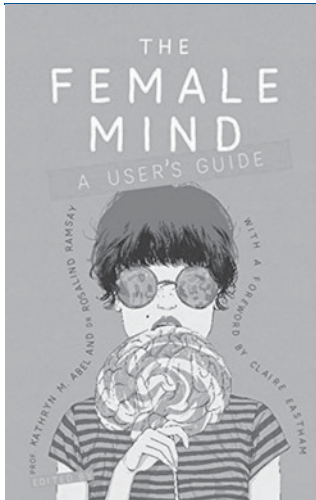


## Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboade

**The Female Mind: A User's Guide**

By Professor Kathryn Abel and Dr Rosalind Ramsay.  
RCPsych Publications 2017.  
£13.99 (pb). 128 pp.  
ISBN 9781909726802

*The Female Mind: A User's Guide*, edited by Abel and Ramsay, is a much-needed, holistic resource for both laypeople and clinicians about the mental well-being of women. It is divided into five parts, each comprising chapters eloquently written by experts.

*Part I. Women in perspective* considers the many facets of what it means to be a woman in ancient and contemporary society, and how this evolves throughout their life. Parts II and III, *Women in society* and *Women and their environment*, go on to explore several sociocultural circumstances and environmental factors that affect a woman and how they may negatively affect their mental health. Parts IV and V, *Women and specific disorders* and *Women and treatment*, take individual disorders and explore how they are experienced by women before discussing treatment options and patients' perspectives on these services.

Although many sociocultural factors influencing a woman's mental health are discussed throughout the text, the role of LGBTQ+ identity is overlooked. This seems an unfortunate omission given that the text explores the psychological stress that societal expectations of a woman's lifestyle can bring, yet fails to acknowledge the diversity of a 'queer' lifestyle and the associated oppression. Further, although the editors acknowledge 'gender fluidity' in the introduction, the text later refers to 'both genders' (p. 152); reinforcing the oppressive concept of binary gender.

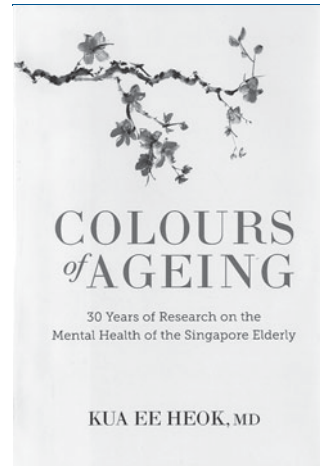
Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is its ability to empower educated women to develop an understanding of how societal and environmental circumstances may make them vulnerable to mental health issues as well as aiding in understanding particular illnesses they may experience. Furthermore, chapters end with concise sections detailing self-help options for women, further support that may be available when experiencing difficulties and advice for loved ones on how best to provide care.

Another great asset of this book is the inclusion of the lived experience of women in similar situations throughout the text. I believe the openness of each story helps readers to understand the diversity of experience and hardship a woman may have, and how such issues can often be resolved. In addition, I believe each story contributes to destigmatisation of the vulnerabilities women face in mental health or otherwise.

Finally, I thank all contributors for this fantastic and unique text and would strongly recommend it to anyone who wishes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of *The Female Mind*.

Dean Connolly, Campbell House, 5–10 Taviton Street, London WC1H0BX, UK.  
Email: dean.connolly.15@ucl.ac.uk

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**Colours of Ageing: 30 years of Research on the Mental Health of the Singapore Elderly**

By Kua Ee Heok.  
Write Editions. 2017.  
US \$24.99 (hbk). 180 pp.  
ISBN 978-981-11-1946-0

Bill Gates announced recently that he was donating \$100 m to 'find a cure' for Alzheimer's disease. A good first step would be to immerse himself in the life and work of Professor Kua Heok of Singapore University who has been researching, teaching and writing about dementia for over 30 years. His masterpiece, to which the present volume runs a close second, is his remarkable semi-fictional novel, *Listening to Letter from America*. There he depicts how a group of elderly Singaporeans, 40 years on from the Japanese occupation, recall the life-saving impact of Alastair Cooke's famous broadcasts. Together with the pianistic skills of one group member, and the self-esteem boost of being interviewed on national radio, reminiscence therapy transformed the mental health of these men and women suffering from depression and memory loss.

The theme of this book, counterpointing its poetic title, is the evidence-base for the qualitative truths of the novelistic form. Professor Heok trail-blazingly combines 'Western' scientific methods with 'Eastern' values: meticulous randomised controlled trials plus respect for elderly people, mindfulness practice and cultivation of an active and aesthetically pleasing *umwelt* (I hope this dichotomising does not reveal my covert 'orientalism'). Heok and his team's epidemiological studies, described here in great detail, which have won four international awards and received over \$5 m in research funding, show that staying mentally and physically active, overcoming loneliness, mindfulness practice, being involved in art, singing and horticulture – even eating curry and drinking green tea – significantly reduce rates of cognitive decline, as compared with control groups.

Windows was Gates' passport to untold wealth. Yet, however admirable his philanthropy, the USA is one of the most unequal countries in the developed world, spending more and achieving less than almost all comparable healthcare systems. Mesmerised by Windows-type mystique, Western medicine continues to search for the illusory big-pharma magic bullet. Heok's revolutionary formula is social change: creating a culture that encourages healthy eating, physical and mental activity, fostering the arts,