

[Author Talk: Sarah Fay](#) [1]

October 17, 2022 [TW Podcast](#) [2]

[Illness](#) [3]

[About Memoir](#) [4]

Podcast Interview with Martha Nichols

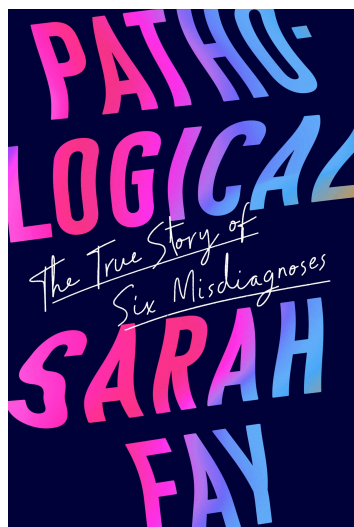
The Trouble with Mental Health Diagnoses

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Episode Notes: In our inaugural episode of the Talking Writing podcast, I have a wide-ranging conversation with Sarah Fay about her 2022 memoir *Pathological: The True Story of Six Misdiagnoses*. The impact of storytelling on mental health is all over the media these days in books, essays, and feature articles. In this interview, we get into the outsize influence of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—otherwise known as the *DSM*—along with what it's like to write personally about a difficult topic.

Sarah Fay is an award-winning author and mental-health advocate who writes for many publications, including the *New York Times*, *Atlantic*, and *Paris Review*, where she served as an advisory editor. Her essays have been chosen as a Notable Mention in *Best American Essays*. She's currently on the faculty at DePaul University and Northwestern University.



Sarah's troubling progress through the mental-health system is powerfully told in *Pathological*, which weaves her personal story with a journalistic investigation into the history and uses of the *DSM*. I interviewed Sarah over Zoom last May, shortly after *Pathological* came out. Previously, we had co-organized a panel for NonfictionNOW 2021 ("Facts and the First-Person Voice"), and we both share personal and professional interests in stories about mental illness as well as first-person journalism.

As writers, we're also fascinated with punctuation, and Sarah's reflections on different punctuation marks throughout *Pathological* form some of the quirkiest and most captivating parts of it. I'll leave you to listen to why she discusses punctuation in a memoir about mental illness and health. But here's one quote, part of which I read aloud toward the end of the episode, to whet your appetite – *Martha Nichols*

Brackets, like human beings, are relational. At times they signal unnecessary information; at others, they draw attention to what's inside. Recently, someone reminded me that they hold space [] for words that may or may not yet exist. They communicate to the reader when someone's words have been altered.... Brackets clarify the context: *She has an illness [bipolar]*. They nest information: *She has an illness (bipolar [which she's been told is lifelong])*. They point out a typo or an error in the original text: *She's really bipolr [sic]*. Not my error; someone else's.

— From *Pathological* by Sarah Fay, p. 237

Publishing Information for this Episode

These works were mentioned in the interview or inform what was discussed.

- [Pathological: The True Story of Six Misdiagnoses](#) [9] by Sarah Fay (HarperCollins, 2022).
- [Pathological: The Movement](#) [10], mental-health advocacy website.
- [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(DSM-5-TR\)](#) [11], American Psychiatric Association.
- [Man's Search for Meaning](#) [12] by Viktor E. Frankl, translated by Ilse Lasch (Beacon Press, 2006, originally translated into English in 1959); teaching guide provided [here](#).
- [Healing: Our Path from Mental Illness to Mental Health](#) [13] by Thomas Insel (Penguin Random House, 2022).
- ["Nurses Continue to Rate Highest in Honesty, Ethics"](#) [14] by RJ Reinhart, *Gallup News*, January 6, 2020.
- [The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder](#) [15] by Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- [Start with a Question](#) [16], Sarah Fay's newsletter.



Martha Nichols co-founded *Talking Writing* and is a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School. Much of her teaching craft appears in her recent book [*First-Person Journalism: A Guide to Writing Personal Nonfiction with Real Impact*](#) [17] (Routledge, 2022).

For more information, subscribe to her newsletter and website: [Martha Nichols Writer](#) [18].

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- [7] <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-talking-writing-103321660/episode/sarah-fays-cautionary-tale-about-misdiagnoses-103321661/>
- [8] <https://rss.com/podcasts/talkingwriting/652046/?listen-on=true>
- [9] <https://www.harperacademic.com/book/9780063068681/pathological/>
- [10] <https://www.pathological.us/>
- [11] <https://psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>
- [12] <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/206272/mans-search-for-meaning-by-viktor-e-frankl/9780807000007/teachers-guide/>
- [13] <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/670329/healing-by-thomas-insel-md/>
- [14] <https://news.gallup.com/poll/274673/nurses-continue-rate-highest-honesty-ethics.aspx>
- [15] <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-05332-000>
- [16] <https://sarahfay.org/newsletter>
- [17] <https://www.routledge.com/First-Person-Journalism-A-Guide-to-Writing-Personal-Nonfiction-with-Real/Nichols/p/book/9780367676476>
- [18] <https://marthanicholswriter.com/>