

## SHADOWLAND

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McGraw-Hill

*Shadowland* by William Arnold. McGraw-Hill, 1978, \$9.95, 260 pages.

Frances Farmer. No, she is not responsible for your local candy store or favorite cookbook. If her name does not otherwise evoke familiarity, it could be because Farmer, who appeared and most often starred in nineteen motion pictures, three Broadway plays, seven stock productions and countless radio shows in the 1930s and 40s, has almost completely been erased from cinematic, theatrical and literary history. And it wasn't until recent years that any significant public record of her highly controversial existence even surfaced.

William Arnold, a writer for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, saw Frances Farmer in an old movie called *Come and Get It* with Edward Arnold and Joel McCrea. Intrigued, he explains, by her "haunting beauty," he decided to find out what had become of her—and opened up a Pandora's box of political scandal, family betrayal, and psychiatric abuse.

His book, in its detailed and retrospective analysis, is a fascinating companion to, though hardly an adequate replacement for, Frances Farmer's own powerful, posthumously published autobiography *Will There Really Be a Morning?* (G.P. Putnam, 1972).

*Shadowland* is most valuable and useful as a modern day polemic aimed at the mental health industry. "The mentality of the system," Arnold says, "which deals with supposedly abnormal behavior is virtually unchanged since the 1940s." This, coupled with his graphic description of Farmer's five-year incarceration at the notorious Hospital for the Insane at Steilacoom (literally the "snake pit" much prettied up for the Olivia de Havilland movie of the same title) and paralleled in its barbaric brutality against inmates only by Nazi concentration camps, provides powerful fuel for his argument.

The violent ward, into which young Frances Farmer was ultimately thrown, head shaved and naked, was jammed with other inmates similarly dehumanized—male and female together. Forced to live in (and often eat) their own excrement, with no protection from the weather, these people were (perhaps still are?) fed only once a day. Inmates would fight over scraps of food that was thrown through the bars and dumped on the floor where it mixed with the rats and other vermin that they were also forced, of necessity, to eat. They were hosed down unexpectedly once a week and most were subjected to a long range of then experimental psychiatric procedures (including drugs, shock, hydro "therapy" and ultimately psychosurgery).

In her autobiography, Frances Farmer offers stark and vivid descriptions of the institution's conditions: "There were beatings. Hard bars of soap were knotted into towels and slammed against skulls. . . . There were rapes. Strange men smuggled their way into the cage to assault. . . . There were chains. Restraints that lashed with steel links the ankles and wrists. And naked women. . . were tied in sacks or straitjackets, or hooded like untamed falcons."





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### The Precipitating Events

It is said that there is a time and a place for everything. Unfortunately, for dissident high school student Frances Farmer, the 1930s in Seattle was neither the time nor the place to compose an essay entitled "God Dies," which won a national contest but also the unrelenting enmity of authorities in the politically tense Northwest city.

Nor did she receive favorable reactions when she won a VIP tour of the Soviet Union (a country which, upon her return, she praised highly) through a circulation contest in a local leftist paper. The trip also provoked considerable flack from her mother, an obstinate, reactionary and outspoken person who was a very imposing figure in Frances' life. (One of Lillian Farmer's most ambitious endeavors was to breed a variety of different chickens in order to achieve a red, white and blue "Bird Americana" which she hoped would replace the bald eagle as the national symbol.) Lillian Farmer's angry comments headlined the Seattle papers under such banners as: "*Mother Uncovers Red Vice Ring.*"

Frances Farmer was, in many ways, an American political dissident—condemned by Hollywood, by her mother, by Seattle reactionaries and by the social and sexual norms of our culture, into Shadowland, the metaphorical American Siberia which is not one particular place but rather the collective "back wards" and "violent units" of our psychiatric institutions.

We regard Frances Farmer as a dissident, not only because of her beliefs and aforementioned political affiliations, but also because she was just as much, if not more so, a dissident in her emotional character. She was never, in the era of fragile and innocent starlets, what so many people, particularly in Hollywood, wanted her to be: a sweet and malleable young actress/woman. She was so promising an actress as to be compared with Hepburn and Garbo, but she hated Hollywood and would never hide her contempt for it. (Her most rewarding theatrical experiences—as she always considered herself a serious dramatic actress—were with Clifford Odets' radical group-theatre in New York where she played the lead in *Golden Boy*.)

She was simply not a "nice" woman. She had very few friends since she could not help but be honest. And given the circles that she lived in, she was thus always outspoken, crude and usually vulgar in her language. In her own words: "I had not lived as a good woman but there was one favor to my credit. I never pretended to be what I wasn't."

Arnold writes in his book that "because she was one of the most glamorous and complicated women of her generation, she became a prize guinea pig for arrogant and ruthless men who were determined to remold her into a more acceptable version of herself. When they could not save her by their standards, they destroyed her."

Frances Farmer's own story, however, as one of psychiatry's most "difficult" and "interesting" cases is a far more fascinating description of her angry encounters with Hollywood, with the police and with psychiatry—full of her eloquent and justifiable rage and critical wit which are sadly missing from Arnold's fogged fascination with her role as simply an innocent victim. In his attempt to prove that Farmer was the subject of a secret lobotomy which stripped her of her wit, intelligence and unique being, he fails to adequately celebrate her lifelong defiance of the forces that sought to "tame" her. And couldn't.

