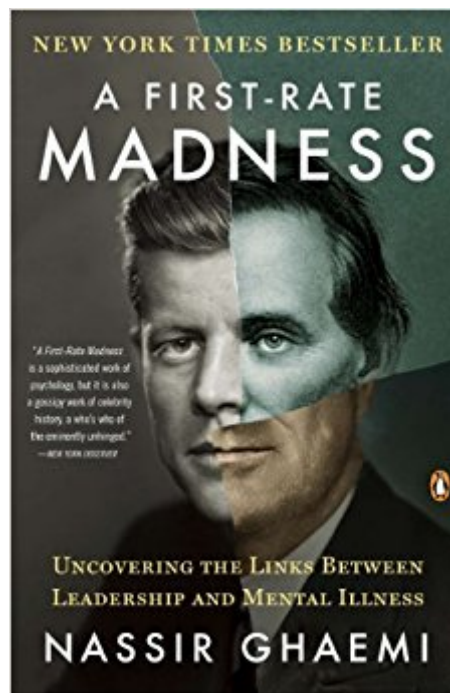




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# **A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering The Links Between Leadership And Mental Illness**



## Synopsis

This New York Times bestseller is a myth-shattering exploration of the powerful connections between mental illness and leadership. Historians have long puzzled over the apparent mental instability of great and terrible leaders alike: Napoleon, Lincoln, Churchill, Hitler, and others. In *A First-Rate Madness*, Nassir Ghaemi, director of the Mood Disorders Programme at Tufts Medical Center, offers and sets forth a controversial, compelling thesis: the very qualities that mark those with mood disorders also make for the best leaders in times of crisis. From the importance of Lincoln's "depressive realism" to the lacklustre leadership of exceedingly sane men as Neville Chamberlain, *A First-Rate Madness* overturns many of our most cherished perceptions about greatness and the mind.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A glistering psychological history, faceted largely by the biographies of eight famous leaders | *A First-Rate Madness* is carefully plotted and sensibly argued." • "BOSTON GLOBE" "Ghaemi isn't the first to claim that madness is a close relative of genius, or even the first to extend the idea into politics. But he does go further than others | His explanations are elegant, too" "intuitively accurate and banked off the latest psychiatric research." • "NEWSWEEK" "A provocative thesis" | Ghaemi's book deserves high marks for original thinking." • "THE WASHINGTON POST" "Ghaemi is a remarkably disciplined writer, and he examines both psychiatry and history with impressive clarity and sensitivity. *A First-Rate Madness* will almost

certainly be one of the most fascinating books of the year, not just because of the author's lucid prose and undeniable intelligence, but because of his provocative thesis: 'For abnormal challenges, abnormal leaders are needed.'

• [NPR.ORG](#) • [Provocative, fascinating.](#) • [SALON.COM](#)

Nassir Ghaemi, M.D., is a professor of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine and director of the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. He has published more than a hundred scientific articles and several books on psychiatry.

So very interesting, fascinating, informative. The author picks out several very well-known people who have accomplished great things or been just the right person for a time of crisis, but who suffered from bi-polar condition to some degree. The book title points out that this condition, so difficult for the sufferer to bear and for his/her family and friends to understand, at times gives the person just the right combination of the ability to think outside the box and the energy to carry out the necessary action that is needed.

The author argues that "normal" leaders without mental illnesses do well in managing day-to-day problems in government and corporations and often excel at administrative tasks but manage poorly in times of crisis. However, leaders with mental illness, primarily those with some form of depression (which facilitates insight into objective reality, e.g, Churchill's warning about the Nazi threat) or mania (which is a source of creativity that generates many options for problem solving; e.g., Union General Sherman avoided frontal assault on the Confederate armies and instead was one of the first in history to wage "total war", leaving a barren landscape for his enemies). However, these mentally ill leaders often do not fit in "normal" society (Churchill lost the first post-war election and Sherman was a failure in business before and after the war). Interestingly, we, the vast majority who are "normal" and free of mental illnesses, do experience occasional periods of mild depression and mania. However, the author argues that these periods are insufficient in strength and length for us to be considered mentally ill and thus we probably lack the temperament to be a good leader in times of crisis. Nevertheless, the argument that we are more realistic when we are mildly depressed rings somewhat true and we are usually more upbeat and "full of ideas" when we are mildly manic. While the author qualifies his conclusions throughout, and the reader may feel some are tenuous, he makes a compelling case for viewing mental illness differently, a new, even positive, perception without the stigma that is now pervasive. The reader will also look at today's leaders and ask if they fit into the author's categories: Is Obama "normal" and is Putin mentally ill? Overall, a thought

provoking read that should inspire new research into mental illness.

Amazing! Best book I have read in a while. I love the history mixed with the bipolar/depressive world. The author goes off on some historical tangent related to the leader he is talking about, but I liked it because it gave it some context. The best part for me was that it validated the even with, in fact especially with BP and or depression, one can still achieve greatness.

While Dr. Ghaemi is a good writer and passionate about his subject, his rather nutty premise, that only the bi-polar can lead brilliantly in a crisis, plays out in very strange ways. To begin with, he explains in a preface that by madness he doesn't mean what most of us mean-psychosis-but only the poles of depression and mania, carried to clinical levels of expression. Depression, he asserts, is the font of compassion, mania of creativity. And we get a taste of what he means by leading brilliantly, in his lead chapter on the manic-depressive General Wm. Tecumseh Sherman: the inspired scorched earth policy that resulted in the utter destruction and humiliation of the South at the end of the Civil War. This may not seem loaded with creativity and compassion, but wait, the author assures us, Sherman warned the citizens of Atlanta days ahead, so they wouldn't be burned alive, and his policy achieved his principle end, bringing a swift end to the war's horror. That's the depression-comapssion side. And for manic creativity? Sherman was the inventor of Total War.Total war, the great leader's answer to the need for quick, compassionate results. Fast forward 75 years, Germany, 1939, and find the same plan growing in the mind of another lunatic. But here Dr. Ghaemi sees a different path with the opposite outcome. He does of course include Hitler in his portraits, attempting to show that before 1937 (when Hitler came under the influence of one Dr. Morell, a self-serving physician with a big bag of amphetamines), Hitler, like Sherman, was the good kind of crazy. Compassionate toward animals and the poor, full of creative ideas for the New Germany. But then in the total war that followed he was driven the bad kind of crazy: psychotic. And we are told and are meant to accept that 1933-1937 demonstrated superior leadership while the war itself, not to mention the Holocaust, were just horribly botched. The destruction of democratic institutions, the laws against Jews, gays, all non-Aryans; the Reichstag Fire, the Night of the Long Knives: well led, Herr Hitler! Well, after all the Jews, like the citizens of Atlanta, had years of warnings, didn't they, before the Final Solution? Too bad you went bad crazy or you might have had, who knows, like Churchill, a wonderful manic-depressive legacy.To be fair, there is a lot of interesting material here, if you can bear watching it mangled to fit Dr. Ghaemi's theory. The book gives the reader lots to chew on, but without much nutrition.

I have read reviews of this book by homoclitcs. That is like asking men to describe the feeling of childbirth, and they vociferously do it. To those of us who associate - not only is it interesting, well written, shocking, exhilarating - but it gives names to situations, people and conditions we have known but not named. While some can't fathom the joy of mediocrity, others can't fathom the joy (burden?) of vision even at great personal price. It's one of those books too truthful to be taken seriously by most. I also recommend "NeuroTribes" by Steve Silberman - the bit on midcentury science fiction writers/readers was my favorite.

I have found myself referring back to this book numerous times, in my own writing and even occasionally in the classroom. If it matters what happens in the mind of a leader, then this book raises a difficult possibility -- namely, that what we call madness might in some instances contribute to the effectiveness of particular leaders. The author is not sloppy, making extravagant claims. Nonetheless, it is readable. And it forces those of us who study leadership as well as forcing voters to re-think what it means to be a viable leader.

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