



44 Years in Darkness: A True Story of Madness, Tragedy and Shattered Love

Sylvia Shults

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44 YEARS IN DARKNESS

A TRUE STORY OF MADNESS, TRAGEDY AND SHATTERED LOVE

BY SYLVIA SHULTS

Lost in the shadows of Illinois asylums in the nineteenth century is the strange story of Rhoda Derry. Left at the Adams County Poor Farm when her family could no longer care for her, she spent the next 40 years confined in a wooden box. Abandoned, ignored, and traumatized, she had clawed out her own eyes, pulled her own teeth, and her legs were atrophied to the point that she could not stand on her own, or even sit in a wheelchair. She spent four decades locked away from the world. Her crime? Falling in love.

Rhoda suffered a mental breakdown after being "cursed" by the mother of a boy to whom she was engaged to marry. Committed to the poor farm because of her violent insanity, she was eventually rescued by pioneering alienist Dr. George A. Zeller. She was taken to the Peoria State Hospital in Bartonville, Illinois, where she spent the remainder of her days in comfort. Rhoda died in 1906, but her spirit lives on at the former asylum where she found peace.

The chilling story of Rhoda Derry is one of the great tragedies of mental health care in Illinois, but one of the great success stories of the Peoria State Hospital. Sylvia Shults, author of *Fractured Spirits: Hauntings at the Peoria State Hospital*, returns to the hilltop to tell the story of Rhoda's life -- and her mysterious afterlife. With exhaustive historical research and analysis, as well as laying bare secrets of her own, the author provides twists, turns, and surprises in this compelling tale of history, horror, and a lingering spirit of the old hospital.

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