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Blanche, Augustine, and Geneviève found themselves in the hysteria ward of the Salpêtrière Hospital in 1870s Paris, where their care was directed by the prominent neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. They became medical celebrities: every week, eager crowds arrived at the hospital to observe their symptoms; they were photographed, sculpted, painted, and transformed into characters in novels. The remarkable story of their lives as patients in the clinic is a strange amalgam of intimate details and public exposure, science and religion, medicine and the occult, hypnotism, love, and theater.

But who were Blanche, Augustine, and Geneviève? What role did they play in their own peculiar form of stardom? And what exactly were they suffering from? Hysteria_with its dramatic seizures, hallucinations, and reenactments of past traumas_may be an illness of the past, but the notions of femininity that lie behind it offer insights into disorders of the present. 40 black-and-white illustrations