

The Psychopath Test: A Journey through the Madness Industry by Jon Ronson. Riverhead, 2011. 288 pp., \$25.95. ISBN 9781594488016.

To say that *The Psychopath Test* is a weird book is an understatement. Riveting, from beginning to end, it reads like a nonfictional variation of *Alice in Wonderland* with the author, Jon Ronson, taking on the role of Alice. The people he encounters and the events he describes seem way too far-fetched to be true; one must keep reminding oneself that it's all for real.

In that sense the book is similar to Ronson's earlier bestseller *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Ronson 2005), which was turned into a Hollywood movie starring George Clooney. Reading that book, and watching the movie based on it, helped me to appreciate this author's unusual style.

He once said that the idea of *The Men Who Stare* project was to explore "the apparent madness at the heart of U.S. military intelligence" (Ronson 2012). In the case of this *Psychopath Test* adventure, it might be said that the idea is to explore the apparent madness at the heart of the madness industry.

It begins with Ronson meeting in a Bloomsbury coffee shop with a neurologist who shows him a strange package she had received in the mail. Postmarked Gothenburg, Sweden, it contains an expensively produced book titled *Being or Nothingness*—suggestive of Sartre. The cover is a reproduction of M. C. Escher's *Drawing Hands*. Of the 42 pages, half are blank, 21 have text (sometimes just a cryptic sentence), and one of them has words cut out. The same package, he is told, had been sent anonymously to a number of accomplished academics, in various disciplines, who are intrigued, become convinced that it is meant to relay to them some important message, and struggle to figure out the puzzle. When none of them can solve it, they turn for help to Ronson—a non-academic who is known for his investigative journalistic talents.

Very quickly, his sleuthing takes him on a trip to Sweden and to the door of a seemingly prominent psychiatrist. His wife answers and Ronson learns a few things about this man, including that he is away for a few days seeing patients at a clinic. He then spends several days waiting in his hotel room watching TV shows that he can't understand (because they are in Swedish) before he returns to the house for what seems to have been a very brief meeting with this strange man. Concluding, on the basis of what I'm not sure, that he is the source of the book, Ronson returns to London and informs the neurologist that the mystery is solved. She, on hearing this news, says: "That *Being or Nothingness* thing . . . Are you *sure* it was all because of one crazy man?" (p. 32). Wondering what kind of man does something like this—something that so dramatically disturbs other people—Ronson veers off into an exploration of the meaning of "psychopathy."

To this point in the book, the story had seemed to be about the *Being or Nothingness* book, and, while there had been references to psychopathy, these seemed to be “in passing.” Ronson had talked about how his first meeting with the neurologist coincided with the threat of a lawsuit against him for calling someone a psychopath. When he encountered a researcher who specialized in studying psychopaths, he had expressed some curiosity and had mentioned recalling claims made that it was psychopaths who ran the world. But the book had seemed to be about the *Being or Nothingness* mystery; so, it was a bit disorienting when that mystery was so quickly solved and the focus shifted, via the puzzle of psychopathy, into madness.

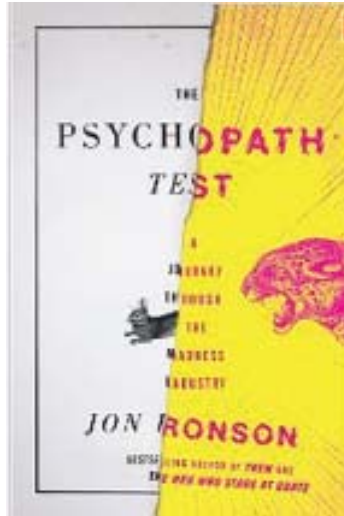
Soon I was feeling, I think, the way Alice must have felt when she fell down the rabbit hole to encounter Wonderland’s cast of unusual (and quite possibly mad) characters. While I can’t possibly convey the feeling, I will introduce a few of these characters—just to give the flavor of the encounters and to give a sense of what the experience of reading this book is like.

I’ll start with Tony. Scientologists, active in fighting the power wielded by psychiatrists, arrange for Ronson to visit Tony, a fellow who, having been convicted of Grievous Bodily Harm and, facing a 5–7 year prison sentence, had decided to act delusional in order to be hospitalized instead of imprisoned. “The minute he got admitted to Broadmoor . . . and saw what a hell hole he’d got himself into, the symptoms just vanished” (p. 57). A host of psychiatrists assessed him and agreed he was not mentally ill. But they decided that he suffered from psychopathy, thus declaring him dangerous and condemning him to an indefinite hospital stay. Twelve years later, he remains incarcerated with an indeterminate sentence. Everything he does to prove he is not mentally ill is seen as further evidence of his psychopathic personality. In his meeting with Ronson, Tony appears, well, sane enough.

Then, there’s Elliott Barker—a Canadian psychiatrist who had worked at Oak Ridge Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Ontario in the 1960s. After investigating nude psychotherapy in California, R. D. Laing’s therapeutic community in London, and the use of psychedelic drugs, Barker invented a raw, naked, LSD-fueled treatment program for psychopaths. Participants spent 11 days and nights in what Barker called the Total Encounter Capsule, exploring and exposing their deepest emotions and urges. While initial opinions were positive, evidence gradually accumulated showing that if anything, it made psychopaths worse. Eighty percent of those who went through the program re-offended while only 60% of those who didn’t re-offended, introducing the still-popular notion that psychopaths are both sick and untreatable. After looking at the material written about Barker’s treatment program, Ronson interviews one of the former patients who claims that what the “treatment” did for him was teach him to manipulate better. Then he converses by email with one of Barker’s

former colleagues who says that he'd always thought that Barker had his heart in the right place but that psychopaths are just born that way. He refers to Robert Hare whom Ronson had first heard mentioned in his brief encounter with the psychopath researcher way back when he was just starting to delve into the *Being or Nothingness* mystery.

Hare turns out to be the pivotal character in the book. A Canadian psychologist, he is the undisputed, internationally renowned expert on psychopaths. His research spanning three decades, and his writings, including the classics *Without Conscience* and *The Disturbing World of Psychopaths among Us*, form the basis of contemporary notions about psychopaths. Hare's test,



The Psychopathy Checklist—Revised (The PCL-R), is the most widely used instrument for identifying them. It's based on the idea that there are 20 characteristics (e.g., “Glibness and Superficial Charm”; “Shallow Affect”) by which a psychopath can be identified. Hare's *PCL-R* is now used routinely in prison systems where it is used to identify the most dangerous, and most prone-to-re-offend, prisoners.

But Hare's influence is much more widely spread. It has served to bolster a widespread impression that these predators are not just in prisons but rather roaming anywhere and everywhere, and that among those who hold powerful positions in industry, business, and government they may be especially plentiful—and especially dangerous. “Corporate and political and religious psychopaths ruin economies,” Hare states, “They ruin societies” (p. 112).

Ronson e-mails Hare and they agree to meet for a drink in a hotel bar in rural Pembrokeshire, West Wales. They get along well and Ronson ends up registering, at an only slightly reduced fee, in Hare's three-day workshop where he learns to identify psychopath traits in others' speech and behavior, and to score the Checklist. By the third day, he feels that he has “new powers” as a certified “psychopath-spotter.” Ronson writes,

Everyone in the field seemed to regard psychopaths (as) inhuman, relentlessly wicked forces, whirlwinds of malevolence, forever harming society but impossible to identify unless you're trained in the subtle art of spotting them as (he) was now. (p. 114)

Ronson imagines applying his new powers to his friends and associates, and teaches his wife to administer the Checklist. It's no surprise that she quickly

“identifie(s) lots of people we know as psychopaths” (p. 169).

Now, Ronson takes us on the next lap of this adventure as he goes about applying his new “psychopath-spotter” powers.

We meet “Toto,” a former Haitian death-squad leader, responsible for countless atrocities and now incarcerated for mortgage fraud. We learn that he wants everyone to like him and later learn that he wants to be liked only so that he can more easily manipulate. Then, there is Al Dunlap, who is well-suited to his career in shutting down failing factories and firing employees by the hundreds. With his cool, grandiose personality and extensive trophy collection of ferocious, predatory animals, he appears to score high on the *PCL-R*. Next we meet Charlotte, who may well be drawing on her psychopathic traits in her job of booking guests for the Jerry Springer TV show, and David Shayler, an MI5 spy who became a 9/11 conspiracy theorist, promoting the idea that the World Trade Center plane crashes were the product of government-projected holograms. None of these characters is actually scored as a psychopath; however, Ronson’s comments on how they present or behave suggest that they’d be likely to be given high scores on the *PCL-R*.

Eventually, we come to accept, as Ronson seemingly does, that these people are, to differing degrees, psychopaths. And there are moments even, in later encounters with Hare, when Ronson seems to be wondering whether Hare himself might be a psychopath or, at least, dangerous because of the “power” bestowed upon the psychopath-spotters he trains and certifies.

Some nagging questions—ones that come to nag the author and eventually the reader too—are:

- Should “psychopathy” really be recognized as a mental illness? At present, it is not officially a mental illness but it is thought of already that way and could one day be officially proclaimed a psychiatric diagnosis.
- Is the *PCL-R* a reliable way to identify psychopaths? Or is it a dangerous weapon, especially when put in wrong hands?
- Are there effective therapies, as Barker believed, or are psychopaths untreatable—a different species as Hare contends?
- Should we be defending ourselves by identifying people we encounter as psychopaths? Or does believing that we can identify them just make us paranoid and in danger of seeing everyone through a darkened lens?

Ronson summarizes this dilemma writing:

Some months passed, during which I solved the *Being or Nothingness* mystery, met the Scientologists and Tony in Broadmoor, attempted to prove (with mixed results) Bob Hare's theory that psychopaths rule the world, and became uncomfortably conscious of the fact that being a psychopath-spotter had turned me somewhat power-crazed. Actually, I now realized I had been a somewhat power-crazed madness-spotter for twenty years. It is what we journalists do. It is why I had taken to being a psychopath-spotter with such aplomb. I was good at spotting the diamonds of craziness amid the gloom of normality because it's what I've done for a living for twenty years. There can be something quite psychopathic about journalism, about psychology, about the art of madness-spotting. (p. 205)

In the last few pages, the *Being or Nothingness* mystery resurfaces as Ronson himself becomes the recipient of the strange package that, way back at the beginning, had so intrigued and puzzled the academics. I didn't entirely understand what this meant—or what the message of the book, presumably sent by the Swedish psychiatrist, might actually be. But, I accept this note of uncertainty as a suitable ending.

Perhaps, Ronson wants to leave us wondering—not knowing for sure whether “psychopathy” is something or nothing, an abnormality or a shade of normality, a scientific finding or a well-marketed idea, a useful concept or a harmful idea. Assuming that he does want to leave us in this state of confusion, I will say that of all the books I have read that claim to expose or critique psychological notions and to question society's tendency to go along with them, *The Psychopath Test* may well be the best. That's because the author, very much like Alice when she falls down the rabbit hole, starts off without an agenda, sets out on an adventure, doesn't judge or condemn the characters he meets, catches himself when he jumps to conclusions, and imparts to the reader an appreciation of wonder.

TANA DINEEN

td@tanadineen.com

http://tanadineen.com

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