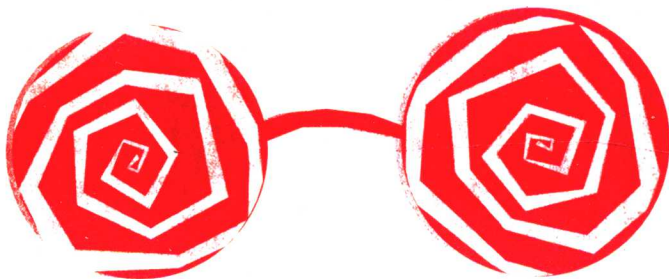


# JON RONSON

FROM THE  
AUTHOR OF  
THEM  
AND  
THE MEN WHO  
STARE AT GOATS



## THE PSYCHOPATH TEST



JOURNEY THROUGH THE MADNESS INDUSTRY

**THE PSYCHOPATH TEST**

**JON RONSON**

A Journey Through the Madness Industry



PICADOR



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# THIS IS A STORY ABOUT **MADNESS**

It all starts when journalist Jon Ronson is contacted by a leading neurologist. She and several colleagues have recently received a cryptically puzzling book in the mail, sent anonymously, and Jon is challenged to solve the mystery behind it. As he searches for the answer, Jon soon finds himself, unexpectedly, on an utterly compelling and often unbelievable adventure into the world of madness.

Jon meets a Broadmoor inmate who swears he faked a mental disorder to get a lighter sentence but is now stuck there, with nobody believing he's sane. He meets some of the people who catalogue mental illness, and those who vehemently oppose them. He meets the influential psychologist who developed the industry standard Psychopath Test and who is convinced that many important CEOs and politicians are in fact psychopaths.

Jon learns from him how to ferret out these high-flying psychopaths and, armed with his new psychopath-spotting abilities, heads into the corridors of power, spending time with an international death-squad leader and a legendary CEO whose alleged psychopathy caused huge fluctuations on the stock market. As well as talking to psychopaths, Jon meets those whose ordinary lives have been touched by madness and those who depend on it to make a living – disturbingly discovering that many of the people at the helm of the industry are sometimes, in their way, as crazy as those they study.

Combining Jon's trademark humour, charm and investigative incision, ***THE PSYCHOPATH TEST*** is a fascinating journey through an unsettling industry; a deeply honest book unearthing dangerous truths and asking serious questions about how we define normality in a world where we are increasingly judged by our maddest edges.

# **THE PSYCHOPATH TEST**

ALSO BY JON RONSON

*Them: Adventures with Extremists*

*The Men Who Stare at Goats*

*Out of the Ordinary: True Tales of Everyday Craziness*

*What I Do: More True Tales of Everyday Craziness*

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For Anita Bhoomkar (1966–2009)

A lover of life and all its madness.

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# THE MISSING PART OF THE PUZZLE REVEALED

This is a story about madness. It begins with a curious encounter at a Costa Coffee shop in Bloomsbury, Central London. It was the Costa where the neurologists tended to go, the University College London School of Neurology being just around the corner. And here was one now, turning onto Southampton Row, waving a little self-consciously at me. Her name was Deborah Talmi. She looked like someone who spent her days in laboratories and wasn't used to peculiar rendezvous with journalists in cafes and finding herself at the heart of baffling mysteries. She had brought someone with her. He was a tall, unshaven, academic-looking young man. They sat down.

'I'm Deborah,' she said.

'I'm Jon,' I said.

'I'm James,' he said.

'So,' I asked. 'Did you bring it?'

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Deborah nodded. She silently slid a package across the table. I opened it and turned it over in my hands.

‘It’s quite beautiful,’ I said.

Last July, Deborah received a strange package in the mail. It was waiting for her in her pigeonhole. It was postmarked *Gothenburg, Sweden*. Someone had written on the padded envelope *Will tell you more when I return!* But whoever had sent it didn’t leave their name.

The package contained a book. It was only forty-two pages long, twenty-one of which – every other page – were completely blank, but everything about it, the paper, the illustrations, the typeface, looked very expensively produced. The cover was a delicate, eerie picture of two disembodied hands drawing each other. Deborah recognized it as a reproduction of M. C. Escher’s *Drawing Hands*.

The author was a ‘Joe K’ (a reference to Kafka’s Joseph K, maybe, or an anagram of ‘joke’?) and the title was *Being or Nothingness*, which was some kind of allusion to Sartre’s 1943 essay, *Being and Nothingness*. Someone had carefully cut out with scissors the page that would have listed the publishing and copyright details, the ISBN number, etc., so there were no clues there. A sticker read, ‘*Warning! Please study the letter to Professor Hofstadter before you read the book. Good Luck!*’

Deborah leafed through it. It was obviously some kind of a puzzle waiting to be solved, with cryptic verse and pages where words had been cut out, and so on. She looked again at the *Will tell you more when I return!* One of her colleagues was visiting Sweden, and so even though he wasn’t normally the sort of person to send out

mysterious packages, the most logical explanation was that it had come from him.

But then he returned, and she asked him, and he said he didn't know anything about it.

Deborah was intrigued. She went on the Internet. And it was then she discovered she wasn't alone.

'Were the recipients all neurologists?' I asked her.

'No,' she said. 'Many were neurologists. But one was an astrophysicist from Tibet. Another was a religious scholar from Iran.'

'They were all academics,' said James.

They had all received the package the exact same way Deborah had – in a padded envelope from Gothenburg upon which was written *Will tell you more when I return!* They had gathered on blogs and message-boards and were trying to crack the code.

Maybe, suggested one recipient, the book should be read as a Christian allegory, 'even from the enigmatic *Will tell you more when I return!* (Clearly a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus.) The author/authors seem to be contradicting Sartre's atheist "Being AND Nothingness" (not B OR N).'

A researcher in perceptual psychology called Sarah Allred agreed: 'I have a vague suspicion this is going to end up being some viral marketing / advertising ploy by some sort of religious organization in which academics / intellectuals / scientists / philosophers will come off looking foolish.'

To others this seemed unlikely: 'The expensiveness factor rules out the viral theory unless the campaign is

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counting on their carefully-selected targets to ponder about the mysterious book online.'

Most of the recipients believed the answer lay, intriguingly, with them. *They* had been hand-picked to receive the package. There was clearly a pattern at work, but what was it? Had they all attended the same conference together years ago or something? Maybe they were being headhunted for a top position in some secretive business?

'First one to crack the code gets the job so to speak?' wrote one Australian recipient.

What seemed obvious was that a brilliant person or organization with ties to Gothenburg had devised a puzzle so complex that even clever academics like them couldn't decipher it. Perhaps it couldn't be decoded because the code was incomplete. Maybe there was a missing piece. Someone suggested 'holding the letter closely over a lamp or try the iodine vapor test on it. There may be some secret writing on it in another type of ink.'

But there didn't turn out to be any secret writing.

They threw up their hands in defeat. If this was a puzzle that academics couldn't solve, maybe they should bring in someone more brutish, like a private investigator or a journalist. Deborah asked around. Which reporter might be tenacious and intrigued enough to engage with the mystery?

They went through a few names.

And then Deborah's friend James said, 'What about Jon Ronson?'

On the day I received Deborah's email inviting me to the Costa Coffee I was in the midst of quite a bad anxiety

attack. I had been interviewing a man named Dave McKay. He was the charismatic leader of a small Australian religious group called the Jesus Christians and had recently suggested to his members that they each donate their spare kidney to a stranger. Dave and I had got on pretty well at first – he'd seemed engagingly eccentric and I was consequently gathering good material for my story, enjoyably nutty quotes from him, etc. – but when I proposed that group pressure, emanating from Dave, was perhaps the reason why some of his more vulnerable members might be choosing to give up a kidney, he exploded. He sent me a message saying that to teach me a lesson he was putting the brakes on an imminent kidney donation. He would let the recipient die and her death would be on my conscience.

I was horrified for the recipient and also quite pleased that Dave had sent me such a mad message that would be good for my story. I told a journalist that he seemed quite psychopathic (I didn't know a thing about psychopaths but I assumed that that was the sort of thing they might do). The journalist printed the quote. A few days later Dave emailed me: 'I consider it defamatory to state that I am a psychopath. I have sought legal advice. I have been told that I have a strong case against you. Your malice toward me does not allow you to defame me.'

This was what I was massively panicking about on the day Deborah's email to me arrived in my inbox.

'What was I *thinking*?' I said to my wife, Elaine. 'I was just enjoying being interviewed. I was just enjoying



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talking. And now it's all fucked. Dave McKay is going to sue me.'

'What's happening?' yelled my son, Joel, entering the room. 'Why is everyone shouting?'

'I made a silly mistake, I called a man a psychopath, and now he's angry,' I explained.

'What's he going to do to us?' said Joel.

There was a short silence.

'Nothing,' I said.

'But if he's not going to do anything to us why are you worried?' said Joel.

'I'm just worried that I've made him angry,' I said. 'I don't like to make people upset or angry. That's why I'm sad.'

'You're lying,' said Joel, narrowing his eyes. 'I *know* you don't mind making people angry or upset. What is it that you aren't telling me?'

'I've told you everything,' I said.

'Is he going to attack us?' said Joel.

'No!' I said. 'No, no! That definitely won't happen!'

'Are we in danger?' yelled Joel.

'He's not going to attack us,' I yelled. 'He's just going to sue us. He just wants to take away my money.'

'Oh God,' said Joel.

I sent Dave an email apologizing for calling him psychopathic.

'Thank you, Jon,' he replied right away. 'My respect for you has risen considerably. Hopefully if we should ever meet again we can do so as something a little closer to what might be called friends.'

‘And so,’ I thought, ‘there was me once again worrying about nothing.’

I checked my unread emails and found the one from Deborah Talmi. She said she and many other academics around the world had received a mysterious package in the mail. She’d heard from a friend who had read my books that I was the sort of journalist who might enjoy odd whodunits. She ended with, ‘I hope I’ve conveyed to you the sense of weirdness that I feel about the whole thing, and how alluring this story is. It’s like an adventure story, or an alternative reality game, and we’re all pawns in it. By sending it to researchers, they have invoked the researcher in me, but I’ve failed to find the answer. I hope very much that you’ll take it up.’

Now, in the Costa Coffee, she glanced over at the book, which I was turning over in my hands.

‘In essence,’ she said, ‘someone is trying to capture specific academics’ attention to something in a very mysterious way and I’m curious to know why. I think it’s too much of an elaborate campaign for it to be just a private individual. The book is trying to tell us something. But I don’t know what. I would love to know who sent it to me, and why, but I have no investigative talents.’

‘Well . . .’ I said.

I fell silent and gravely examined the book. I sipped my coffee.

‘I’ll give it a try,’ I said.

• • •

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I told Deborah and James that I'd like to begin my investigation by looking around their workplaces. I said I was keen to see the pigeonhole where Deborah had first discovered the package. They covertly shared a glance to say, 'That's an odd place to start but who dares to second guess the ways of the great detectives.'

Their glance may not, actually, have said that. It might instead have said, 'Jon's investigation could not benefit in any serious way from a tour of our offices and it's slightly strange that he wants to do it. Let's hope we haven't picked the wrong journalist. Let's hope he isn't some kind of a weirdo, or has a private agenda for wanting to see inside our buildings.'

If their glance did say that they would have been correct: I did have a private agenda for wanting to see inside their buildings.

James's department was a crushingly unattractive concrete slab just off Russell Square, the University College London School of Psychology. Fading photographs on the corridor walls from the 1960s and 1970s showed children strapped to frightening-looking machines, wires dangling from their heads. They smiled at the camera in uncomprehending excitement as if they were at the beach.

A stab had clearly once been made at de-uglifying these public spaces by painting a corridor a jaunty yellow. This was because, it turned out, babies come here to have their brains tested and someone thought the yellow might calm them. But I couldn't see how. Such was the oppressive ugliness of this building it would have been

like sticking a red nose on a cadaver and calling it Ronald McDonald.

I glanced into offices. In each a neurologist or psychologist was hunkered down over their desk, concentrating hard on something brain-related. In one room, I learnt, the field of interest was a man from Wales who could recognize all his sheep as individuals but couldn't recognize human faces, not even his wife, not even himself in the mirror. The condition is called prosopagnosia – face-blindness. Sufferers are apparently forever inadvertently insulting their workmates and neighbours and husbands and wives by not smiling back at them when they pass them on the street, and so on. People can't help taking offence even if they know the rudeness is the fault of the disorder and not haughtiness. Bad feelings can spread.

In another office a neurologist was studying the July 1996 case of a doctor, a former RAF pilot, who flew over a field in broad daylight, turned around, flew back over it fifteen minutes later, and there, suddenly, was a vast crop circle. It was as if it had just *materialized*. It covered ten acres and consisted of a hundred and fifty-one separate circles. The circle, dubbed the Julia Set, became the most celebrated in crop-circle history. T-shirts and posters were printed. Conventions were organized. The movement had been dying off – it had become increasingly obvious that crop circles were built not by extra-terrestrials but by conceptual artists in the dead of night using planks of wood and string – but this one had appeared from nowhere in the fifteen-minute gap between the pilot's two journeys over the field.