

Just Checking: Scenes From the Life of an Obsessive-Compulsive

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✓ Verified Book of Just Checking: Scenes From the Life of an Obsessive-Compulsive

Summary:

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We all worry. We all have moments of unfounded dread (Is someone behind that door?), or little phobias (roaches) or superstitions (step on a crack) that we indulge. Just Checking is an autobiographical account of what it is like to live with a full-blown case of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which, at its height, finds author Emily Colas nervous that she will contract a disease from blood that she sees on television. In the course of the book, what at first appear to her husband and friends to be Colas's idiosyncratic notions accumulate until she is frozen by the astounding psychological binds of OCD. Using precise (of course), connect-the-dots scenes, Colas draws a life that is at first highly monitored and ultimately unraveled by her disorder. One imagines that from afar, Colas's behavior at the height of her illness would look incomprehensible and just plain weird: She has to check the dishwasher multiple times before using it to make sure the cat is safe; the packaging of every new toothbrush has to meet rigorous sanitary standards; the landlord can't attempt to find new tenants for her apartment — she won't let them in the house. But readers are not at a distance here. Instead, we become privy to Colas's somewhat apologetic but firm explanations of what her logic was, and what it felt like to be afraid. She is so honest and witty that one can't help liking her, rooting for her, and wishing help would come. In a typical vignette, when the family tries to go to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade ("definitely a mistake"), Colas is terrified that she will step on blood: When I was a kid in New York, all we had to eat on the street were pretzels and hot dogs. Food that was readily identifiable. Now, vendors sell the fanciest things with cherries, berries, jelly, and other crap that's way too close to the color of blood. We finally made it to where we had to go, but not before I had inspected the bottom of my shoes. There was a mushy red object there. Maybe a cherry, possibly a finger. The kids watched the parade on TV and I had a nice new worry. My kids don't even remember that lovely November day, but, lucky for me, I do. This event is sad and resonant, but it also manages to be viscerally entertaining. The result is that instead of inspiring schadenfreude, this book reminds us that psychological disorders are often exaggerations of the ordinary and familiar. We all, on a continuum, wish to survive, to avoid disease, to impose order on our lives. We sympathize with Colas's desperate attempts to find safety and with her seemingly loving husband's gradual loss of tolerance. Even the not-so-funny poems that are occasionally interspersed among the perfectly crafted chapterettes find their place. Strange as it may be to find charm in a memoir of illness, Colas is utterly winning. Hilary Liftin is a writer living in New York City. Her first book, coauthored with Kate Montgomery, is scheduled for publication by Vintage next year. She is the editorial development manager at BookWire (www.bookwire.com).

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