



# The Man Who Couldn't Eat

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*“I’m a glutton in a greyhound’s body, a walking contradiction, in the grip of the one thing I can’t have—food.”*

Food is not just sustenance. It is memories, a lobster roll on the beach in Maine; heritage, hot pastrami club with a half-sour pickle; guilty pleasures, a chocolate rum-soaked Bundt cake; identity, vegetarian or carnivore. Food is the sensuality of a ripe strawberry or a pork chop sizzling on the grill. But what if the very thing that keeps you alive, that bonds us together and marks occasions in our lives, became a toxic substance, an inflammatory invader? In this beautifully written memoir, both gut-wrenching and inspiring, award-winning writer Jon Reiner explores our complex and often contradictory relationship with food as he tells the story of his agonizing battle with Crohn’s disease—and the extraordinary places his hunger and obsession with food took him.

*The Man Who Couldn't Eat* is an unvarnished account of a marriage in crisis, children faced with grown-up fears, a man at a life-and-death crossroads sifting through his past and his present. And it shows us a tough, courageous climb out of despair and hopelessness. Aided by the loving kindness of family, friends, and strangers and by a new approach to food, Reiner began a process of healing in body and mind. Most of all, he chose life—and a renewed appetite, any way he could manage it, for the things that truly matter most.

## The Man Who Couldn't Eat Details

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# From Reader Review *The Man Who Couldn't Eat* for online ebook

## Elizabeth says

I really wanted to like this book. I was diagnosed with Crohn's in 2008 and my journey to remission was a rough one. However, Reiner's self-righteousness and pseudoscientific tangents were really off-putting.

For someone as obsessed with food and the nature of Crohn's disease as Reiner, his understanding of the relationship between food, inflammatory bowel syndrome, and the body was disturbing. The macrobiotic is the opposite of what a healing Crohn's patient should be eating, as the fiber and residue content is too high. While Reiner's gastroenterologist stressed this fact, he disregarded his doctor's advice in favor of a crackpot "nutritionist" and an anti-medicine philosophy. Protein (yes, especially animal protein) is a crucial element to building up one's system after a severe Crohn's attack. I was horrified to read that Reiner had passed over medically-recommended diets for Crohn's patients (such as low-residue or gluten-free) in favor of yin and yang.

This isn't to say that all "alternative" medicine is to be shunned. Probiotics, specific vitamin supplements, and other preventative measures are key in reaching and maintaining remission. However, the macrobiotic diet has been criticized by the American Cancer Society and has even led to several malnutrition deaths. This is NOT a valid treatment for a chronic autoimmune disease.

While Reiner loved to whine about the impact his disease had on family finances, he made little effort to reduce the blow. He was too prideful to accept disability benefits, but had no problem blowing cash on quack nutritionists, high-end food products, and numerous vacations. Of course, trying to get a full-time job was deemed a waste of his time. Instead of devoting his energy to improving his lot, he decided to pick on little league parents for serving snacks to kids. Absurd.

Reiner's ridiculous health philosophies aside, the writing style was not my cup of tea. Reiner insisted on repeating the same empty phrases over and over again as if context would magically give them meaning. "Show me what you crave and I'll show you what you are." You would think that he'd understand that his cravings are his body's way of alerting him to specific nutritional deficiencies, not some sort of silly extension of his personality. Of course you crave fattening foods! You have a chronic illness that prevents fat absorption and you're forty pounds underweight!

If you want to understand the daily life of a person with Crohn's disease, steer clear of this book. It provides a very limited, food-centric, uninformed perspective of day-to-day life with chronic illness. It's not always about dramatic intestinal ruptures or TPN. Crohn's affects more than the diet and the gut. It changes everything from energy levels to blood protein to bone density. It's not something you only think about when sitting down to eat a meal.

Suck it up, Reiner. Stop whining, listen to your doctor, and start enjoying your life and your wonderful family instead of dwelling on your disease and food.

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## Amber Koppenhofer says

The main reason I decided to read this book when I saw it in an email from goodreads is that this story is

about a man with Crohn's Disease, and I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease nearly 6 years ago. I was really hoping I could relate to this man, and have empathy for him, and perhaps even enjoy his story enough to purchase the book, but my hopes were a bit too high.

Let me start by saying that while I had a really rough patch when I was first diagnosed with Crohn's Disease, I have been virtually symptom free since the meds starting working about 6 months after my diagnosis, and that my case of Crohn's does not even come close to comparing what this man has gone through. Nevertheless, I thought I would be able to relate to him, but instead I felt very disconnected with Reiner throughout much of his tale.

First, I don't care for his writing style, which is a matter of personal taste, I suppose, but beyond that, I feel like this story should have been titled, "The Jewish Man Who Couldn't Eat." I want to be clear, I have no issues with him being Jewish, it's just that I felt the book was a lot more about his Jewish culture and upbringing than it was about his struggle with Crohn's, which is where I think some of the disconnect came from. I understand that we wanted to convey to his readers how we was affected by the fact that he couldn't eat the food he was raised on, but it was a bit too much and detracted from the main story of the book. He also seemed to have a lot of self pity, which began to bug me after a bit. He really struggled to find meaning in his situation, and I just have a low tolerance for people who get really negative about their lot in life. It was getting more and more difficult for me to continue with the story. I began the book by reading it, but despite the fact that I wanted to hear how the story ended, I couldn't bring myself to pick up the book and keep reading. Lucky for me, this book is also recorded on cd, which is how I finished the second half of the book - I just listened to it while I drove my car and did my housework.

In the end though, I had more sympathy for the man than empathy, and while I could relate to some of the story he was telling, it wasn't enough to keep me interested. It certainly wasn't the worst memoir I've read, but it was far from the best. I wish him lots of luck and hope he has found, or soon finds, a solution to coping with his Crohn's and finds a way to get into remission.

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## **Read, Run, Ramble says**

"In the sensuality of eating, the nose teases and the mouth consummates. The intensity of the dinner's aroma is playing havoc with my senses, as so many smalls have lately, and I'm transported."

This quote is used by the author very early in the book to describe how he feels in the kitchen of his own home while unable to eat anything. Jon Reiner has Crohn's disease and has been in and out of the hospital with the disease for over 20 years. Often his bouts end in an NPO - nothing by mouth, which means he cannot eat or drink anything. All nutrition is pumped through IVs and catheters.

Reiner's ability to describe a scene or a dish or an event is miraculous - he is vivid and funny in describing the Hell he lives and how he tries to reclaim the life he once new - the life he desperately wants back. Readers will find themselves almost able to taste the food items he writes of in his memoir. Reiner shows that food and eating is so much more to us than nutrition. Whether right, wrong, or indifferent we all associate memories, experiences, moods, and many other things with eating. Imagine having all of that completely removed. Imagine being so sick you're not sure you'll make it to the next day. Imagine losing your job. Imagine your life completely changed in one moment. Imagine.

Reiner starts readers on this journey by describing a gut wrenching medical emergency he experiences while alone at home. Unable to understand what has happened or what caused it, and how he's going to get help, the memoir jumps off at a gripping pace. Through his trials Jon is frustrated, angry, scared, and gripped with the cravings of food - I think one of the best parts about this memoir is it isn't a, "look what I faced and how awesome I faced it - look at what I conquered" type of book. Reiner is honest - he loses his taste buds to atrophy and that makes him angry. He goes without food for several months, but continues to crave and come close to cheating. He struggles with depression and anger and his marriage suffers great difficulty. Jon doesn't sugar coat his journey and he doesn't try to claim perfection - I loved that.

Whether you love food or not. Whether you have Crohn's, another medical issue, or none at all, whether you've had marriage problems or not - no matter who you are, this book will give you some things to ponder. See Reiner isn't just displaying a food addict's journey without food, he's addressing change - sudden, unexpected, life-altering change and the pitfalls that come with that change.

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### **Jill Furedy says**

I've been having a lot of issues in connection to a former surgery from my crohn's disease, (scar tissue is closing up my intestine and food can't make it through), so this seemed like something to shake up any thoughts of a self pity party. I guess I expected his scenario to be a lot worse. He couldn't eat for a few months, which is totally hard and obnoxious, but I thought it was going to be a permanent situation based on the title. So partway through the book, I was thinking how I'd feel more sorry for him if he felt less sorry for himself and then wasn't as sympathetic to him as I might have been. However, I'm sure given the circumstances, it's hard not to feel sorry for yourself. My surgery was for a perforated intestine as well, with fistula issues at the surgical site, but fortunately I was only NPO for a few days after the surgery and never had to deal with a food pump.

I could totally relate to his cravings for food that are on his 'do not eat list'. I've never been a big meat eater...I'd maybe have either chicken, beef or bacon once or twice a week, but as soon as it started making me sick a couple months ago, I would smell In & Out burgers from across the parking lot at work at be dying to go get one. Or I'd smell a neighbors grill going and want to hop the fence. And his wanting to lick a French fry made me laugh, because I've threatened to do the same with popcorn, which I used to love and eat a few times a week and now two kernels will send me to the ER. I've not actually succumbed to that desire to lick the food though, unlike in his story.

I felt very bad for his wife in quite a few chapters of this book, which hopefully will remind me to be less obnoxious and self absorbed when I'm feeling unwell. I was curious to see what became of his macro diet. I'm not sure I could even try that one. I'm with him in the frustration of there not being a clear right and wrong thing to do to feel better. Even if they pointed at me and said..."you made bad food decisions and now you will pay...never eat carbs again". I would wail and kick and scream about the unfairness, but there would still be some relief in having some kind of definitive answer. I've not yet taken a stand about getting off meds after 12 years of maintenance meds and most issues being complications for surgery and not flare ups, thought I've refused to try different drugs or escalate to the newer trendier drugs just cause the docs feel the need to do something.

I do like to read about others experiences to compare how things could be worse, how things are similar and what experiences are still unique. So I would possibly recommend this book for that reason to people with Crohns, colitis, etc. I might suggest it to someone without the disease only if they specifically were looking for medical memoirs or looking to understand a bit about digestive diseases. On the other hand, the author did a 20 minute interview on Radio Lab that pretty much sums up the book, so that would work too.

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## **I Love Books says**

<http://livetoread-krystal.blogspot.co...>

The memoir opens with Reiner telling the reader a little bit of background about himself. He is a glutton in a greyhound's body. He has to live in a self-imposed exile from many of the foods he enjoys eating. He lets the reader in on the pain he experiences due to Crohn's. His own kids must eat healthy due to his fear of passing on the disease to his children compounded by the fact that his wife has diabetes in her family. He goes on to tell the reality of living with Crohn's disease. The reader will be taken through a very detailed account, he holds nothing back.

The memoir is told from Jon's point of view, it really adds to the book. The opinions of his children, wife, and friends are less subtle, but they are in the book and help the reader to form his/her own opinion on Crohn's from different viewpoints. The events range from excruciatingly painful (when he is having an attack) to mildly painful (when he attempts to eat light and follows an extremely restrictive diet). The idea of Crohn's disease is awful to those of us who never experience it, but it is rare to receive a first-hand account; Crohn's will become much more real to the reader. This memoir is recommended to readers who enjoy nonfiction, reality, diet books.

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## **Todd says**

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to not be able to eat or drink? Not to fast, not to go without food for 30 hours in support of starving people in Africa, but to really go with nothing passing down your esophagus for longer than a week or two? Welcome to the life of Jon Reiner, who suffers from Chron's disease, leaving him helpless to his body's attacks against his own digestive tract. Having lived with the disease since his college years, Jon offers up a unique insight into the mental and physical suffering that often accompanies chronic disease and disability. Both depressing and intriguing, his story left me feeling saddened for those afflicted with this terrible disease but enlightened about how Jon was able to deal with his circumstances and deal with the daily battles that he waged with his own body.

The Man Who Couldn't Eat begins, as all good books do, with an excruciating account of pain and misery as Jon lies on his apartment floor, unable to stand or essentially help himself as he experiences an acute digestive attack that literally floors him. His mind begins to wander, wondering what has triggered this pain and suffering. Was it the dried apricots he ate earlier in the day? Was it the leftover food he indulged in last night to clear out the family refrigerator? From this point, Jon launches into an autobiography of sorts, detailing his childhood, pre-Chron's adolescence, and finally adult life, all centered around food. Unfortunately, Jon's lot in life was to be a "foodie" long before he developed Chron's. His principle memories of his childhood revolve around food, and he bases much of his modern identity on his Jewish culture and the ties to food that he has had throughout his life. Therefore, discovering that he has a disease that basically robs him of the ability to eat food, any food or drink, is akin to saying that he cannot breathe. It is as if his identity is taken away, never to return. Jon then details his painful recovery and subsequent battles with his disease, which literally almost kill him. He is forced to go NPO, or nil per os in latin, meaning that

he cannot eat or drink anything for a prescribed period of three months. Although surrounded by food left by well-meaning friends and family, he must sit on the sidelines and watch his family bond and develop together as he drifts inert as an outsider. His insight from this experience is phenomenal. It is a contrast between food love and food hate that exists in such extremes that it is truly mesmerizing.

I have to admit that I went into reading this book knowing little to nothing about Chron's disease and being a bit skeptical about Jon's obsession with food. With my medical knowledge limited to other specific diseases, I was familiar with certain disease processes physically, but I was at a loss to the mental toll of disease by and large. After reading this book, I have nothing but the utmost respect and compassion for Mr. Reiner. To endure what he had to; to face the reflection of failure in his family's faces every night, knowing that he was not only unable to be a dedicated father, nor a provider for the family must have been devastating. The physical toll of his illness was extremely hard to bear alone, but adding the mental stress and depression must have been unimaginable. However, his ability to persevere onward and survive this black hole in his life is a testament to the type of person Reiner is. The lessons that his experience left him with are invaluable, and the strengthened relationship he has with his family is inspirational. It is as if food both took away and gave him back his life. I found it an invaluable read that made me think about myself and my relationships with those around me. Definitely check it out, it's getting published today! You'll be glad you did.

Todd (Reflections of a Book Addict)  
<http://wp.me/p18IIL-yu>

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## **Tzipora says**

I'm very torn on how to rate this book. And also torn on how to review it.

In general, memoirs of health issues probably only really appeal to a fairly small group of people. I do not have Crohn's disease like the author but I do have a very severe digestive system disorder. And like the author I am dependent on Total Parenteral Nutrition (TPN), a form of nutrition that bypasses the digestive tract entirely. You get all your nutritional needs through your veins. And like the author I have NPO (nothing by mouth) for extended periods of time although unlike the author there is no expected recovery for me so maybe that makes my outlook different.

I LOVED the beginning of this book when Jon Reiner discusses his feelings towards being on TPN. For that reason alone I wanted to recommend it to my friends and family. I could relate so much. However, as the book went on I had more and more trouble relating and am not sure I'd recommend it to anyone. The bulk of this book, as others have mentioned, is a lot of whining. At one point the author even addresses the fact that others have pointed out that TPN saved his life (as it has mine). TPN is definitely a life saver for all who need it but Mr. Reiner is too busy complaining. Even when he addresses the lifesaving aspect he seems to state it's not enough. He only spends 3 months on TPN and NPO and never in all that time does he ever come to accept the TPN or his illness. And this bothered me immensely. The author's Crohn's goes more or less into remission by the time the book ends so on some level he never really has to accept it. This is unfortunate and the book could've been so much better and of much more use to so many people if it had been a story of learning to cope with a severe and chronic illness. Instead it's a whining lament.

If you're going to write a memoir, you need to be a likeable person and as the novel progresses, the author becomes more and more unlikeable with his ranting and whining. Yes, it SUCKS to be NPO. And TPN can be a total pain. And this kind of situation is rare but most people I have ever spoken to in a similar

situation have dealt with it better and honestly have far more inspiring stories. Jon Reiner seems to think he's the only one with these kinds of issues and chances are you've never met someone on TPN because it's rare but not THAT rare. And the last several chapters where he discusses a macrobiotic diet is very disjointed and the whole tone of the book changes. I have no clue what those chapters even have to do with the rest of the book. And the last chapter wraps things up way too well, like a fairy tale. It leaves a bipolar taste in your mouth, so to speak.

I'd like to rate it higher because it brings awareness to Total Parenteral Nutrition and is perhaps the only memoir of it's kind but I can't bring myself to recommend this to anyone.

So admittedly I have personal issues with this book and I realize this is a strange sort of review but if you take anything away from my review, it is this- This book SHOULD HAVE been extraordinarily relevant to me because I am in a similar situation but even I did not like it. That says a lot. And while I could give you more of a plot synopsis, I want to leave it at this. I was the perfect target audience for this memoir (and in general a big fan of memoirs) but this book was a huge disappointment!

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### **Denaë says**

Ugh. The amount of self-pity Jon Reiner displays throughout this book made it nigh unreadable. When I entered the giveaway for *The Man Who Couldn't Eat*, it was based on descriptions of the book as unique, compelling, and a very real depiction of what it is like to have Crohn's disease, from the point of view of someone with a special relationship with food. Instead, I received a book which seems to have been written from the point of view of a man who feels he is unique in having what is actually a sadly common disease. There are references to how hard it is for others to cope with his illness, but they seem to still be in light of how it makes him feel. Overall, this is not a book about a disease, this is a book about a man wallowing in self-pity.

*Disclaimer: I received an advance review copy of this book for free through the Goodreads First Reads giveaway program.*

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### **Gerald Curtis says**

I felt miserable the entire time I spent with this book. I didn't expect to "enjoy" the book, being a true account of a man and his family's struggle with Chron's disease. The degree of suffering I endured as I read about his struggles is a testimony to the effectiveness of his account.

I read the book because I have a niece, whose husband died young, due to this disease and I wanted to know more about it and more about what she and her children had been through. I had always thought he was an unusually positive, happy guy, but now that I have some insights, I marvel at how he always came across at family gatherings and wish I'd known him better.

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## **Trevor Tupper says**

Speaking as someone with Crohn's Disease I at first found this book masterful the way it accurately described the same type of turmoil I went through. About half way through the book I found I disliked the amount of self pity the author was displaying, it became more unbearable than Crohn's symptoms. I got about 75% through the book when I had to just set it down. Would not recommend.

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## **Josephine says**

When I was in high school, I worked at an insurance company during the summers doing thankless little tasks like filing.

Between getting paper cuts upon paper cuts, I did something I was told not to do — I'd sit at a desk and read through the long-term disability claims as I was filing.

There was this one man's claim that I still remember to this day.

He was a 28-year-old with beautiful, spidery handwriting. In his claim, he described how Crohn's disease had robbed him of the ability to leave the house, nevermind going back to work.

It's weird, but I still remember this — and I can't help but think about all the number of times that people feel invisible and unnoticed by the world, not realizing that, in a weird, random way, someone out there is thinking about them and wondering if they're okay.

I found myself thinking about this guy when I started reading "The Man Who Couldn't Eat" by Jon Reiner, who describes a near-fatal collapse due to complications from his chronic battle with Crohn's Disease.

From that point, he was forbidden from eating food, fed intravenously, and tortured by his incessant hunger.

In one chapter, he describes his family having a meal that he cannot participate in.

"Now I'm bent in a twisted position by the kitchen stove, and the hunger is driving me mad. I crave food more than sex. The smell and touch of food in our apartment can drop me to my knees. I think about it constantly, more desperately as the months wear on, an obsession that magnifies a craved bite of the ordinary into surreal portions." (p.106)

Later, he writes: "Anyone who's ever starved for a day, for medical or religious or financial reasons, knows the torture of moving along the sidewalk and having every pizza aroma within five blocks knock you down blind. Imagine getting provoked every day in the confining walls of your own home with meat, vegetables, sauces, and brownies coursing the plate." (p.126)

You know, reading this book gave me a profound appreciation for my health and standard of living — which I think a lot of us take for granted because we don't have to think twice about rummaging through the cupboards for something to eat when we're hungry or indulging in something unhealthy when the craving overtakes us.

While a lot of people will largely see this as a “food memoir,” I saw this as a poignant reminder of never taking for granted good health.

I thought this was a remarkable and beautiful memoir that was definitely worth reading — I can’t even begin to say enough how much this book made me appreciate my good health and the circumstances under which I’m living.

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### **Heather says**

The Man Who Couldn't Eat is Jon Reiner's personal story about returning home from an uneventful grocery shopping trip only to have his stomach explode. As he struggles to heal after a poorly performed surgery, he is put on TPN. He is sent home to spend months living without eating or drinking - absolutely nothing by mouth. His deep surgical wound is left open and covers his gut. The battle to survive takes Jon on an emotional roller-coaster through denial, anger, depression, and finally acceptance. The book chronicles a full year of medical drama, yet it is so much more than the tale of one man's struggle to survive.

Entering this book allows the reader to journey through Jon's past by means of his taste buds. The delicious descriptions of the food of his past are at such odds with the grotesque descriptions of his present medical procedures. It's the ultimate oxymoron, leaving you salivating and yet nauseated in one swoop.

Much admiration goes to Jon's ability to tell it like it is. He does not play the victim, instead fully admits to his selfish behavior. As his family falls apart, he takes his share of the blame and does not sugar-coat any of it. Jon's battle becomes not only one to overcome the illness but to also reclaim his family.

In the end, this tale is one of balance - the yin and the yang. The continuous balancing act while juggling the needs of a family, the struggles of a career (or lack thereof) and the needs of his health crisis is thoroughly documented. Jon's ability to rediscover what is important in life is inspiring. His tale is laced with religion, but it is his ultimate decision to concur that allows him to reclaim his life. There is no glossing over the facts to bring the story to a neat conclusion. Jon continues to struggle to balance his wants with his needs, especially in terms of food. This conflict leads to a stimulating read.

My review as posted on [readingforsanity.blogspot.com](http://readingforsanity.blogspot.com)

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### **Mike says**

As someone who has lived with this disease since I was 6, I am all too familiar with what the author has gone through. His ability to describe what it's like to live with this disease and survive the more humiliating aspects show his talent as a writer. I am asking my family to read this book because I have never been able to describe what it feels like to live with this disease and he has done the best job of any author I have ever read of putting a face on this disease. He is able to explain why we can't just "suck it up" and how the lack of understanding affects all of our personal relationships. His relationship to food brings this book to an even more interesting place and I hope it enlightens people to what living with a chronic disease is like and how difficult even simple things can become. I must commend Mr Reiner on his ability to tie in the very interesting personal story of his relationship with food and remaining NPO to the more mundane daily tasks and his success in doing both

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## **Cheryl says**

I am not familiar with Crohn's disease. So to read what Mr. Reiner went through dealing with this disease, it was disheartening. I can not imagine having to live with Crohn's disease. Always having to worry about what you eat not because you want to lose weight but because you never know when some type of food could be like a time bomb towards your body.

Reading about the stool blockage that formed in Mr. Reiner's small intestine and tore a perforation in his intestinal wall, which caused a rupture was horrible. I could just envision the horrific pain that he was in, while he lay on his kitchen floor waiting for his wife to come home. Luckily, the doctor was able to stabilize Mr. Reiner but in order to heal and avoid further surgery; the doctor informs Mr. Reiner that he will have to have a PICC line for total parenteral nutrition (TPN). Mr. Reiner will be receiving food intravenously.

The way Mr. Reiner described food was better than some food writers. I swear I could almost smell and taste the pastrami from Kazi. While, I did appreciate Mr. Reiner sharing his story, I found this book to be heavy. I could not sit and just read it. In fact I did skim over it in parts. After reading this book, I would never wish anyone to have this disease.

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## **Alison says**

I have never been so relieved to finish a book and have it no longer claiming any of my precious time. There are a few lovely sentences peppered here and there, but for the most part the writing is awful. Tons of boring, unnecessary details and side stories, disjointed jumping around and the author's voice itself is beyond wearing. He obviously finds himself to be very clever but yet can't seem to figure out why no one ever laughs at his jokes. He tends to focus on the negative, both in the people that surround him and his situation.

I would have quit it after the first few pages but forced myself to plow on ahead because I'm going through such a similar experience. I wanted to silently commiserate / see what he gained from such suffering. (Spoiler: not much.)

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