



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

Emily Colas

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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).

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

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Ashley says

I really wanted to like this book - a personal look at OCD that was touted as a funny yet personal glimpse into one woman's daily rituals and compulsions. David Sedaris even gave the book a great review - how could I not like it? However, I found Colas hard to relate to and struggled with her choices - though I know her OCD kept her from making rational, reasonable decisions.

I hope she's found a treatment that works for her.

♥ Sandi ♥ says

The book title says it all "scenes from the life of an obsessive compulsive".

This is vignettes on the life of Emily Colas, OCD sufferer. It is high-lights taken from her life of dating, college, marriage, children, therapy, divorce and employment. It hits on food, sanitation, travel, medication and conversation problems.

Although not a funny psychiatric affliction, Emily uses humor to tell her story.

Lisa says

I judge this kind of book against one standard: Is YOUR crazy crazier than MY crazy? And by that I mean me personally, my friends and family, and so on. In this case, kinda sorta, but really, in the end, not really. She starts out strong, when it's easy to see how numerous compulsions are negatively affecting her life. However, once again we end up with a woman safely in the arms of an enabling, loving husband (for awhile, anyway). To put it bluntly, this coddled housewife has free reign to indulge her mania with no fear of ever having to fend for herself. Money can buffer so many things.

Plus, with all her germ phobias, she still manages to have two children. She never bottoms out, never requires hospitalization, never becomes a danger to herself or others. The zenith of her affliction is that, well, she's annoying. And has the gall to compare herself to a heroin addict.

Just another chick (like "Girl, Interrupted") briefly flirting with so-called mental illness, and ends up a best-selling author.

Well, good for them.

And by Them, I mean those giant irradiated ants.

Kate says

I just love OCD memoirs. This is a hysterical read, plus very candid about the ways the author's disorder ruined parts of her life (like her marriage).

Stephanie says

I picked up this book at a Goodwill, so I didn't spend much money on it. I am so glad! It is described as "laugh-out-loud hilarious". It also seemed interesting. OCD has always fascinated me, and I've been hooked on memoirs where people overcome obstacles in their lives. I wanted to like this book. There were a few things that kept me from enjoying it.

Possible Spoilers

I enjoyed the first quarter of the book. After that, it felt to me that Colas had a lot of people in her life that enabled her. Her husband seemed like a nice guy, but he was also an enabler. He wanted her to seek help, while also indulging her whims. Like eating bites of her food first to ensure it wasn't poisoned, taking 20 bags of garbage out one bag at a time, asking waiters about their cuts to make sure that they were not getting blood in their food, etc. At the same time though, he can be very harsh. His response to Colas' questions about getting rabies while pregnant and not being able to get the vaccine in time, "I guess you'll die." And that's just her husband. She also has neighbors at the end of the book who come and eat her food for her because she thinks it might be poisoned and she wants someone else to eat it first.

And that brings me to another problem. Colas worries so much that things will harm her, yet doesn't care if they harm others. The food tasting is one thing. It isn't ok if she gets poisoned, but it's ok if her husband or neighbors do. She didn't like the garbage bin at her apartment so she hoarded their garbage, and when it got to be too much she would have her husband take it out. He would do this one bag at a time while she watched from a window to make sure he did it right. When he came back he would wash his hands, get another bag, repeat. If he happened to get something on him while doing this, Colas would make him go back and search through the garbage to find out what it was that he got on himself. She would then make him throw his clothes away and shower immediately. The things she would ask of others just got so selfish. I couldn't believe it. She even gets to a point in the book where she begins collecting her kids toys to throw away because she doesn't like the glitter. It's only her husband who gets her to stop.

I got the feeling when reading the book that Colas did these things because she could. Because there were always people around her who would enable her whims. She also doesn't have to worry about having a job, so she gets to stay at her house all day further cementing her OCD. She talks often in the book about how medication would help. When she finally does take medication she gets better, surprise! But it takes her husband leaving her, and hitting rock bottom for her to realize this.

And that's another thing. Colas and her husband separate, and then get back together for a little bit. During this time period when they might sort of be getting back together, she cheats on him! With a guy she knew in high school, and who appears and disappears just as quickly. It seems like he was just another way for her to put herself first, just like all the many whims she has throughout the book.

Finally, the way the book is written is frustrating. I like the her writing style, but the segments jump around so much that I found it hard to really know what exactly it was that Colas was trying to say when writing this book. I think the book could have been better organized.

I'm not saying I don't think she had OCD. She definitely struggled. But so many of her struggles didn't just hamper her quality of life, but also her husband's and her children's, her family's and friend's. She seems like a smart woman, and she knew she needed help. She knew she would get better if she got help, yet she didn't until her marriage fell apart.

Katie says

One of the most irritating memoirs I've ever read. Little more than a stand-up comedy routine, Colas mistakes sarcasm for substance and describes her struggles with obsessive compulsive disorder in a generally unenlightening and unsympathetic way. While there are moments of real wit and occasional flashes of insight, as a whole the book falls flat, and Colas comes across as self-absorbed and, I hate to say it, unlikeable.

Amy says

My best friend has OCD. The real OCD, not the stupid little quirks and things we all have that people call OCD. This is one of her favorite books, and she gave it to me to read so that I would have a better understanding of what it is like to have this particular disorder, that very much disrupts and interferes with everyday life. It's an honest and rather funny memoir, and I really loved it. I've learned a lot about obsessive compulsive disorder from my friend, and because of that, I get pretty skeptical when someone says they have it. The biggest pet peeve of my best friend is when people say "I'm so OCD about..." It's actually become something that bothers me. I correct people a lot, and tell them that just because they have A compulsion, or something they think is AN obsession, that does not mean they have obsessive compulsive disorder. It's not a quirk, it's an actual illness.

Esther Servin says

This book made me angry haha

Kressel Housman says

This is the second OCD memoir I've read of late, and while it takes a more comic tone than the previous one, the writer turned out to be much less likable. She has contamination fears, which is relevant to my situation, so there were sections I could read aloud to the OCD sufferer in my life to ask, "Is this what it feels like?" I made sure to read the conclusion aloud also. But as much as this is a book about OCD, it's also a book about a challenging marriage. The author's husband was an absolute saint for putting up with her. She says as much herself, and one of the book's two clever poems is about him. (The poems are the best part of the book.)

In the end, though, her behavior was unforgivable. I lost almost all my sympathy for her, and I think most readers would have the same reaction. Still, it's a short book and a quick read, so if you're on the same quest I am, reading this book is worth the investment of your time. But remember: don't expect anybody else's

bout with OCD to provide even a fraction of the answers of how to emerge from it. The best you can hope for is greater understanding.

Eryn says

I'm not going to rate this, 'cause I only read 3/4th's of it for my Abnormal Psychology class. But! I really enjoyed it. I might actually finish the chapters I didn't get to read. Maybe... Who knows?

Kassandra says

I am really interested in this topic but I found the format didn't draw me in. She told this with a great deal of humour through short quips but I was really looking to get more into the meat of how this progressed for her and how she copes with it. The book is definitely lacking in that for me.

Trina says

I read Just Checking to gain a better understanding of OCD so I can show more empathy to those who suffer from OCD. Although it was funny and snarky at times, I also found it sad and a bit disturbing. However, I think that it was brave for author Emily Colas to publish such an honest portrayal of what it is like to live with OCD.

Anita says

A funny, entertaining, and sad memoir about living with OCD. Excellent and fun.

Kayla says

I enjoy reading memoirs but this one was poorly written and too breezy for my taste. Although the author has a sense of humor, she did not seem to have much compassion.

Reem says

Just Checking by Emily Colas is a great book about a mother and wife living with OCD and how much it affects her life. There were things that I liked that the author did and things that I wasn't exactly in favor with. To start off with the positives, I really loved the details of her life and how she has trust issues because of her husband and how she found out about her OCD. Another thing I really loved was the writing style because it has heading and a small paragraph about a scene of her life that really shaped her. Something that

I really didn't like it because it's just different scenarios of her life, but there was no plot or a big event in her life so I found it hard to read. Usually when I pick up a book, I will read it in one or two sittings, but I read ten pages at a time. I would recommend this book if you are into little stories rather than a big plot.
