



Lost At Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries

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The New York Times–bestselling author of *The Psychopath Test*, Jon Ronson writes about the dark, uncanny sides of humanity with clarity and humor. *Lost at Sea* reveals how deep our collective craziness lies, even in the most mundane circumstances.

Ronson investigates the strange things we're willing to believe in, from lifelike robots programmed with our loved ones' personalities to indigo children to hypersuccessful spiritual healers to the Insane Clown Posse's juggalo fans. He looks at ordinary lives that take on extraordinary perspectives, for instance a pop singer whose life's greatest passion is the coming alien invasion, and the scientist designated to greet those aliens when they arrive. Ronson throws himself into the stories—in a tour de force piece, he splits himself into multiple Ronsons (Happy, Paul, and Titch, among others) to get to the bottom of credit card companies' predatory tactics and the murky, fabulously wealthy companies behind those tactics. Amateur nuclear physicists, assisted-suicide practitioners, the town of North Pole, Alaska's Christmas-induced high school mass-murder plot: Ronson explores all these tales with a sense of higher purpose and universality, and suddenly, mid-read, they are stories not about the fringe of society or about people far removed from our own experience, but about all of us.

Incisive and hilarious, poignant and maddening, revealing and disturbing—Ronson writes about our modern world, the foibles of contemporary culture, and the chaos that lies at the edge of our daily lives.

Lost At Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries Details

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Steve Johnson says

When I saw that this book opens with Ronson's Insane Clown Posse interview (which is one of my favorite things ever), I was afraid it would be downhill from there. To some extent, that turned out to be true--the ICP interview is still probably my favorite piece--but for the most part it's a pretty gentle descent. Some articles are better than others, but they're all good and a few are very good. Unlike Ronson's previous books of (if I remember Jon Stewart's phrase correctly) "satirical investigative journalism," *Lost at Sea* is more anthology than narrative, with the only unifying theme being that people are just really damned strange. Topics range from "Indigo children" to a foiled school shooting plot in North Pole, Alaska (the town where it's always Christmas) to a portrait of obsessive-compulsive genius in the form of Ronson's explorations through the thousands of boxes of stuff spread out all over Stanley Kubrick's estate. If you've enjoyed Ronson's other books, this is a must-read. If you've never read Ronson, this is as good a place to start as any.

Laura says

I laughed harder at this book than I've ever laughed at any book ever. Not all the way through, mind you - some parts were serious, some sad and some downright depressing, but there were also bits where out of nowhere I'd find myself bent-double, honking with laughter or shooting tea out of my nose.

This is a collection of journalism by Jon Ronson, published in various places and over a period of around 20 years. My plan was to read a chapter at a time, interspersing them with other books, but I ended up devouring it in one go over a couple of days - it was just so addictive.

Jon Ronson is fast turning into my favourite journalist/writer/people-observer. He is seemingly capable of taking any topic and making it not only interesting but tangibly, and often beautifully, human.

The articles covered a vast range of different topics. Here's a brief breakdown:

Thinking Inside the Box. A fascinating behind-the-scenes look at the frankly insane world of *Deal or no Deal*. Funny and creepy. Noel Edmonds, ugghhhhhhh

Doesn't Everyone Have a Solar? An investigation into artificial intelligence in which Jon ends up interviewing several robots. Surprisingly moving - he even managed to humanise this topic.

The Chosen Ones. A look at the concept of 'Indigo Children'. Are they highly evolved souls sent to guide the human race towards a better future, or just kids with ADHD and deluded parents? This contains, to my mind, the second funniest bit in the book.

A Message From God. The alpha course. One of the less interesting chapters in my opinion but still fascinating.

I Looked Into That Camera and I Just Said It . Jon interviews Ray Gosling, a legendary Northern filmmaker who admitted on BBC East Midlands television to mercy killing his boyfriend decades before. I liked this one because I'm from Nottingham and I remember when all of that kicked off.

Have You Ever Stood Next to an Elephant My Friend? Jon interviews the Insane Clown Posse. Hilarity ensues. Completely mad.

The Hunger Games. Jon investigates the world of competitive eating in the US. Interesting but overall pretty depressing.

Portrait of the Artist on Crystal Meth. I found this the most heartbreaking one. He interviews Bryan Saunders, an unusual man who has devoted his life to drawing self-portraits, but who found unexpected fame on the internet after drawing himself while on a variety of drugs.

The Name's Ronson, Jon Ronson. This is one of the funniest things I've read in bloody ages. One particular line had me laughing like a twat for about five minutes. Jon recreates, to the word, a journey undertaken by James Bond in Goldfinger. Hilarious.

I'm Loving Aliens Instead. Awwwww, Robbie Williams....

First Contact. What would happen if we receive a signal from aliens? Jon interviews the guy whose job it would be to make first contact. Fascinating.

Citizen Kubrick. What a weirdo.

Santa's Little Conspirators In North Pole, Alaska, it's Christmas every day. Jon goes to investigate the arrest of a group of 13-year-old North Pole boys who, after responding to Santa letters from real kids in the guise of elves, plotted to commit mass murder in their school.

Phoning a Friend. Charles Ingram et al cheated on millionaire in 2001. The least whelming of the chapters.

Who Killed Richard Cullen?. Published two years before the financial crisis, this investigation (obviously couched in the most accessible and human terms possible) of subprime lending and credit culture was extremely perspicacious. If only people had paid attention at the time.

The Sociopath Mind Guru and the Hypnotist. This really reminded me of the psychopath test, another amazing Ronson book. He investigates Neurolinguistic Programming and gets programmed by Paul McKenna.

Death at the Chateau. A UK couple move to a Chateau in France and things begin to fall apart. Jon investigates. Not amazing but entertaining.

I've Thought About Doing Myself in Loads of Times... A really dark exploration of family men who lose it and kill their entire families and themselves. This wasn't fun but it was worth it.

Blood Sacrifice, Amazing piece of journalism on the Jesus Christians, who were trying to illegally donate kidneys to strangers in 2002/2003.

I Make it Look Like They Died in Their Sleep. Incredible story of an American priest who helps people without physical illnesses to commit suicide.

Is She For Real? The “psychic” Sylvia Browne sounded like a real bitch. Jon went on a Mediterranean cruise with her.

The Fall of a Pop Impresario. In 2001, Jonathan King was arrested for raping underage boys in the sixties and seventies. Jon followed the case. Interesting to see how attitudes have changed between then and the current Yewtree age. I feel like Jon’s attitudes would have been pretty different post-Saville.

Amber Waves of Green. This was one of the best of a very good bunch in my opinion. Jon interviews four people living in the US, with each interviewee having a salary five times that of the last. A brilliant investigation into wealth distribution in the US.

The Man Who Tried to Split the Atom A Swedish guy tried to split the atom in his kitchen. I thought this was one of the less interesting chapters.

Lost at Sea. Heartbreaking look at what happens when people fall off cruiseliners and how nobody seems to be accountable. Made me never want to go on a cruise.

The Amazing Adventures of Phoenix Jones Jon follows a group of real-life superheroes as they try and fight crime on the streets of America. A great way to end a great book.

Caroline says

I'm a fan of the geeky, quirky Jon Ronson - but found this collection of his essays a little patchy. Plus I had already read a couple of these essays in his other books. There are some absolute gems here though, and herewith my favourites...or in some instances, essays that made me sit up and take notice.

The Name's Ronson, Jon Ronson

Here he celebrates the centenary month of Ian Flemming's birth - by travelling in James Bond's footsteps, from London to Geneva, driving a vintage Aston Martin. The laughter lies in the gap between Bond and Ronson - cool, handsome and sophisticated v geeky, off-beat and a bit cack-handed. I give him 10/10 for trying though. (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Who Killed Richard Cullen?

Ronson brilliantly investigates the way that those least able to carry debt, are deluged with offers to borrow money. I did a bit of voluntary work for a debt charity at one stage, and this piece pressed all my buttons. Grrrrr! (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

The Sociopath Mind Guru and the TV Hypnotist

He follows and interviews Richard Bandler (Neurolinguistic Programming guru), and Paul McKenna (hypnotherapist), who have teamed up together. There is a nice sting in the tail to this piece.(view spoiler)

Blood Sacrifice

Here I felt that Ronson was laughing at a group of odd religious people who meant well, albeit in a rather strange way (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]. I felt I was supposed to laugh with him at them, but I didn't.

Is She for Real

An exposé of a psychic; someone called Sylvia Browne - who charges \$750 for people to have a thirty-minute telephone reading with her, and who has a waiting list of four years. I always enjoy well-deserved denunciations. Go Ronson go! Yeah!

Amber Waves of Green

This was an incredibly moving and sad piece. Ronson has worked out that if you multiply each person's income by five, there are six degrees of economic separation between a dishwasher making less than \$8 an hour, and a Forbes Billionaire. "*So I decided to journey across America to meet one of each multiple, to try to understand their financial lives and the vast chasms that separate them.*" Ronson includes his own earnings in this assessment.(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

This article is not just about money. It's about lifestyle too.... and that is the part that shocks and saddens.

Lost at Sea

Have you any idea how many people are lost at sea on cruise ships> No? (view spoiler) Here Ronson tries to get to the bottom of one of these losses. I found this piece more irritating than gripping, but was intrigued by the subject - one that nobody talks about.

As I said, I found this book a bit patchy - but some of the essays were a delight.

John Wiltshire says

I think reading habits have changed dramatically since electronic readers were invented--I know mine have. I have literally hundreds of books on mine in no particular order and when I'm too lazy to get up and research why I've put a book on there, I tend to just click on it and start reading. Hence I'm 30% through this and thinking, "Huh, weird, he's mixing real people into this really, really bizarre science fiction story. Is that allowed?"

Yeah. Duh.

I got up and did the research.

So, this is a real book about real people. Insane Clown Posse (a rap group who wear clown masks) are apparently real (never heard of them). That's more entertaining to discover than thinking this book was fiction. I'm enthralled. People with robots of themselves stashed away and being looked after by minders. Children who think they are a new species of humans.

I am returning to the book slightly wiser but even more intrigued that the expression 'there's nowt as queer as folk' is actually true. Bring it on.

As usual, I'll update when done.

50% into this now and it's just more and more fascinating. Frustrating as all get go too, because it's written so well it's as if we, the reader, were actually taking part in these extraordinary events and conversations, and I want to ask...wtf...and can't. For example, the Alpha Course segment. Alpha is an intense Christian course. I know a fair bit about it for various reasons. Jon Ronson attends one in order to write about it. In the course of a long weekend retreat, he's involved in a speaking in tongues experience. Purportedly, participants on Alpha regularly speak in tongues--Chinese, other foreign languages they've never spoken before, due the power of the Holy Spirit entering them. Now, as a journalist on an investigative mission, shouldn't Ronson at least discuss whether this was genuine Chinese? Or just...gobbledygook, which I can speak on a Saturday night after too many beers...Not a mention.

Then he meets up with Robbie Williams to attend a UFO Abductee convention. Seriously, you couldn't make this stuff up.

Ronson has the driest sense of humour ever.

I will update when finished...

Well, finally finished last night and my attention never waned once. What an interesting book. There was no connection between the chapters other than that they were quirky slices of life: Jonathan King's trial; a famous psychic; missing girl from a cruise ship; credit debt and suicide; neural linguistic programming; the coughing major. This is a book for enquiring minds, but possibly its English-centric focus might make it a bit confusing for anyone who doesn't, for example, know who the coughing major is. Mind you, I'd never heard of Insane Clown Posse and that's still one of my favourite chapters.

Brilliant. Eccentric. I'm off to put some more Jon Ronson on my reading list.

Petra Eggs says

I bought this book on 22nd November 2012 and read and reviewed it within the next three weeks. It is yet another book missing from my bookshelves together with its review and comments. Whenever I write to Goodreads or post on Feedback about these missing books there is never any serious answer and it's not me alone. It must be me. I must have deleted it 'by accident' or something. Why would I delete a book and review? I have started to export my books but I didn't do it very often (if at all!) back in 2012. In any case, we can't export the comments and sometimes those are very interesting discussions.

I wish I could remember the original review but I can't and I am so unhappy about this now, I don't even feel like it.

Anna Janelle says

SIX STARS, I say. SIX STARS for Jon Ronson!

I'm always amazed by Jon Ronson's style. He is witty, self-deprecating and observant. This collection of non-fiction stories takes a look at both those on the fringe of society (other-worldly Indigo children, psychics, robot-enthusiasts, and Jesus Christian cults) as well as issues that affect more ordinary people (like the economic collapse, unequal taxation as well as crime and punishment). I've been told that the many of the short stories in this collection has been published before by Ronson, but they were all new to me. I cannot say how much I loved this book.

One of my favorite stories from the collection can be read by following the below link.

"Have you ever stood next to an elephant, my friend?"

I present to you, this amazing interaction that Ronson captured:

"I figured most people would say, 'Wow, I didn't know Insane Clown Posse could be deep like that.' But instead it's, 'ICP said a giraffe is a miracle. Ha ha ha! What a bunch of idiots.'" He pauses, then adds defiantly, "A giraffe is a fucking miracle. It has a dinosaur-like neck. It's yellow. Yeah, technically an elephant is not a miracle. Technically. They've been here for hundreds of years..."

"Thousands," murmurs Shaggy.

"Have you ever stood next to an elephant, my friend?" asks Violent J. "A fucking elephant is a miracle. If people can't see a fucking miracle in a fucking elephant, then life must suck for them, because an elephant is a fucking miracle. So is a giraffe."

In this short journalistic story, Ronson interviews the Insane Clown Posse about their recent claim that, for the last 20 years, they have been promoting Christianity through their music. And yes, it is just as ridiculous as you might imagine. My jaw dropped while reading this and stayed open the entire time. I made my friends read it. I brought it to work to share with co-workers (and successfully avoided HR).

My other favorite story is "Santa's Little Conspirators." Ronson goes to North Pole, Alaska, the town where it is ALWAYS Christmas time, to uncover truths regarding the thwarted plans of Middle Schoolers to exact a Columbinesque shooting at the school. At the North Pole, they receive letters from Santa; these letters are then answered by students and townspeople. Is there too much Christmas? Does the practice of writing letters addressed to Santa Claus too much for sixth graders to handle? (There are some heartbreaking requests from children in those letters - and by answering the letters, the students have to accept that there is no Santa). Unfortunately, I can't find this one available online, but it was the highlight of the entire collection.

So, in closing, everyone should read this book :)

ALL HAIL JON RONSON!

Pink says

This was okay, but of all the Jon Ronson books I've read it's my least favourite. I think that's because it's the least cohesive, as a range of magazine articles, that aren't really connected. I've much preferred his other books, but this is perfectly readable if you're a Ronson fan and want more.

Ross Blocher says

Lost At Sea easily wins as my new favorite "collection of essays" book. Jon Ronson is always entertaining: his persistent curiosity and willingness to grab a flight to go ask so-and-so about such-and-such seems so audacious while at the same time feeling perfectly natural. He has the ability to ask questions people don't normally ask, and root out surprising responses or telling evasions. Maybe it's a combination of his unusual inflection and non-judgmental honesty, or just the fact that he's there and asking the questions: he comes across as an alien who has just landed on the planet and is trying to figure out Earthlings. I listened to the audio version because it's narrated by Ronson - he's one of those authors whose voice is so distinctive that you'll try to picture the words in his cadence anyway, so you might as well have him do the honors. It's a soft voice, and Ronson exerts a gust of energy into each utterance before the phrase or sentence softens at the tail, resulting in oddly-placed emphases.

Included are over two dozen stories, each as interesting as the next. The only one I'd read before was his cruise with Sylvia Browne, the psychic who specialized in feeding false and harmful information to grieving parents. Sylvia surprises him by granting an interview, lies to him openly, and then bad mouths him once he's left. He's at sea in another tale to investigate the disappearance of a Disney cruises crew mate. He tracks down Minging Mike, the draft-dodging creator of many soul albums that exist only as cover art. He relates the defensive arguments of Jonathan King, the disgraced pop impresario who abused dozens of young boys. He tracks down Phoenix Jones, a self-styled super hero, and follows the vigilante into dangerous street altercations. He talks to various denizens of a Christmas-themed village that narrowly avoided a school shooting. He covers the trial of "Who Wants to be A Millionaire?" quiz show contestants who tried to game the system with a cough-based code. He converses with a cult leader who asks his parishioners to donate their kidneys to strangers. And so on... Ronson uncovers in each story the various phobias, compulsions, and peccadilloes that fill the world with oddity and mystery. Along the way, he makes himself a part of each story with his own reactions and thought processes. His ability to self-appraise, and layer the narration with his observations and reflections, are fascinating in their honesty. It's a great read (or listen), that will give you a lot of material to ponder and talk about with your friends.

Mac says

Ronson has a good eye for bizarre nonfiction investigation. He writes about assisted suicide practitioners, people preparing for alien visits, robots with artificial intelligence, a high school mass murder plot in North Pole, Alaska, a Christmas themed town, and a person's mysterious disappearance from a Disney cruise ship. Each chapter is a captivating subject, and together they paint a picture of the strange world we live in. So I read with interest.

That said, I found many chapters to be thin and somewhat unrewarding. As I read, I wondered what other writers might do with the well-chosen subject matter. Matt Taibbi, writing in Rolling Stone, could provide some bite and a welcome harder edge; David Foster Wallace (if still alive) could give more depth and richer characterizations; and Malcolm Gladwell could add more meaning and interpretation. Whatever the case, something needs to be added to make this book soar. Even a preface or a meta-essay from Ronson commenting on the book's contents as a whole would contribute needed weight and impact. Overall, *Lost at Sea* is an interesting read, but I was continually longing for something richer, something more.

Brendon Schrodinger says

After enjoying "The Psychopath Test" I was up for more Jon Ronson in my life. I picked up this collection of his essays and I was not disappointed.

I'd best describe Jon as Louis Theroux style exploits with Mary Roach humour. Mary can be great, but sometimes the rigour lacks. Jon is much better on the research and rigour, but still a journalist style. It's not an academic book making academic claims, and don't mistake it for that. It's more on the entertainment side of informative.

Jon has fun with psychics, real life super heroes, Stanley Kubrick and Robbie Williams at a UFO conference. There are some more serious essays here on debt, deaths on cruise-liners, suicide and others. But essentially Jon Ronson material.

The essays range in page length from about 4 pages up to 20. It was a great book for a busy time in my life where I could only give 20 or so minutes a day to leisure reading.

Lea says

3.5 stars

I'm a big fan of Jon Ronson, so I had to buy this book as soon as I saw he had something new out. Like many of his other books, this one is a collection of shorter essays or articles. This book deals with a wide range of subjects, from juggalos to income disparity in the U.S. It's all fascinating, but the majority of the pieces are so short that they end up feeling insubstantial, and ultimately forgettable. I will continue seeking out Ronson's previous books, and I will certainly buy anything he releases in future, but this one, for me, felt a bit light.

Lauren says

Wholly brilliant.

Not every essay gripped me in the same way, but I thoroughly enjoyed this collection of Ronson's work. It was particularly great to listen to on audiobook, read by Ronson himself. It's very conversational, and you can hear the memories of the interviews in his voice: meeting Stanley Kubrick's family, the Insane Clown Posse, his re-hashing of the *Frank* story, the "right-to-die" movement advocates, the "Real Life Super Hero" movement, the Jesus Christians voluntarily donating kidneys to strangers ... and so many more highly interesting people and stories that time and space do not allow me to describe.

This is the perfect book to pick up for really interesting tidbits, and set down again for later. Or, you can be like me (and my partner) on our recent roadtrip, and just listen to the whole thing straight through - definitely gave us some things to talk about later!

Ana Mardoll says

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I read this book because it was selected for our book club, and I am terribly disappointed with it. I don't recommend this book at any price, for I found it to be very poorly researched and (more importantly) to put forth some really contemptible ideas about marginalized people and victims of abuse.

I initially thought this book to be a collection of journalistic articles on various interesting and zany topics, but I found the "journalism" part to be very lacking. In almost each of the cases presented, Ronson does little-to-no research, and instead just shows up to interviews and/or classes, and merely records what he observes. He doesn't even stick with his subjects over the short term: whenever there is a class that lasts ten weeks, he misses several of the sessions, so the material presented is spotty and incomplete. And whatever is told to him directly in interviews, he makes little attempt to confirm or refute with actual research after the interview is over.

A good example of this is the chapter entitled "A Message From God" where Ronson attends the Alpha Course. He incorrectly states that everyone attending the class is an agnostic ("We are agnostics."), even though it's easy to verify online that the Alpha Course is frequently -- and some contend primarily -- marketed to and attended by new Christians seeking guidance after their initial conversion, and that the marketing of the course as a silver bullet for agnostics is deliberately misleading to make it seem more effective. (Ronson doesn't mention any of this; I had to look it up myself out of curiosity.) He then presents C.S. Lewis' trilemma as an impressive and unassailable logical argument, even though perusal of the Wikipedia article will indicate that the trilemma has had serious argument since it was first presented.

Ronson then presents the Alpha Course leader Nicky Gumbel's mention of the Book of Joel as a "message from God" (the chapter title) because Ronson's own son is named Joel, but he does not attempt to point out that he was signed up for the course ahead of time, under his own name, and that his family members' names can be easily discovered online. (An undercover journalist, I feel, would have signed up under a false name.)

Despite the fact that he tells us that Gumbel has had significant criticism leveled at him, Ronson only quotes a single complaint that is clearly entirely hearsay. Ronson misses classes, and the entire chapter chattily refers to Gumbel as "Nicky" and ends with the glowing observation that Gumbel is "quite brilliant" and "wonderful".

This is not the first nor the last time Ronson will glowingly condone controversial persons: it seems like the only factor in whether or not people receive a good write-up in this book hinges on whether or not Ronson found them personable or sympathetic. In a chapter about Chris Foster, a man who murdered his wife and daughter before committing suicide, Ronson extols repeatedly how hard it must have been for Chris -- whom he regularly refers to only as "Foster", forgetting that Chris Foster was not the only Foster in residence -- while completely sweeping aside his wife and daughter, the victims.

Ronson sympathetically writes: "As I sit in Ian's kitchen, it suddenly makes sense to me that Chris Foster would choose to shoot Jill and Kirstie in the back of their heads. It was as if he was too ashamed to look at them. Maybe the murders were a type of honor killing, as if Foster simply couldn't bear the idea of losing their respect and the respect of his friends." The rest of the chapter is taken up with interviews with Chris' friends who talk about their empathy for his actions, and also a charming joke about prostitutes. Apparently actual sympathy for the victims, or interviews with *their* friends and family, couldn't have been worked into the chapter. (And it would have been a shame to lose the prostitute joke! Oof.)

The worst chapter in this book, however, is the one innocently titled "The Fall of a Pop Impresario", which deals with the trial of Jonathan King, who was convicted of sexually assaulting several teenage boys. Ronson doesn't tell us how old King was during these assaults, only that the boys were between 14- and 16-years old, but since King was born in 1944 and the assault charges spanned 1982-1987, he must have been between 38 and 45 years old. I can see why Ronson doesn't tell us this, though, because it rather hurts his continual suggestions that the sexual assaults must surely have been consensual and King must really only be guilty of a statutory crime, because King is so very personable.

Or at least, that's what I'm getting from passages where Ronson notes that "there is no statute of limitations for underage sex--or for sexual assaults" but then candidly tells us: "In one e-mail, [King] asked me if I would consider it fair if, say, Mick Jagger was arrested today for having sex with a fifteen-year-old girl in 1970. I agreed that it wouldn't be." Putting aside for a moment the fact that the witnesses in this case were complaining about sexual assault, and *not* statutory rape, I just want to let it sink in that a supposedly-unbiased journalist decided to take space here to register the opinion that sexual crimes against 15-year-old girls shouldn't be prosecuted in the name of 'fairness'. And he frequently in this chapter uses this opinion to strongly imply that the charges against King are motivated entirely by homophobia (rather than put forth the possibility that perhaps crimes against underage girls are under-prosecuted because of sexism).

The chapter on Jonathan King is astonishingly one-sided. Ronson quotes the defense copiously in large blocks of both direct quotes and paraphrase, yet he can barely make room for any quotes from the prosecution. What is possibly most classy about the court scenes is that Ronson manages to take a statement about King's crimes being the "the tip of the iceberg" and twist it into an implied dick joke ("I looked over at the arresting officers. They chuckled wryly at the words "tip of the iceberg.""), because that is obviously something that should be included in any chapter concerning the anal rape of underage boys. King's friends are interviewed, and are used as the conduit to read the victim statements, so that we can have the full force of things like: "Deniz reads the statement with mock, burlesque horror." Ronson offers his own view of the victims' horrifying descriptions of their rapes: "I always find it hard to look Jonathan in the eye after hearing some detailed recital of his sexual behavior. But I wonder whether any act of sex, when described with such precision, would sound equally unpleasant."

Ronson's flagrant disregard for journalistic research shows up in this chapter as well, as he seems bound and determined to not interview a single expert on sexual abuse, nor to do a moment's worth of research on victim behavior. Ronson asks at least half a dozen times in the chapter why the victims didn't refuse to see King after the assaults, or as Ronson puts it: "why [they] continually went back for more". (Because when a victim of sexual assault doesn't distance themselves from their abuser, they are actively asking for it if it happens again, apparently. Oof.) Any psychologist worth their salt could have easily explained to Ronson that abuse victims are entrained to go back to their abusers, and that this is a common feature of abuse. They could have explained that a 40-year-old man with fantastic amounts of financial and social power, not to mention years of experience in selecting and grooming victims, would have been skilled in manipulation.

But experts are for other journalists; Ronson asks this burning question of only four people: his reader (multiple times), King (who "won't be drawn on the subject"), one of King's friends who admits to helping King ply young boys with whiskey ("How many times do you have to go back before you decide that you don't like being fucked? Does it take three sexual experiences for you to realize it was bothering you?"), and one of the victims (who was, to his everlasting credit, more polite about the question than I would have been). And that's it. The question of why the boys "went back for more" is repeated over and over again in this chapter, but only as a means to cast doubt on the charges, and never as a genuine question to be explored by actual experts on the complexities of abuse and victimization.

As with the Chris Foster chapter, the chapter on Jonathan King ends not with any kind of sympathetic statement for the victims, but with a sentimental statement on the difficulties faced by people who are attracted to underage boys and who are willing to abuse and sexually assault them for their own gratification: "Chris Denning asked me if I wanted to know the worst thing about being attracted to underage boys. 'Sadly,' he said, 'they grow up. They disappear. The person you were attracted to has gone. He doesn't exist anymore. You can never have a lasting relationship with them. It's very sad.'" And then -- lest people complain that Ronson didn't allow the victims an equal voice in this chapter -- he quotes a spiteful email from someone using the name of one of Chris Denning's victims, and who may or may not be who he claims to be.

Possibly the worst line in this book occurs when Ronson interviews a Haitian dishwasher named Frantz. Frantz' daily life is affected strongly by racism: his shoes are thrown in the garbage when he's not looking, he is clocked out of work early by his coworkers while he's still washing dishes, and he won't be promoted because of his skin color. These aren't just inconveniences; the racism that Frantz faces tangibly impoverishes him. But Ronson blithely observes: "Frantz talks a lot about respect and the opposite of respect--humiliation. Like the other day, he says, he was working so hard the busboy told him, 'Look at your face. You look like a slave.' He says that insult really stung. It's as if he's lowered his ambitions to the level that he can take all sorts of awfulness as long as people talk to him with a little respect. It occurs to me that his life would be better if he spent less time worrying about feeling disrespected and more time actively working to improve his conditions, but then I realize he is doing all he can. Putting his head above the parapet to talk to me is a brave step."

Ronson, who is light-skinned and by his own admission makes \$250,000 a year, actually thinks it's appropriate to write that a black man should worry less about trifling things like "respect" and more about "working to improve his conditions" and it does not occur to him that the disrespect Frantz is trying to push back against is the *reason* he lives in poor conditions, because it is disrespect -- i.e., racism -- that drives people to rob him of his hard-earned money and keeps him from being promoted. By pushing back against disrespect and racism, Frantz *is* trying to improve his conditions. But Ronson knows better than Frantz, because how could he not? He himself has copious experience with being black in a racist society... oh wait. But he surely interviewed a number of experts and activists about... oh wait. Well, I'm sure Ronson has

spoken to a lot of black people at any rate, and therefore is very well equipped to tell the world in his books what men like Frantz should and should not be worried about. Because telling the world that Frantz's priorities are wrong will definitely help people to respect him better! Oof.

I just know that someone is going to pop up in the comments to ask why I bothered reviewing this book if I disliked it so much, so let me head that off at the pass: my book club selected this book, I read it to the final page, and I'm leaving this review here so that the next book club to consider this book will have fair warning that this book contains almost no research, is a meandering "day in the life of a journalist who throws softball questions to interview subjects", and contains copious amounts of victim-blaming of murdered women, molested boys, and Haitian dishwashers while constantly reminding the reader that the real people to be sympathized with are the white, rich, powerful men. And I didn't receive a lot of enjoyment from reading that.

~ Ana Mardoll

Melki says

If you haven't read anything by Ronson, this collection of 20+ essays would be a great starting point.

His topics range from real-life superheroes to "psychic" Sylvia Browne, and his writing, while pithy and skeptical, shows a remarkable amount of humor and compassion. Though a few of the pieces didn't really go anywhere, all foreplay and no climax, if you will - alien hunting with Robbie Williams, is one that left me scratching my head - most are solidly written, absorbing studies of unusual and provocative subject matters.

My favorite essays concerned director Stanley Kubrick's remarkable collections, a sinister murder plot originating in the most Christmassy place on the planet, and the sad tale of a young Disney cruise employee who went over the ship's side, appropriately leaving behind a slipper. Not surprisingly, her coworkers were reluctant to speak about the incident.

'I don't know anything about it,' he says. There's a long silence. 'It didn't happen,' he says. He looks at me. 'You know that's the answer I have to give.'

There aren't a lot of happily-ever-afters here, this is real life, after all, but I think you'll be fascinated by all that you find.

Sam Quixote says

In nearly every article of the book, journalist Jon Ronson is able to pick an extraordinary subject to write about in an interesting and engaging way. I loved reading about real life "superhero" Phoenix Jones as he patrols the streets of Chicago, trying to make drunk drivers eat tacos before getting behind the wheel, or discovering that the rap duo Insane Clown Posse have been covert Christians their entire careers, believing they were making converts of their listeners subliminally for 20 years. Other subjects are equally fascinating such as finding out pop star Robbie Williams is a UFO enthusiast and that Stanley Kubrick was a hoarder of everything related to his film career.

There are some really funny pieces included such as Ronson's recreation of James Bond's car journey from Ian Fleming's "Goldfinger", eating and drinking everything Bond did on the journey and making himself very sick (Bond, it turns out, was a glutton alcoholic chain smoker who rarely exercised). Ronson also goes on a cruise to meet psychic Sylvia Browne, a woman who goes on TV to tell parents of missing children (often incorrectly) their kids are dead, and finds out, surprise surprise, she's not just a fake but an unpleasant old bag as well.

Religion and pseudo-religious beliefs play a big part in the articles where Ronson meets the Jesus Christians, a fringe Christian group with a membership of 24 people worldwide, most of whom have decided that as well as giving away most of their possessions that they will give away a kidney as well! He meets the UK's biggest atheist-converter Nicky Gumbel, meets TV hypnotist Paul McKenna and his colleague Richard Bandler who admits to being a sociopath and has a sketchy past involving murder but who now makes millions teaching people something called neurolinguistic programming (NLP) which promises to make you a better salesperson.

The other side of the book take a sobering look at the dark side of humanity. They include a couple of murder/suicide cases, the economic class issues in America, and the sad story of Richard Cullen who committed suicide after becoming hopelessly in debt. Richard Cullen took out numerous credit cards which gave him money with crippling interest rates and was approved for various loans different banks approved, leaving Richard with a six figure debt and no way out. From this one man, Ronson follows the trail back to the banks and exposes the fiasco that was the sub-prime market. This article came out 2 years before the sub-prime crash of 2007.

My favourite piece in the book, "Santa's Little Conspirators", is the story of a group of 13 year old high-school students in the town of North Pole, Alaska, accused of conspiring to commit a Columbine-style massacre at their school (they were stopped before anyone was hurt). North Pole is unique as a town where it is Christmas 365 days of the year and everything in the town is Christmas themed. The would-be killers, like all students in North Pole high school, answered letters from children all over the world addressed to "Santa, North Pole" under elfish pseudonyms. Some of the letters written by small children and given to them to answer are heart breaking like "please make mummy and daddy stop fighting" and "I would like to wear more clothes this year".

While parts of "Lost at Sea" have been published in Ronson's other books - more than half have been printed in "Out of the Ordinary" and all but one have been printed in "What I Do" - and numerous other articles have appeared in GQ magazine and the Guardian newspaper, for those who've not read Jon Ronson extensively, this is an excellent collection of his journalism in one handy volume. Like most of Ronson's journalism, the articles feel too strange to be real, this mixture of strangeness and truth adding to the readability of the articles and lending them an air of surreal-ness. "Lost at Sea" is a fascinating collection of oddball human stories that offers hours of riveting reading pleasure and is a must-read for all readers looking for extraordinary and entertaining non-fiction stories written in an accessible and compelling style.
