

BOOK REVIEW: MENTAL HEALTH

In the heart of anxiety

Stories of therapy, modern day anxieties, and navigating the pandemic

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

I picked up Lori Gottlieb’s *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, Her Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019) while trying to find a good therapist in this dreary land. Lori is a young mother based in Los Angeles, a psychotherapist, and someone who has just had her heart broken. Reading about her helped, because it gave character to the person sitting opposite the couch. Lori felt human and it made me understand that my therapists were human too, not the superheroes I expected them to be.

It’s an easy read—not a literary masterpiece, but a memoir of Lori’s stories, her patients, and what one can expect during therapy. She writes of her achievements and exasperation with her own therapist, whom she calls “Wendell”, and how this khaki and cardigan-donning eccentric revealed that she could use more help than she had anticipated. It is a realisation that makes her a better therapist in her own right.

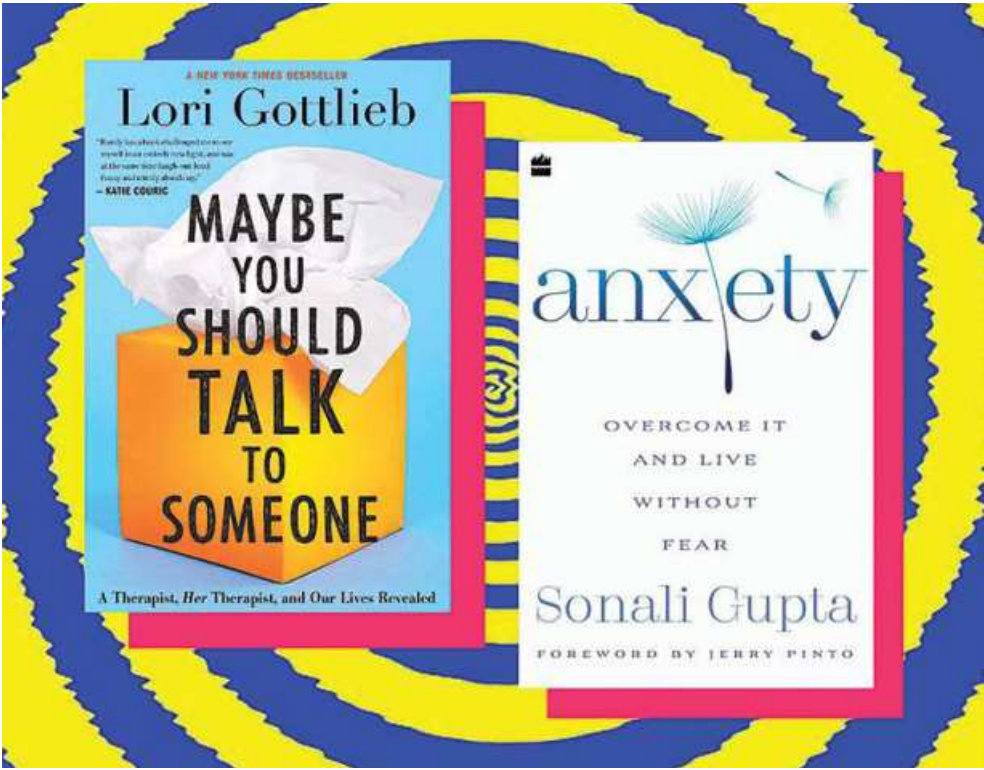
While the stories of her clients were also intriguing, it was watching Lori grow through the book while attending her therapy sessions that kept me moving along. She candidly wrote of loss at a time when I was counting my own, and this made all the difference. “We can’t have change without loss, which is why so often people say they want change but nonetheless stay exactly the same,” she writes. Lori’s internal monologues clarify that your therapist is not there to give you a to-do list. To even read this in print was a wake-up call for yours truly; it showed

just how hard it can be to recognise one’s own flaws while receiving therapy.

The charm in reading all this, even though they are West-centric, was to find that not all therapists and clients kick off, and also that the process of talk therapy has an end goal—that it should involve a strict sense of anonymity and it isn’t just an endless stream of meaningless visits, as I was beginning to think thanks to my experiences in Bangladesh.

While *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* is filtered through a white lens and its associated experiences, Mumbai-based clinical psychologist Sonali Gupta’s *Anxiety: Overcome It and Live without Fear* (HarperCollins India, 2020) is another book on mental health that feels culturally closer to home. The book is at times anecdotal—covering experiences of Gupta’s anonymous clients, and at times self-help—dotted with advice on managing anxiety in our day to day lives in the Indian subcontinent. The interactive chapters have column spaces for adding notes and following little exercises.

I have a pathological need for “relatable” content. Gupta writes of how many clients complain to her of waking up to a barrage of emails and pending or added workload just because they are single or divorced, and so seemingly have no “need” for free time. This certainly felt relatable. For the longest time, as a young employee, I was expected to put in longer hours because my married colleagues “needed” to get back home. As



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though marriage is a license for access to free time and bearing responsibilities. While Gupta’s lament on corporate culture and shaming of millennials felt both endearing and empowering, her addressing of the fact that our seniors’ behaviour may often cause anxiety attacks for younger co-workers felt especially relevant. In exploring such

situations, Dr Gupta helpfully lays out the difference between feeling anxious and having an anxiety disorder. Her parting lesson is that, “...we can only learn to manage anxiety. It’s not going to go away completely.”

Gupta also writes of dating, marriage, and relationships in middle-class households.

Being an older millennial herself, she thankfully addresses burnout culture, and the pressure South Asian parents and society put on their children to become doctors, engineers, or lawyers, all of which can impact one’s mental health.

While she has worked on this for a long time, the latest edition of the book also touches upon post-coronavirus anxiety. These parts unfortunately felt a little forced to me—almost like an afterthought. Yet there is merit in these discussions, because the world of anxiety as we knew it and the world impacted by the pandemic will be vastly different. So, maybe some of the half-formed thoughts towards the end of this book can be extended upon in a future edition?

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BOOK REVIEW: BIOGRAPHY

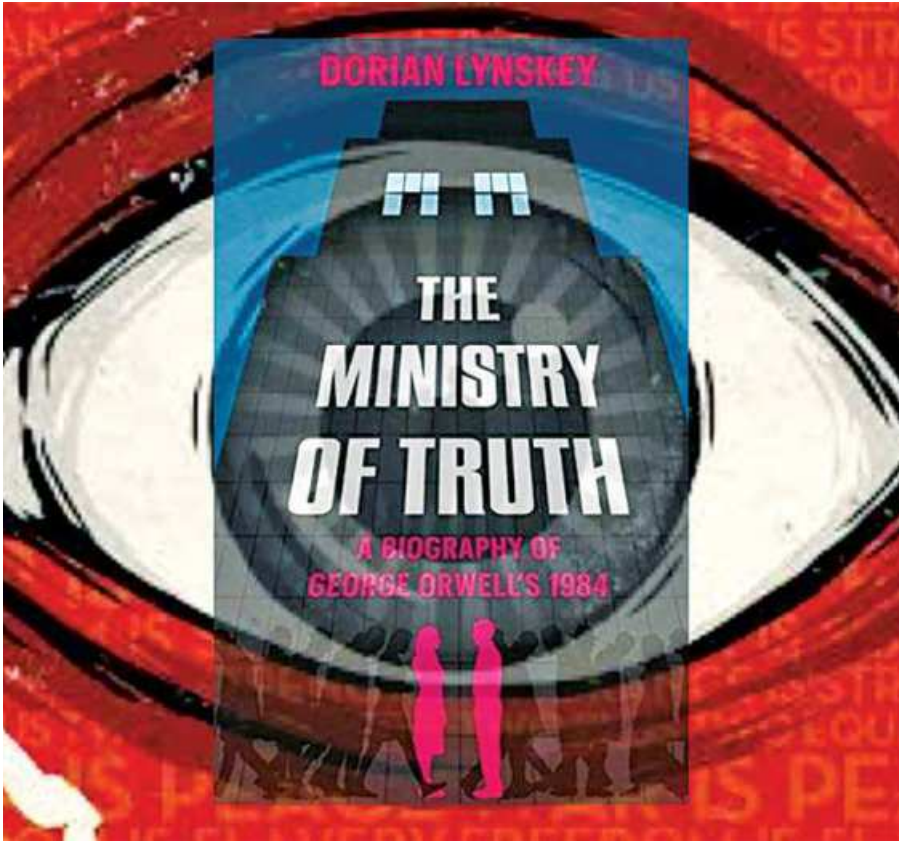
Orwell’s ‘1984’ was a warning, not a prediction

SM SHAFQAT SHAFIQ

Two strange events took place in November 2016; Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 48th President of the United States, and George Orwell’s dystopian classic, *1984*, suddenly became a best seller again. Could event A be the cause of event B? The choice is for the reader to make, but for all intents and purposes, British critic Dorian Lynskey’s *The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell’s 1984* (Pan Macmillan, 2019) may provide a helping hand to the investigation.

Lynskey’s book provides fascinating insights into the lead up to *1984*, starting from Orwell’s experiences fighting as a *cabo* in the Spanish Civil War, and moving on to visiting coal miners in North Western England and his life as a labourer in the kitchens of Paris—all of which combined allowed Orwell to pen his extravagant successes, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984*. According to Lynskey, *1984* was the summation of Orwell’s entire body of experiences and is a key to understanding the machinations of our current world structure.

Orwell experienced that, although he was fighting for the Socialists, there existed an inherent disdain and



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in *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

Lynskey brilliantly elaborates on these ponderings in his analysis of *1984*’s afterlife. Right after the release of the book in 1949, Conservative Americans declared it to be an attack not just on Soviet Russia, but the general Left. To refute this prevailing sentiment, Orwell responded that the novel wasn’t aimed at any particular form of government but rather, was a satirical jest aimed at the collectivist, totalitarian ideologies taking root among post-WWII western intellectuals: “The moral of the story [...] from this nightmare situation is simple: don’t let it happen. It depends on you.”

Critics of *1984* would point to the numerous predictions which Orwell supposedly got wrong. The Soviet Union has collapsed, technology has liberated us, and things have generally turned out to be good. The underlying existentialist tone of the book is also allegedly that of a dying man struggling against his failed romance with Socialism.

But Lynskey elaborates that Orwell

never intended the book to be a prediction; he purposed it as a warning. The novel wasn’t a result of a dying man harbouring bitterness (Orwell was a successful freelance journalist, and spent a significant portion of his youth with the Socialist movement), but rather a Game-Theoretic *au-revoir*—a theme Orwell incorporated through a not-so-subtle exhibition of “The Prisoner’s Dilemma” in the novel’s final chapter(s).

Lynskey acknowledges that we do not necessarily live in a totalitarian system: “By definition, a country in which you are free to read *1984* is not the country described in *1984*.” But such can only be assumed for a handful of nations; and if any one particular lesson were to be taken out of *1984* (and *Ministry of Truth*), it is that it doesn’t take long or much effort to deprive individuals of their autonomy.

A longer version of this article will be available online.

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MUSINGS

Growing up with ‘Archie’ comics

EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

As a tiny five-year old in the ‘80s, I first discovered and liberated an *Archie* comic from a teenage cousin the way oil rich countries are liberated: by force. I used superior tactics of crying, pleading, whining and bargaining. All because I saw a lot of cars in the panels. And aliens and kids doing cool stuff that I had never seen before. I had never seen a comic before. I couldn’t even read.

All through the ‘90s I spent all my lunch money buying these comic books. Recently, from my old stash, I found that I still have that book. Memories came flooding back.

Why Archie?

Started in 1941, *Archie* revolves around the inhabitants of a fanciful American city where the red haired high-schooler experiences friendship, music, and love triangles. The early comics ignored political connotations of race and bigotry. Even school bullies weren’t terrifying: Someone would get stuffed into a school locker. Maybe get roughed up during sports. But it would all end on a note of friendship, self-realisation, or the bullies getting egg on their faces. It was all quite utopian and sterilised but then, that’s what an often confused adolescent needs—the constant underlying theme of friendship.



PHOTO: ‘LIFE WITH ARCHIE: THE MARRIED LIFE’

I and my friends, who read and borrowed and never returned many of my comics, all read *Archie* till late in school life. *Archie*’s problems were the same issues bugging us.

College is where it petered out for most. When you’re hitting close to 20, *Archie*’s colourful life seems that much farther off in the distance. It becomes a popular bathroom read for many.

Is that the end though?

Seems not. *Archie* has always evolved with the times. In 1989 a 12 issue tie-in series with toy manufacturer Kyosho featured *Archie* and the gang racing across all states using various remote control vehicles. Other titles like *Archie 3000* showed life in, well, year 3000. Hovercrafts, lasers, and alien invasions all with the same underlying message that friendship comes above all else.

The biggest evolution came in the last decade when people slowly started giving in to the mind control allure of the smartphone. Were people still reading *Archie*? Not the kids I knew. Popular bookshops like Boi Bichitra, PBS, and Bookworm still keep a stack, but sales have dropped. Readership declined worldwide for *Archie* all through the 2000s until John Goldwater stepped in as CEO in 2009, bringing in new creators and new concepts. In 2013, *Afterlife with Archie* came in featuring a bit of undead thrill. It exposed the popular *Riverdale* characters to a zombie invasion. For readers and older fans, this wasn’t the sterilised content we’d been privy to—without divulging spoilers, characters died, or rather, became undead. And died.

It was a gritty 12 part reboot unlike anything in the series before. A fantastic tale with unexpected twists that were actually scary. Extremely successful, it showed that a larger market was ready for darker *Archie* material.

Earlier in 2010, the revived *Life with Archie* series featured two alternate universes, each showing *Archie* dealing with grownup issues of marital strife, cancer, financial problems, and dreams that don’t work out. It dealt with then risky topics of gun control and same sex marriage, but still followed the underlying themes of love and friendship. In 2014, though, *Archie* died, shot while saving his friend Kevin, the first gay character in the comic series.

Death isn’t part of the *Archie* mythos. Readers are used to comic book deaths being temporary, like fast internet in Bangladesh. But this wasn’t. The series ended there with a strong message, while other titles continued the *Archie* life, modernised and now carrying the all-pervasive cell phone.

Recently, my school-going son picked up an issue of *Archie* that he dug out of my book stash. I’m curious to see what he thinks of it while both he and *Archie* keep growing up.

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