

TRY NOT TO THINK OF A PINK ELEPHANT: STORIES ABOUT OCD

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Throw out everything you think you know about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and read this book! *Try Not to Think of a Pink Elephant* is a collection of true stories by talented writers who live with OCD. At times humorous, at times heartbreaking, this engaging anthology will keep you on the edge of your seat, compelling you to read each person's unique experience of the disorder. There's Martin Ingle on OCD and sexual intimacy; Dani Leever on contamination-based OCD; Patrick Marlborough on living with OCD in NYC; Katharine Pollock on over-achievement and food and body control; and Sienna Rose Scully on the untimely death of her mother, an event that actualised her most persistent OCD obsession.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Martin Ingle is a writer, filmmaker and actor who lives and works on Yuggera land (Brisbane).

Dani Leever is a genderqueer non-fiction writer and genderbending drag DJ from Naarm (Melbourne) who is currently the online deputy editor at *Archer Magazine*.

Patrick Marlborough is a neurodivergent nonbinary writer, comedian, journalist, critic and musician based in Walyalap (Fremantle).

Katharine Pollock is a writer from Eora (Sydney). Her debut novel is *Her Fidelity* (Penguin Random House, 2022).

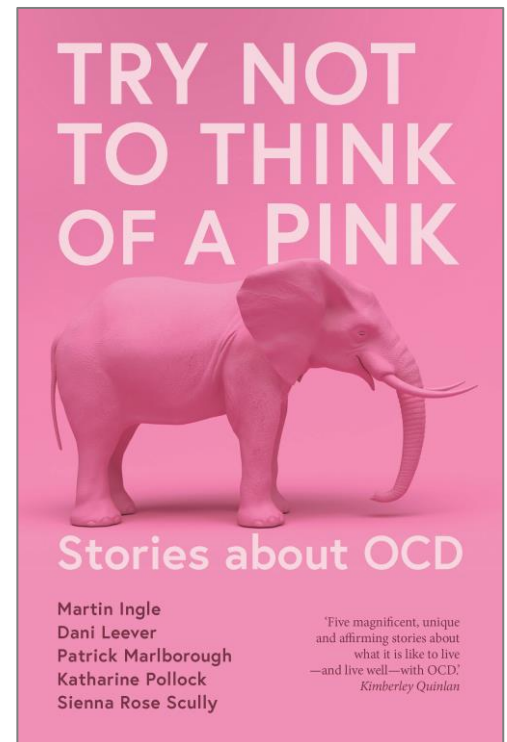
Sienna Rose Scully is a marketing and communications graduate who who has returned to Walyalap (Fremantle) after living for a year in Buenos Aires, Argentina with her fiancé.

Kimberley Quinlan is a licensed marriage and family therapist who has a private practice in Calabasas, California, specialising in anxiety, eating disorders, and OCD and related disorders.

CONTENT WARNING

These personal stories discuss drug use, anxiety, depression, disordered eating, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and, in particular, the behaviours associated with OCD. They are intended for readers from a range of ages and lived experiences. Please take care when reading.

Some content is sexual in nature and may not be suitable for younger readers.



THEMES

- Mental health
- Relationships
- Resilience
- Identity
- Representation
- Diversity
- Shame
- Fear

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- English
- Media Production and Analysis
- Health and Physical Education

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Health Direct: healthdirect.gov.au/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd
- Beyond Blue: beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/types-of-anxiety/ocd
- Kimberley Quinlan: kimberleyquinlan-lmft.com

CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions: General

BEFORE READING

1. How does the title relate to the book's themes?
2. What do you already know, or think you know, about OCD? What has informed your knowledge?
3. What questions do you have about OCD?

AFTER READING

1. What is the benefit of having several different writers share their varied experiences with OCD?
2. Texts are shaped by their purpose and audience. What is the purpose(s) and audience(s) for this text? How has this shaped the text?
3. What do you think the following groups of people can gain from reading this book?
 - a. Those with OCD or other mental health challenges
 - b. Those who are close to someone with OCD
4. The tone of these personal stories is often conversational. How does this tone represent the writers? How does it shape your response to the text?
5. Which story resonated with you the most? Why?
6. In the introduction, Kimberley Quinlan states that 'OCD recovery involves learning how to outsmart one's OCD' (p. 10). How do the personal stories in this book prove or disprove this statement?
7. How has your understanding of OCD changed after reading this book?
8. Several stories discuss OCD in terms of control. What is the relationship between OCD and control?
9. Several of the authors discuss feelings of secrecy and shame related to their OCD symptoms and diagnosis. What effect does this have on perceptions of OCD, both from the person experiencing it and those around them? How does this anthology counteract this shame and secrecy?
10. Several stories in this anthology consider the OCD stereotypes often portrayed in popular media. How do these stories support the stereotypes? How do they disrupt them?
11. Synthesise the main messages of this book into a one-paragraph summary.
12. Did you find parts of this anthology funny? What is the effect of humour in this book?

Discussion questions: Specific to stories within the collection

'OCD: Anxiety's Misunderstood Best Friend', Sienna Rose Scully

1. Sienna Rose Scully uses many metaphors to describe OCD, such as a clingy friend (p. 18), an unwanted houseguest (p. 19), a powerful bully (p. 30) and a TV blasting (p. 30). What purpose do these metaphors serve?
2. On page 32, Scully writes, 'You suffer from a disorder and the disorder is *Not. Who. You. Are.*' How and why has she emphasised this line?
3. Scully states that OCD has been 'glamourised' (p. 32). Is this a phenomenon you recognise? What is the danger in glamourising OCD?
4. In this piece, Scully speaks directly to the reader. In two to three sentences, summarise the message you think Scully would like readers to take from her story.

'Becoming, Part One, Two, Ad Infinitum', Katharine Pollock

1. On page 61, Katharine Pollock describes wanting to see herself in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Buffy Summers, but later realising she is more like Willow Rosenberg, or a combination of several characters. Which fictional character(s) do you relate to, and why?
2. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with the quote: 'I firmly believe that the distinction between so-called high and low culture is arbitrary, snooty and fundamentally misogynistic ...' (p. 62)
3. Pollock discusses the importance of representation in media. Do you think popular media is currently addressing underrepresentation and misrepresentation of diverse groups? Cite examples to support your argument.
4. Pollock describes the relief of having her OCD named by the GP as 'more valuable than a referral to see a shrink or a script for antidepressants' (p. 66). Why was naming Pollock's symptoms so powerful for her?
5. Pollock makes references to many pop-culture phenomena, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Gilmore Girls* and *Scooby Doo*, as well as Instagram and Reddit. Do these references make the story more or less relatable to you personally?

6. Explaining why she hadn't previously mentioned her partner, Pollock writes on page 90 'I don't want to inadvertently imply a male saviour narrative, or a saviour narrative, full stop.' Write a paragraph explaining your understanding of this statement.

'Love and Other Obsessions', Martin Ingle

1. On page 102, Martin Ingle examines how his doubts, ego and 'attempts at good storytelling' may influence his retelling of the past. Do you believe a recount can ever be truly objective? Is there value in an imperfect recollection?
2. Do you agree with Ingle's assertion that his story is a 'love story' (p. 102)?
3. On page 110, Ingle discusses the power of *reframing* – to see something negative as a positive. Do you have a personal experience of reframing a situation or trait to see it differently? If you don't have a personal example, think of an example from another text.
4. Ingle compares OCD to religion (p. 113). Give three reasons why he may have made this connection.

'Filthy but Fine: OCD and T&A in NYC', Patrick Marlborough

1. The first sentence of Patrick Marlborough's story reads, 'Sane people are dud roots' (p. 135). This sentence sets the tone for the piece and sends the reader a message about how this story might subvert their expectations. Analyse the sentence to determine how it creates this effect.
2. Compare and contrast how Marlborough views the Australian and American response to mental illness.
3. Unlike the other writers in the anthology, Marlborough (a writer with multiple neurodivergences) does not express feelings of shame caused by his OCD (in this story). How does this influence his depiction of OCD?
4. On page 137, Marlborough shares his doubts about the efficacy of 'raising awareness' by sharing his personal histories. Explain your personal view of the topic. Who do you think this type of writing is for? Despite these doubts, why do you think he agreed to be involved in the anthology?
5. Explain the meaning of these phrases from pages 161–162: 'trauma porn', '~content~', 'personal brand', 'ABCN crowd', 'wheel out your infirmities', 'career kamikaze'. How does this story differ from the 'product' that Marlborough believes the Australian media wants from him?

'Everything Is Cyanide and Nothing Is Safe: Living with Contamination-Based OCD', Dani Leever

1. Dani Leever shares examples of supportive and unsupportive reactions to their OCD. What could you understand from this piece about how to support friends and family, and how to support strangers, if they share their OCD symptoms or diagnosis?
2. Leever describes writing down their symptoms as 'an empowering, albeit terrifying, experience' (p. 191). Explore the duality of this experience.
3. Explore the questions posed by Leever on page 200: 'What does it mean to have our stories softly told to us? To have a semi-fictional character tell you they *get it*, in a world that famously doesn't.'
4. The importance of feeling safe is a recurring theme in Leever's piece. Find three quotes to support this statement.

MEDIA PRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

1. Several stories in the anthology reference pop culture depictions of OCD. How do fictional depictions of OCD affect the lives of real people with OCD?
2. Several authors discuss finding solace in pop culture, especially texts they're familiar with. Do you relate to this phenomenon?
3. Explain these media 'tropes' referenced in the anthology: 'self-insert character' (p. 61), 'manic pixie dream-girls' (p. 71), 'meet-cute' (p. 132).
4. Explain the context of this quote from Katharine Pollock: 'Loath as I ever am to impose an autobiographical reading on a text (hello, historical diminishment of women's art as "merely" autobiographical ...' (p. 71).

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

1. Several writers share that they didn't understand that *they* had OCD, as they did not exhibit the behaviours often associated with OCD, such as being neat and tidy. How can increased knowledge

and understanding of OCD (and other mental health challenges) support those experiencing symptoms and influence social norms?

2. Why do you think the publisher chose Kimberley Quinlan, a licensed therapist specialising in OCD treatment, to write the book's introduction?
3. Research Exposure and Prevention Therapy, which Kimberley Quinlan refers to as 'the gold-standard treatment for OCD' (p. 10). Create a summary of your research.