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Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries

By Jon Ronson



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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.



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Editorial Review

Review

“Profoundly weird...wonderfully twisted...extremely satisfying.”—*Boston Globe*

“Initially, it seems that oddities are what...Jon Ronson is after. He’s actually really just trying to understand the irrational hopes and desires that drive us all.”—*The Daily Beast*

“Eclectic and fascinating...Ronson treats his subjects fairly but skeptically...his view always framed by an appropriately cocked eyebrow.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Absurdly entertaining.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A sterling collection of amazing stories from an offbeat journalist at the top of his game.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

Jon Ronson’s books include the New York Times bestsellers *The Psychopath Test* and *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries* and the international bestsellers *Them: Adventures with Extremists* and *The Men Who Stare at Goats*. He cowrote the screenplay for the movie *Frank*, which starred Michael Fassbender and Maggie Gyllenhaal. A regular contributor to *This American Life*, Ronson lives in London and New York City.

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Who Killed Richard Cullen?

(This story was published in the *Guardian* on July 16, 2005, two years before the global financial crash that began with the subprime mortgage crisis of July 2007.)

It is a wet February day in a very smoky room in a terraced cottage in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. A portable TV in an alcove plays the news. Everything in here is quite old. No spending spree has taken place in this house. There are wedding and baby and school photographs scattered around. Six children, now all grown up, were raised here. There’s a framed child’s painting in the toilet, a picture of Wendy Cullen. It reads “Supergran.” When I phoned Wendy a week ago she said I was welcome to visit, “Just as long as you don’t mind cigarette smoke. I’m smoking myself to death here.”

The “Congratulations! You have been pre-approved for a loan”—type junk mail is still pouring through their letterbox. Wendy has just thrown another batch in the bin.

“You know what the post is like,” she says.

“I don’t get all that much credit-card junk mail,” I say. “I get some, I suppose, but not nearly as much as you

do.”

“Really?” says Wendy. “I assumed everyone was constantly bombarded.”

“Not me,” I say.

We both shrug as if to say, “That’s a mystery.”

IT WAS A month ago today that Wendy’s husband, Richard, committed suicide. It was the end of what had been an ordinary twenty-five-year marriage. They met when Wendy owned a B and B on the other side of Trowbridge. He turned up one day and rented a room. Richard had trained to be an electrical engineer but he ended up as a mechanic.

“He loved repairing people’s cars,” Wendy says. Then she narrows her eyes at my line of questioning and makes me promise that I am not here to write “a slushy horrible mawkky love story.”

“I’m really not,” I say. So Wendy continues. Everything was normal until six years ago, when she needed an operation. “I couldn’t face the Royal United Hospital in Bath,” she says, “so I went private. I took out a four-thousand-pound loan.”

She says she remembers a time when it was hard for people like them to get loans, but this was easy. Companies were practically throwing money at them.

“Richard handled all the finances. He said, ‘I can get you one with nought percent interest and after six months we’ll switch you to another one.’ ”

But then, a few months after the first operation, Wendy was diagnosed with breast cancer and Richard had to take six weeks off to drive her to radiotherapy. The bills needed paying and so, once again, he did that peculiarly modern British thing. He began signing up for credit cards, behaving like a company, thinking he could beat the lenders at their own game by cleverly rolling the debts over from account to account.

There are currently eight million more credit cards in circulation in Britain than there are people: sixty-seven million credit cards, fifty-nine million people.

He signed up with Mint: “Apply for your Mint Card. You’d need a seriously good reason not to. What’s stopping you?”

And Frizzell: “A name you can trust.”

And Barclaycard: “Wake up to a fresh start.”

And Morgan Stanley: “Choose from our Flags of Great Britain range of card designs.”

And American Express: “Go on, treat yourself.”

And so on.

Right now nobody knows how Richard Cullen’s shrewd acumen fell apart.

“He wasn’t a man that talked a great deal,” says Wendy, “and he never, ever discussed finances with me.” But somehow it all spiraled out of control.

Wendy first got the inkling that something was wrong just before Christmas 2004, when the debt-collection departments of various credit-card companies began phoning. He called them back out of his wife’s hearing.

“You know how men will walk around with their mobiles,” says Wendy. “He used to go out into the garden.”

She looks over to the garden behind the conservatory extension and says, “He was a very proud man. He must have been going through hell. They were very, very persistent. I don’t think he was even phoning them back in the end.”

Finally, he admitted it to his wife. He said he didn’t seek out all of the twenty-two credit cards he had somehow ended up acquiring between 1998 and 2004. On many occasions they just arrived through the letterbox in the form of “Congratulations! You have been pre-approved . . .” junk. He said he thought he owed about £30,000. There had been no spending spree, he said, no secret vices. He had just tied himself up in knots, using each card to pay off the interest and the charges on the others. The fog of late-payment fees and so on had somehow crept up and engulfed him. He got a pair of scissors from the kitchen and cut up ten credit cards in front of her.

On January 10, 2005, Richard visited his ex-wife, Jennifer, who later told the police that he seemed “very quiet, like he’d retreated into himself, like his mind was gone.”

She asked him how his weekend was. He replied, “Not very good.”

Then he went missing for two days.

“Nobody knows where he went,” says Wendy.

On the morning of January 12, Wendy’s son Christopher looked in the garage. It was padlocked, so he broke in with a screwdriver. There was an old Vauxhall Nova covered with a sheet.

“I don’t know why,” Christopher later told the police, “but I decided to look under the sheet.”

Richard Cullen had gassed himself in his car. He left his wife a note: “I just can’t take this any more and you’ll be better off without me.”

WHO KILLED RICHARD CULLEN?

For instance: Why did so many credit-card companies choose to swamp the Cullens with junk when they don’t swamp me?

How did they even get their address? How can I even begin to find something complicated like that out?

And then I have a brainwave. I’ll devise an experiment. I’ll create a number of personas. Their surnames will all be Ronson, and they’ll all live at my address, but they’ll have different first names. Each Ronson will be poles apart, personality wise. Each will have a unique set of hopes, desires, predilections, vices, and spending habits, reflected in the various mailing lists they’ll sign up to—from Porsche down to hard-core

pornography. The one thing that'll unite them is that they won't be at all interested in credit cards. They will not seek loans nor any financial services as they wander around, filling out lifestyle surveys and entering competitions and purchasing things by mail order. Whenever they're invited to tick a box forbidding whichever company from passing their details to other companies, they'll neglect to tick the box.

Which, if any, of my personas will end up getting sent credit-card junk mail? Which personality type will be most attractive to the credit-card companies?

I name my personas John, Paul, George, Ringo, Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick, Titch, Willy, Biff, Happy and Bernard. And I begin.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sheila Rocha:

The book *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries* give you a sense of feeling enjoy for your spare time. You can utilize to make your capable much more increase. Book can to be your best friend when you getting tension or having big problem with your subject. If you can make looking at a book *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries* to be your habit, you can get far more advantages, like add your personal capable, increase your knowledge about several or all subjects. You could know everything if you like available and read a book *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries*. Kinds of book are several. It means that, science reserve or encyclopedia or other individuals. So , how do you think about this publication?

John Silverstein:

This *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries* tend to be reliable for you who want to certainly be a successful person, why. The reason why of this *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries* can be on the list of great books you must have is usually giving you more than just simple reading food but feed a person with information that might be will shock your prior knowledge. This book is actually handy, you can bring it all over the place and whenever your conditions at e-book and printed types. Beside that this *Lost at Sea: The Jon Ronson Mysteries* giving you an enormous of experience such as rich vocabulary, giving you trial run of critical thinking that we all know it useful in your day exercise. So , let's have it and revel in reading.

Stuart Rosado:

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Pamela Eckert:

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