



## Jonathan Harnisch: *An Alibiography*

**Jonathan Harnisch**

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*This, it is easy to imagine, is what life with mental illness is like for some: full of continuous questioning, rationalization, guilt, anxiety.*

*Jonathan Harnisch: An Alibiography* presents a simultaneously dazzling and frightening portrayal of mental illness through the eyes of several characters—though all embodied in the same being.

The complex narrative is seemingly told from the viewpoint of Benjamin J. Schreiber, son of a wealthy blue-blood family who converses with his doctor (known as C). The privilege afforded to him by birth enables him to live relatively well off; his multitude of diagnoses, including Tourette's and schizoaffective disorder, would effectively render him incapable of functioning in society under other circumstances. However, Ben doesn't wish to talk about himself with Dr. C, but rather a fictional counterpart, Georgie Gust.

Georgie, like Ben, comes from an aristocratic family and views reality from a different vantage. An obsessive coffee drinker and chain smoker, he maintains a quiet (though sordid) existence on the outside, a rich sexual life in private. Early in the text, an erotic scene focusing on his foot fetishism appears in exacting detail. This proves to be the most tame of Georgie's passions, as soon he begins his sadomasochistic conquest of Claudia, an older woman whom he hires to torture him. This, too, is richly rendered, as Georgie is teased with dripping wax, hot pans, and psychological distress. The two become dependent upon each other, hating yet needing their company, and their relationship evolves into a bizarre reimagining of the American Dream, one in which we are privy to the seedy reality underneath the polished exterior.

Forced to confront the darker nature of desire, *An Alibiography* shocks and confuses as the narrative unspools itself with a randomness that evokes a questioning of reality. This, it is easy to imagine, is what life with mental illness is like for some: full of continuous questioning, rationalization, guilt, and anxiety. In many respects, this work can be compared to Alasdair Gray's 1982, *Janine*, in which a businessman obsesses over his sadomasochistic desires and dreams, seeking meaning in his own marginalized existence. Harnisch's work, however, employs many main characters embodied in the same man, building realities within realities that often cannot be constructed into a cohesive narrative.

At over eight hundred pages, the subject loses shock value and becomes mundane. As Georgie and Claudia's passion evolves and intensifies, and the novel ventures into the completely surreal, disgusting, and criminal, the oversaturation of violence and S&M confuses the message. Mental illness is romanticized at points in the text, as well, which may leave some familiar with the realities with an unsavory taste. That's not to say the work isn't well written—it's carefully plotted with well-rendered characters, presented in a narrative that would appropriately be deemed "schizophrenic."

However, upon reaching the end, there is an exhaustion. Perhaps, though, this is in itself a meaning: that life with mental illness is difficult and confusing, yet produces a desperation for understanding.

ALEX FRANKS (October 14, 2015)

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