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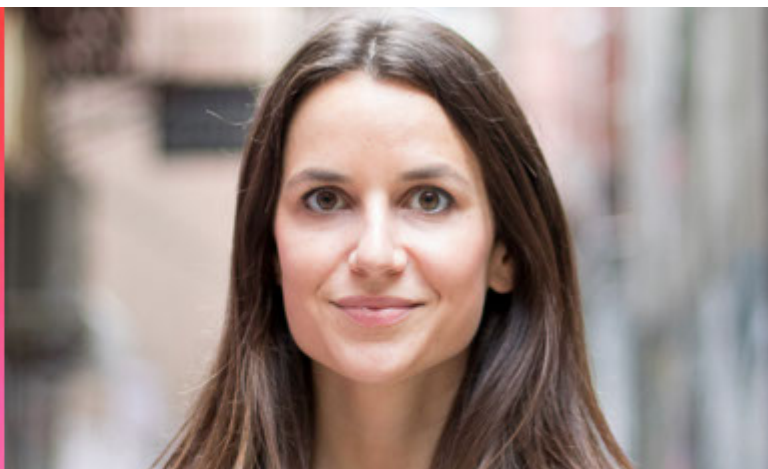
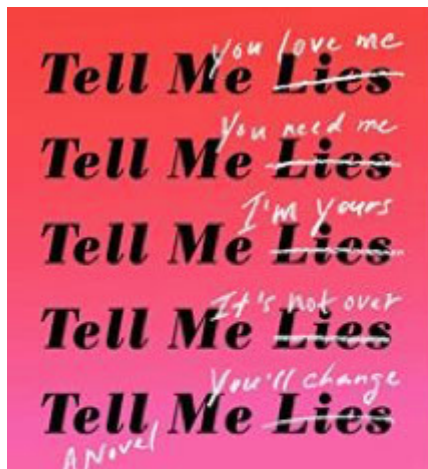
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In Order to Understand Sociopaths, I Got Inside One's Head

By Carola Lovering | Jul 13, 2018

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Carola Lovering's potent debut novel, Tell Me Lies, tells the story of the complicated relationship between college freshman Lucy Albright and charming sociopath Stephen DeMarco. While alternating Stephen and Lucy's points of view, Lovering depicts how Lucy's depression drives her codependency. Stephen's sections show his remorseless Machiavellian sensibilities: unable to genuinely feel affection, he studies people in order to learn how to act normal and get what he wants. Lovering discusses the

Tell Me Lies

Carla Lovering



capability of inhabiting another person's mind in fiction.

Sociopath is a heavy word, but one that's thrown around a lot these days, especially by Millennials.

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sociopath" was a phrase my friends and I would reason in agreement over brunch when someone's love interest had begun to ignore them, a chain of unanswered texts with read receipts evidence of this intentional betrayal. Of course, we also used total sociopath when discussing more harmful acts, like a partner who cheated or routinely lied.

But, I've realized, labeling sociopaths is not that simple.

Several years ago, I became extremely interested in learning about sociopaths. I'd been with a guy who continually hurt me in a way that felt calculated and ruthless. A close friend deemed him a total sociopath, a description that was becoming increasingly mainstream.

Though I would've loved to believe her, I was unconvinced. Sociopaths were serial killers. Cold-blooded murderers like the real-life Ted Bundy and the on-screen Hannibal Lecter; in the literary world, characters such as Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley and Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman.

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I turned to the internet for further research and was inundated with information. I quickly learned that a sociopath is a person with a mental health disorder called Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), and that the profile of a serial killer is only at one far, rare end of the sociopathic spectrum. On the opposite end and in between, there are varying degrees of sociopathy, some hardly traceable, many easily masked. And more disturbingly, I discovered that sociopaths are startlingly common, and that the possibility I'd dated one or two was not so farfetched.

My stomach dropped to my feet when I read that psychologist Martha Stout, author of *The Sociopath Next Door*, estimates that sociopaths comprise four percent of the U.S. population. The "comforting" takeaway on this staggering statistic is that only a tiny fraction of the four percent are serial killing types of sociopaths; the rest are law-abiding Joe Schmos like the rest of us.

What characterizes all sociopathy, regardless of where it lies on the spectrum, is a common trait: sociopaths do not experience guilt or remorse. The majority aren't going around committing mass homicide--they understand society and wish to be a part of it. But when it comes to wrongdoings like infidelity, manipulation, and deceit, this is where "functioning" sociopaths become monsters.

It makes sense that many accomplished CEOs and politicians have been sociopaths; if you take remorse out of the equation, the ceiling opens wide. The path to success becomes less complicated, far less laden with hurdles.

I felt slightly creepy but too enthralled to mind as I dug deeper into this subject on the internet. I ordered self-proclaimed sociopath M.E. Thomas's *Confessions of a Sociopath* and delved into the archived posts on her blog, Sociopath World.

What I found was frightening, but I wanted to understand. If sociopaths made up four percent of the population, there was no doubt that everyone I knew, myself included, had, at some point, stumbled across several. More of them were men--Psychology Today cited that the ratio has been as high as 20:1.

But who were they? Was I dating them? Were my friends dating them? We all had our horror stories, and I'd met plenty of charismatic men who told me exactly what I wanted to hear and charmed me until I was a melted puddle on the floor. But while sociopaths are routinely charming, plenty of non-sociopaths are charming, too. Charm could be genuine or it could be strategic. The problem, I realized, was that when it came to the wider (non-serial killing) spectrum of sociopaths, I couldn't know whether or not someone was a sociopath unless I truly knew them, unless I studied their behavior and comprehended the world through their eyes to such an extent that I actually became one of them.

So that's what I decided to do. In the midst of working on a novel about a toxic relationship in which the antihero is a "functioning" sociopath, I finally understood that to accurately pin down my sociopathic character, Stephen DeMarco, I'd have to get inside his head and walk around a bit. Throughout his hot-and-cold relationship with Lucy Albright, I'd have to reason for him, to justify his behaviors, to project his desires and fears. I was driven by intense curiosity, but also something else--accountability. To do Stephen justice, I would have to tell his side of the story.

In her acclaimed novel *You*, Caroline Kepnes does a fantastic job writing from the lens of a sociopath who the reader can understand and even arguably sympathize with, to some degree. Kepnes gives her sociopathic protagonist Joe Goldberg a voice, a bold and fascinating feat which inspired me to do the same as I wrote Stephen's chapters. Stephen isn't a killer like Joe, but he is a classified sociopath, an individual among the four percent of the population who experiences life without the ability to feel guilt. Stephen is a chronic cheater, a pathological liar and a narcissist with a fragile ego; and in *Tell Me Lies*, he has a say. As destructive as I believe sociopaths like Stephen can be through manipulation and emotional abuse, I also think it's interesting to consider the various perspectives that can be imposed on the same situation.

Writing Stephen's sections of the novel were unquestionably my favorite; as a womanizer in his 20s in a fictional world, I was free to roam. Seeing life through his eyes, I was finally able to answer the questions my friends and I had been unloading on each other throughout our twenties. I grew to understand that there is a critical difference between being a sociopath and being a jerk. There is chronic cheating, and there is error. There is manipulation, and there is misunderstanding. There is deceit, and there is immaturity. Sociopathy is a true mental disorder, and unfortunately, one without a cure. Labels can be as deceiving as a sociopath himself.

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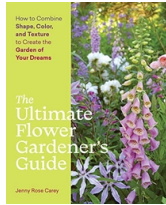
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