

Books – I'm a Joke and So Are You by Robin Ince

The Sad Clown is a common trope in popular culture, the idea that comedians all have hidden depths of tragedy, despair and miserabilism. But does this perception have any basis in fact?

Award winning comedian Robin Ince explores the popular idea of tortured minds behind funny facades with this thoughtful, kind and funny book "I'm a Joke and so are You".

With touching honesty, Ince examines the human condition from the perspective of a comedian. Using experience gained in a long career in comedy, he considers the issues that affect comedians in a very visible way but are also common to us all. With frankness and humour, he turns his attention, and hence ours, to anxiety, creativity, imposter syndrome, impulsive thoughts. And, of course, death.

Through the prism of comedy, comedians and the creative life, this warm and engaging book examines the workings of the mind and all its complexities and contradictions. Ince shares his own thoughts and experiences, and happily acknowledges his own "weirdness".

With empathy and lack of judgement Ince reflects on the big questions in our lives. Some, such as Imposter Syndrome, may be more common in the creative fields, but others including the "Imp of the Mind" are both common and reassuringly normal. It seems that those alarming moments when we consider throwing a baby down the stairs is merely the product of the brain running the equivalent of a 1970s health and safety film, and not a sign we have murderous impulses.

Professor Charles Fernyhough explains some of the random and disturbing thoughts that enter our heads. "We are all susceptible to intrusive thoughts. "Not everything that goes

through your head is you. I see it as an ideas factory”

As Ince puts it “We judge ourselves on the terms of our own inner monologue, and others by their outer appearance, which will never be an equal match.”

In “I’m a Joke and So are You” Ince calls on the knowledge and experience of a wide range of fascinating individuals. As expected, there is input from comedians including Eddie Pepitone, Dane Baptiste and Nina Conti. Conti’s contribution is fascinating and searingly honest, particularly for anyone who has witnessed Conti’s utterly arresting transformation from ventriloquist to Monkey to seemingly possessed performer. In this section Conti “wonders whether it speaks of some form of repression of herself that she engages in during her daily life” as she shares the unique opportunity Monkey gives to voice her inner monologue on stage.

Ince explores the deeper aspects of our psyche we prefer to keep hidden and shares the opinion that creativity in any form is a vital outlet. In Ince’s hands our foibles become normalised. He celebrates the fact that all humans are different and weird, prone to doubts, misery, laughter and joy.

Experts in the field of cognitive neuroscience, including Professor Sophie Scott have contributed their knowledge, understanding and humour, but this is not a technical or scientific book. Instead it is introspective and thoughtful. It helps us to tune in to our own inner monologues. Ince, in sharing his discussions with psychotherapists, encourages each of us to celebrate “the you-ness of you.”

In this book the author allows us to “live with our hidden eccentricities, safe in the knowledge that many other minds contain absurd trains of thought.”

The book is both an easy read and a challenge to the reader. It asks more questions than it answers and encourages self-

reflection. It may be a gateway book to the fields of neuroscience and psychology, or it may be an opportunity to ask your partner if they have ever considered pushing a commuter under a train.

Ince does not give definitive answers -this is by no means a psychology self-help book. As Bertrand Russell put it so candidly "the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt." This book allows space and time for us to consider our own inner world with a kindly and less critical eye.

"Sanity is wonkier than we thought" concludes Ince, and that is reassuring to us all.

'I'm a Joke and so Are You' by Robin Ince, published by Atlantic Books on 4th October 2018