

Spilling secrets

A BARE BONES TRUE LIFE ACCOUNT OF LIVING WITH EATING DISORDERS

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SARAH Claire Picton (left) is the first to admit that bulimics are “great secret-keepers”, yet throughout the entire process of sharing her life story and her ongoing battle with eating disorders, Picton never once discussed using a pseudonym with writer Joanne Jowell.

Determined to share her journey with the “sneaky and manipulative” disease of bulimia, Picton sought Jowell out and initiated an introspective and invasive dissection of how she got to this point – a young 20-something journalist with a passion for life and work who is constantly fighting against the impulse to binge and purge.

“Her frame might be small, but her personality is large. She’s loud, she’s feisty, she’s dramatic and she’s fabulous,” says Jowell of Picton.

“Sarah is a writer herself, but she didn’t want to write her own story because if she spends too much time in her head, it can actually be quite a trigger. The over-analysis is detrimental.”

And thus began a writing project that will probably forever occupy Jowell’s thoughts; an opportunity to not only extend her fascination with non-fiction, issue driven writing which gets to the heart of a psychological issue, but also to self-reflect on her own

dangerous but brief flirtation with weight loss as a young girl.

In its dealings with such a complex disorder, *Finding Sarah* veers far away from the more obvious self-help approach.

A lot of the book feels like Sarah’s own journey, a stream-of-conscious kind of metaphorical “purging” of the who’s, what’s, whys and hows in Picton’s life.

“I never wanted to write a psychological treatise,” says Jowell.

“I am not a psychologist and I’m not a healthcare practitioner. I wanted to write a bare bones true life account which puts you in a position as a reader that you would never otherwise be able to occupy.

“It’s kind of like a morbid fascination – you’re sitting watching something unfold that you feel kind of like you’re not entitled to be seeing; so secretive, so deceptive, so private. But at the same time you’re gaining understanding and knowledge, and that’s how you help,” says Jowell.

Another unconventional aspect to the book is the fact that it is completely devoid of photographs, apart from a pensive self-portrait of Picton on the front cover.

This decision stems strongly from Picton’s criticism of certain media as encouraging and even aiding eating disorders.

“The question of media on its own is hugely contested with the realm of eating disorders, which is why we didn’t use any photos,” Jowell explains.

“What people in a lay perspective find difficult to understand about bulimia is that you often cannot tell if someone is bulimic or not by looking at them.

“You think about an eating disorder and immediately think of a skeletal waif, but bulimics can even be a bit overweight sometimes, because of water retention and so on,” Jowell says.

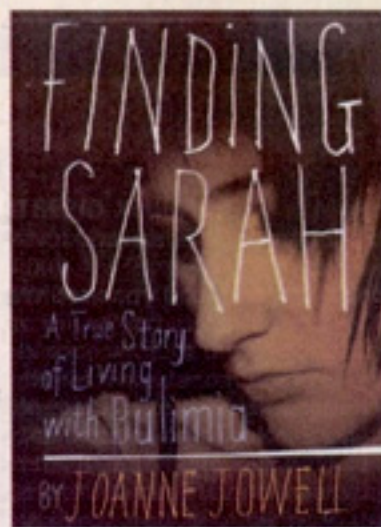
“So *that*, coupled with the fact it’s this obsession with what one looks like that

gets girls there in the first place, led to us to try very hard for this book not to be a trigger for others, not to be fodder for someone trying to get into an eating disorder.”

Ultimately, Jowell explains that Picton wanted her to help her write a book that she herself would want to read, detailing thoughts, ideas and emotions that might be helpful when thinking about recovery.

It’s not about shock tactics or gruesome truths, but rather the goings on in Picton’s mind about the ugly disorder she is constantly battling.

“The photo on the front cover says: ‘This is the face of a disorder, it’s not the body of a disorder. Get inside the mind of it.’ Because it’s really in the mind that it starts and ends,” Jowell concludes.



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