

“Epistemic justice” (a memoir)

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John Hartley

The University of Sydney, Australia

Emma A Jane (2022), *Diagnosis Normal: Living with Abuse, Undiagnosed Autism, and Covid-grade Crazy*, Melbourne and Sydney: Ebury Australia (Penguin Random House), 2022; 336pp. ISBN: 9781761044113, A \$34.99.

Abstract

This is a review essay, focussing on Emma A. Jane’s (2022) memoir, *Diagnosis Normal: Living with Abuse, Undiagnosed Autism, and coronavirus disease grade Crazy* (2022).

Keywords

Complex systems, Emma Jane, epistemology, memoir, science, story

Un-pretty stories

What happens here is by no means a cause-and-effect story. It’s a complex-systems story. Inheriting its metaphors from earlier mechanical and atomistic models of science, institutional scholarship doesn’t generally recognise the causality of relations among the different components of a complex system, never mind the new kinds of knowledge that might emerge from their dynamics. Instead, units are built up from their smallest particle, and forces are deduced from their elementary interactions.

But it’s rare, even in the humanities, to allow for connective causation and collective action. For example, scientific methodology, even when concerned with the individual unit of humanity, doesn’t usually entertain the co-causal forces of child sexual abuse, mental illness, late-diagnosis autism, patriarchal injustices, cancer, popular journalism, sex, drugs, rock & roll, not to mention a personal acquaintance with Lachlan Murdoch and a mode of hyper-performative showiness that, between them, have entailed having to live with ‘relentless rape and death threats from strangers’ (p. 6). But what if the individual unit has encountered these forces, not beyond the domain of learning, but as the lived reality within which learning must occur? And what if that lived reality is common, across many different lived realities?

Diagnosis Normal: Living with Abuse, Undiagnosed Autism, and COVID-grade Crazy is a serious and challenging contribution to scientific and disciplinary knowledge systems. It presents itself and needs to be understood, as an epistemological essay. The extraordinary life, catastrophes, pain, and entertainment that it embodies and the uncertainties about selfhood that it chronicles, need to be understood as necessary components of intersectional knowledge about human life as a

Corresponding author:

John Hartley, The University of Sydney, Australia.

Email: john.hartley@sydney.edu.au

system. This is a time when individual humans are routinely excluded from the Republic of Letters, and indeed any political order, while humanity as a whole is unwittingly, uncaringly – or powerlessly, forcedly – playing havoc with non-human systems, to such an extent that the resulting mass extinction now looms nearer for humanity itself.

At such a time, a tale of one girl's troubled life may seem a world away from formal knowledge, and of course, it is, not least because it takes the form of a story (where's the evidence!), but that's why formal knowledge systems need to understand their limits, their dangers, and their need for immediate, urgent reform.

End of story?

The first thing I want to say about this book – indeed, the first thing I did say to Emma when I heard about it – is that it makes me insanely jealous. That's because I've recently completed a 100,000-word memoir of my own, called *Boy 56*. It is an attempt to explain how I survived a boyhood of undiagnosed autism, orphanage-strength schooling, and a strong sense of abandonment in a world that privileges white males from cruel but crumbling imperial origins, but wastes almost all of them along the way. I was a candidate for the white trash heap alright, and I ended up where so many of my kind had been dumped over the past couple of centuries. Is that all there was to it? How then to account for the teeming thoughts in my head, the 'findings'; of my research and my walks of the beach, my undiagnosed abandonment, anxiety, autism and anger?

Seeking to explain more carefully how life can be known even as it is lived, you need a new kind of story, not of redemption (I once was lost but now I'm found), but of learning – a sort of post-human *bildungsroman* that might teach us not to weaponise individualism, even as we strive to achieve it and to understand its toxic consequences. Only then can connective and collective causation emerge as a science. It's also a story of learning how to write in order to learn, of learning by writing.

In order to live with myself, to live with others, and to live in this great continent as it buckles under its colonial load, I needed to know more about how the world actually works, how a self is produced, not just an abstract-universal given. Hence, *Boy 56* is a truthful work of non-fiction but scientifically of no consequence, being made of anecdote and logic. In terms of genre, it is not a tragedy, since I didn't succeed in self-destruction, so it must be a comedy, haha. But I have totally failed to get it published. The kindest rejection I've received so far reads: 'We have found of late that it is so very difficult to get a publisher to take on a memoir unless the writer has a very high profile'.¹ No deal. Category error. You finally get to know what you're talking about, only to find you should have been thinking about something else if you want to communicate.

'Epistemology is my penguin'²

Meanwhile, not only did very-high-profile Emma Jane score publication by Penguin Random House, she also scored a generous endorsement from Annabel Crabb, no less: 'It is an extraordinary thing, to watch a brilliant mind examining itself and checking for wounds. I've never read a memoir like it'.³

Hence my insane jealousy. But that was before I read it.

She writes: 'Epistemology is my penguin because I've always had a mind that watches itself and questions what it can know of the real' (p. xiii). Putting the sorting hat onto knowledge is Emma Jane's go-to refuge, something to retreat to when she overthinks (a word of which she is

suspicious) her own thoughts. Indeed, Jane is seeking truthfulness and ‘epistemic justice’ in the narrated life (pp. xiii–xv).⁴ She is also seeking to precipitate generic changes in the whole story-telling machine: ‘We need to speak these unspeakable things. We need more un-pretty stories’ (p. 7).

In a chapter disarmingly titled ‘Hello’, Jane reveals that her ‘secret professional agendas’ include ‘non-violently smashing: the patriarchy, knowledge silos, and the scourge of certainty’ (p. 10). These are non-trivial ambitions, and the chapter as a whole reads a bit like a lump of plutonium about to go critical. Jane brings together fissile materials that are not allowed anywhere near each other in the usual order of things. The Republic of Letters generally assigns them to different genres, with no connecting border-zones: the personal and the epistemological; the pets and the patriarchy; tattoos and complex systems theory; not to mention child sex abuse, cancer, mental illness and autism in the life of a professor.

A ‘blivit’

Her writing is deceptively easy to read – she’s a proper journalist and attends to her Oxford commas – so it’s easy to read *past* the bravery it must take to mix expressions of love with disclosures of mental illness, grotesque dating experiences with a scholarly interest in ‘crass responses to my revelations of sexual abuse’ (p. 14).

In short, Emma Jane introduces herself to the reader by means of what Kurt Vonnegut once called ‘a blivit’, which he defined as ‘two pounds of shit in a one-pound bag’. In *Palm Sunday*,⁵ Vonnegut celebrates his own combination of incommensurables as ‘an all-frequencies assault on the sensibilities’, made of ‘fiction, drama, history, biography and journalism’ (1982, p. 14). He wants to combine ‘the tidal power of a major novel with the bone-rattling immediacy of front-line journalism ... the flashy enthusiasms of musical theatre, the lethal jab of the short story, the sachet of personal letters, the oompah of American history, and oratory in the bow-wow- style’ (1982, p. 13).

Interestingly, Emma Jane reports that ‘My favourite author used to be Kurt Vonnegut. These days, his writing seems sexist and shallow’ (p. 18). Vonnegut himself thought that his ‘prettiest contribution’ to his culture was a Master’s thesis that he presented to the University of Chicago in the 1940s. It was unanimously failed by the examiners, on the grounds, says Vonnegut that ‘it was so simple and looked like too much fun’.⁶ As we know, Jane is looking for *un-pretty* stories. But she’s giving the old sexist a run for his money in the blivit department. Not to mention in the collection of degrees in later life, and the ability to disguise fear with humour.

Complex systems

You’re going to have to read for yourself what is disclosed in chapter 3, because I’m fast-forwarding to Ch. 4, ‘Sex, drugs, and complex systems’. Jane writes: ‘There’s never just one reason for anything’, and ‘everything you’ve ever thought or been taught about cause and effect is probably wrong’ (p. 45). She pauses to ‘ladysplain’:

Complex systems are made up of parts that are connected and dependent on each other. These parts may be people, things, or people and things. Their interactions create feedback loops. These change the parts of the system as well as the way the parts interact. They also produce what is known as emergence: sudden changes or outcomes to the status quo that may seem paradoxical or unexpected (p. 45).

Here's where the reach for 'epistemic justice' comes in, where the ambition of her epistemological daring hits the fan of bodily functions and emissions. Jane wants to understand her own story in dispassionate terms, and linear cause-and-effect scientism doesn't work. She writes:

It is impossible to write properly about sexual violence or mental illness or neurodiversity or COVID or reality-sized memoir caveats or any topic that comes with a 'why did it happen?' question without making at least a quick pit stop in complex systems (p. 47).

She wants to account for her life in terms that go beyond atomised causation, either by 'broader contexts' (too passive) or by 'me and my actions' (too individualistic). Instead, Jane wants her memoir to trace 'circularity, interactivity, and feedback loops', in order to explain 'the swirling systems that helped spit me from the status quo' (p. 47).

Don't be fooled. This is not a book about a risk-taking and troubled life, lived in the glare of publicity, in which more than one of those acts that used to be unspeakable is perpetrated upon – and by – Emma Jane's body. These are the 'people and things' alright, but what Jane is looking for are the relationships, connections and changes they represent that have caused her life and times to 'emerge' the way they have. In short, it's a book about knowledge, and about writing.

The trouble is that 'people and things' keep interrupting.

Desire and disgust, danger and doubt – a dance

Eventually, *Diagnosis Normal* alights upon the themes that begin to explain the 'swirling systems' of Jane's life – via her very rich palette of personal experience, her 'gonzo girl reporter self' (p. 161), mixed with serious therapy (p. 153–7), a decidedly un-Vonnegutian Master's degree (pp. 160–1), having a daughter (Ch. 11), and doing a PhD (Ch. 12).

The themes that emerge are what she calls the 'septic combination of desire and disgust men can direct towards women, and paedophiles can direct towards children' (p. 153). 'Septic' is well chosen: it means self-damaging responses to bodily invasions. The dynamic that drives abusers is 'desire and disgust'. But the response may be toxic. It was Jane's therapist whose 'identification and naming of this dynamic not only helped me understand my abuse but inspired my PhD' (p. 154). Henceforward, when 'desire and disgust' were incoming, they were no longer to be met by self-destructive doubt and danger, but by the getting of knowledge. Treatment – in the form of a heavy dose of higher education – was always going to be painful:

My first class was a cultural studies subject about hegemony, media, and something-alism. The prescribed readers were as big as old-school telephone books and as dense as osmium (p. 160).

I think I may have been part of the 'something-alism'. Sorry Emma. My own early work was associated with poststructuralism, one of the contributing discourses of cultural studies, which itself had to twist and tug itself away from literary theory and anthropology before it could tackle media. Luckily, her first response – 'I was *devastated* by these readings' – soon gave way to her skills as a 'professional thrill-seeker'. Instead of worrying, she revelled in her outsider status, 'trying to keep things loose and absorb' whatever she could with a 'beginner's mind'.

It worked: 'Mustering this sense of wonder turned my university experience around and dense theory has since become a passion' (p. 161).

Knowledge, not spoilers!

It is normal in an academic book review to lay out the author's argument – chapter by chapter – before passing judgement on the adequacy of their theorising. But in the case of a 'trade' book, it's important not to give away the storyline and plot twists, which would ruin the reader's joy of discovery. The theory is a spoiler.

Given that she's written a hybrid, interdisciplinary, trans-everything book – about knowledge, methodology and epistemology; about evidence, footnotes and truth; about study, learning, teaching and discovery; about complex systems and science; about writing, representation and the status of the story – I have followed some of the steps she takes in these matters, because they are clearly part of a quest for scholarly and scientific reform, as attested by the intellectual and social prescriptions she offers at the end.

But she has headed this final chapter 'Rhetorical swagger and unpublishable polemic'. She's her own 'Reviewer 2' (p. 200). She wants you to know that she knows how hard it is to pull off that trick.

Diagnosis Normal is very clearly a text where 'the writing is the research', as they say. In such narratives, the conclusions compel assent and action in direct proportion to the number and depth of the battle-scars that the writer has sustained along the way. Be assured, Emma Jane has taken more hits than the Terminator, and still she gets up again, to face even more *outré* experiences, in which danger, doubt, and dancing are both methods and madness. The book's very strong pedagogical ethic – wanting to talk directly to those who may be experiencing similar issues – gains its force from the disclosure of intimacies as well as trade secrets.

The truthfulness effect results not only from her experience and evidence but also from her doubt. From the outset (p. xiii), Jane is unsure of her own reality. All she can say is that it 'feels false but might be true' that she is 'slightly built, can tell neat Schrödinger's cat jokes, ha[s] glittery eyes' (p. xiii). With this rather spare wardrobe, she has performed feats I could barely imagine, never mind emulate.

You win some

I haven't had to face anything like the challenges and scenes in which she is both protagonist and witness. I admit that I have left some important episodes and stories out of this review, but not just to avoid spoilers. I've been keen to trace Jane's quest for knowledge, but squeamish about all the gooey bits. My aversion to bodily fluids, intimacy, emotional excess, even touching, has nothing to do with Emma Jane, it's my own condition doing the talking. But Jane doesn't hold back. It's just that I don't have the skills that she does to tell you about it. Words fail me.

My insane jealousy gives way to ungrudging admiration. The stakes are higher, the skills are greater, and the result more compelling than I could achieve through my own unpublishable memorial trudge. Whether you're a schoolie or a scholar, you can relate to her reality, even as she flattens it out into a representational form that makes her autism *sing*.

One of the devices she uses is the list, of which Umberto Eco was the acknowledged master. But I must say I find Jane's more compelling. Here is her first taste of the internet, at a time when she worked as a columnist for the *Australian* newspaper, and started publishing her email address:

According to my new, anonymous, e-friends, I needed to be taught a lesson by being arse-fucked into oblivion, forced to work in a 'hore' house, gang-banged to set me right, shot in the face, pushed off a skyscraper, decapitated and incinerated, and raped for being so unrapeable (p. 199).

There's a lot more, duly and dispassionately listed, of what Jane calls 'Rapeglish', a term she also uses in her scholarly work, not least in an article I had the honour to publish.⁷ I have not been treated in any way to compare with this. Only once has a critic threatened me with actual death, but only as a joke, haha, and in any case I was permitted to answer back.⁸

We too?

The question is, how can scholars (people), as well as scholarship (institutions), cope with, represent and reform such a 'Manosphere'?

Here's where Jane's commitment to complex systems, which I share, comes into its own. She wants to describe the research findings on the 'impact' of Child Sexual Abuse. So, another list:

Children and adolescents who have been sexually abused can exhibit a wide range of emotions and behaviours. These include an 'exaggerated startle response', hyper-vigilance, heightened alertness, intrusive memories, mood and personality changes, over-compliance and eagerness to please, drug and alcohol misuse, aggression, impulse issues, running away, problems with school attendance and achievement, self-harm and mutilation, avoidance of certain people and places, sleeping issues, nightmares and night terrors, and 'socially inappropriate' behaviour (p. 216).⁹

My first, visceral reaction when reading this list was the shock of recognition: that's *my childhood*, right there! And yet, as far as I recall, I wasn't subject to the type of child sexual abuse summarised in this passage, although I can recall quite a lot about my childhood. In fact, that's the subject of *Boy 56*, which, for me at least, is the dead twin of *Diagnosis Normal*. However, it seems I'm not going to be sharing it with the reading public any time soon, so I can't show you what I'm getting at in detail. In turn, that means I'll have to rely on scholarly abstraction and generalisation to make the point: Emma Jane's autobiography is an epistemology for us all. It's not a tragedy or a comedy: it's a manifesto.

This gives rise to what many might see as a preposterous conclusion. Here's my take-out from Emma Jane's most singular life. The personal themes and experiences that she describes, the 'institutional responses' that she endures, and the 'condition' in which she lives, are not the same as, but are *connected to* my own, and to yours too, dear reader. To presume otherwise, 'failing to see or at least consider the possibility of connections between things' is, as she remarks, 'injurious and scientifically unsound':

Adopting a complex systems view of the world means rock-solid lines of causality – this indubitably causes that – are not required to understand that people, circumstances, and conditions constantly interact and influence each other to produce outcomes that may seem unexpected or greater than the sum of their parts (p. 267).

This is why *Diagnosis Normal* is a good deal greater than the sum of its parts. It speaks to us all as a society that is complicit in many kinds of human excess and human rights abuse, and it speaks to me about a condition and a life I have barely begun to understand, both hers and my own. More significantly for the Republic of Letters, it speaks about the crying need to allow complex, connective, collective, 'common' knowledge to emerge as a scientific enterprise, in order to steer collective and institutional action away from systemic catastrophe. Science and story, institution and person, knowledge and dance, are connected in ways that can spoil your life, or maybe save it. It's now a '#WeToo' world. As for individual specimens, so for planetary systems. Who can write these stories, before it's too late?

– John Hartley, *The University of Sydney*

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Notes

1. Email from 'Admin'.
2. Jane (p. xiii) is citing a character from the Netflix series *Atypical* who, in crises, recites the names of penguins.
3. See: https://www.emmajane.info/_files/ugd/4b7383_7518603e7cc54f3d929e262b40f59082.pdf.
4. See Miranda Fricker (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Kurt Vonnegut (1982) *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*. London, Cape.
6. See: <https://www.openculture.com/2019/12/why-the-university-of-chicago-rejected-kurt-vonneguts-masters-thesis.html>.
7. Emma A. Jane (2018) Systemic misogyny exposed: Translating Rapeglisch from the Manosphere with a Random Rape Threat Generator. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(6), 661–80.
8. John Hartley (1999) Why is it Scholarship when Someone Wants to Kill You? Truth as Violence. *Continuum*, 13(2), 227–36.
9. Jane is summarising the section on 'identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse' in the report of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), vol. 4, p. 62.