

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR



Lisa Bonack writes:

"I've always felt a tad out of step with everyone around me. Although I had some close friends and moved easily among social circles, I felt different and quite lonely. Quirky interests would grow to obsession and then dissipate altogether in a matter of weeks. My moods followed suit, cycling between highs and lows. At age 18, I was diagnosed bipolar.

"In school, surrounded by classmates who had known me virtually my whole life, my differences were never questioned. While I may not have felt understood, I did feel accepted. As an adult I encountered far more people who didn't get me than did, and as a result it was difficult to break into new groups, particularly in work situations where the staff had existing relationships with one another. Eventually being the chronic outsider left me feeling isolated and paranoid and things usually ended badly.

"After leaving a job impulsively, I found myself underemployed for over a year. Finally I landed a job at an independent bookseller. It should have been my dream job, but I was miserable. There were only a couple people on the staff whom I felt comfortable with the perfectionist in me hated that there was no way I could know every book inside and out, and reading, a favorite pastime, became work. Within a couple months, I had plunged into a suicidal depression.

"I came into work and found an advance copy of 'Queen of the Oddballs' waiting for me. I started reading and felt an immediate connection. Hillary Carlip was the person I wanted to be – a person I didn't even realize was possible! I still wanted to kill myself, but maybe I'd wait until I finished the book. By the time I was done, I didn't want to die. This stranger's memoir gave me some hope. Her book bought me enough time to get help. I felt compelled to write to her and started an e-mail friendship that still helps me through the bad days."

PRINCESS OF THE 'ODDBALLS'

As Author C.S. Lewis once wrote, "We read to know we are not alone." Part of the attraction of consuming personal stories of ordinary people lies in the sense of connection many find. When Lisa Bonack picked up Hillary Carlip's memoir, "Queen of the Oddballs," she was at a low point in her life. But as Ms. Bonack writes in the essay below, Ms. Carlip's confession helped her turn her own life around.

Bonack, who works for a regional repertory theater, wrote this essay as a courtesy to accompany the Monitor's story on America's confession culture." It not only illustrates the connection people feel to personal material, it also illustrates the genre itself.