THE VERY HUNGRY ANOREXIC

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TAMARISK BOOKS

Thornham Bridge, Ermington, PL21 0LG, United Kingdom

ISBN: 978-1-7385511-2-5

Printed Worldwide
First Printing 2024
First Edition 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.troscianko.com
www.hungerartist.org

For all of you who doubt it's worth it,
and for all of you who make it worth it.

Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen,
die sich über die Dinge ziehn.
Ich werde den letzten vielleicht nicht vollbringen,
aber versuchen will ich ihn.

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete the last one,
but I will try.

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch, I: Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben [The Book of Hours, I: The Book of Monastic Life]*, 1899; my translation)

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Acknowledgements

I want to warmly thank many people for their contributions to this project.

- Donald Winchester, for early advice that helped this version of the book come into being.
- Sue Blackmore, for reading and commenting on drafts at all stages of its evolution. And for letting me use *Ten Zen Questions* for the control condition in the pre-publication experiment.
- Jon Bartlett, for giving me such honest feedback (in between sets) on an early chapter draft.
- Rebecca Park, for an early chat about the experiment, including the galvanizing idea, "Most people don't write memoirs to be useful".
- Rocío Riestra Camacho, for helping me start to imagine the form the experiment would take, and later doing so much of the work of running it.
- James Carney, for tirelessly giving the time and statistical expertise needed to get the data analysis right.
- All 64 women who took part in the experiment, for giving us such revealing glimpses into what happened while reading this book (or *TZQ*).
- Adam Hart-Davis, for so generously editing the entire manuscript.
- Dionysios Kyropoulos, for so kindly and patiently sharing the expertise that gave me the confidence to turn this into a physical book and an ebook by myself.
- Stefan P, for turning my over-complicated brief into a wonderful cover.
- And James Anderson, for so many conversations.

Without you all, neither the experiment nor the book would have been possible.

About the author

Emily Troscianko is a writer and coach who is trying to simplify her life and stop also being a researcher. Thanks to her previous research, when she finished writing this book she decided that she needed to conduct an experiment to determine whether it would be ethically responsible to publish it, so the book rather got in the way of the simplification!

Emily has a DPhil (PhD) in German literature and an academic background in cognitive and empirical literary studies. She coaches individuals who are recovering from an eating disorder and others who are making a career move or want to get their working life working better for them. Her other books so far are *Henry Winstanley and the Eddystone Lighthouse* and *Taking the Piss: A Potted History of Pee* (both with Adam Hart-Davis), *Kafka's Cognitive Realism*, *Cognitive Literary Science* (edited with Michael Burke), *Consciousness: An Introduction* (with Sue Blackmore), and *The Shellfish Nest*.

In the rest of life, Emily loves strength training, narrowboating, hot tubs, strong cocktails, and escaping into mountainous wildernesses.

Author's note

This is a work of lightly fictionalized memoir. All names have been changed to preserve privacy; some episodes have been condensed or reordered for the sake of narrative; dialogue with other people has been recreated to the best of the author's recollection. The events described are intended to illuminate the physical and psychological transformation involved in recovery from anorexia nervosa.

This book is designed to provide helpful information on the subjects discussed. It is not meant to be used, nor should it be used, to diagnose or treat any medical or health condition. For diagnosis or treatment of any medical or health problem, you should consult a qualified healthcare professional. The publisher and author are not responsible for any specific health needs that may require professional supervision and are not liable for any damages or negative consequences from any treatment, action, or application to any person reading or following the information in this book.

Preface

The only thing I really want to say before you dive in is: This book is not an instruction manual.

I say this partly as a way to beef up the legal disclaimer, but mostly because the idea of an instruction manual for recovery from anorexia nervosa is stupid.

All a realistic and responsible manual could really say would be: Eat, until you're well.

Other people can help us know what to expect along the way; help us hold our nerve and make better decisions in the difficult times; help us find the clarity and calm to articulate what we aspire to, and then the resolve to work towards it. But fundamentally, you must work out the details for yourself—work out what you want, and what you're prepared to do to get there, and what's going to make it easiest on you until you get there. And, whatever else you do or don't do alongside, you must eat, a lot. And rest, for a long time. And so rebel against much of what society screams at us. No one else can design or perform that rebellion for you.

Doing recovery properly means doing it in the way that makes your reality the version of the fully recovered life that you have defined for yourself. No book (or doctor, or therapist) can give you your definition, and no book (or coach, or loved-one) can make your definition a reality except you. But of course our definitions and our ways of making them reality are learned as well as dreamed up: We all imbibe a thousand social and verbal fragments every day that affect how we want our lives to be, and how we actually live them.

Recovering from anorexia is nothing less than coming back to life. Maybe this book will give you one small reason to do this, or to do it sooner, or one small clue as to how to do it, or to do it quicker. Maybe it won't. How you approach it will probably make a difference. As I say, if you expect it to be an instruction manual for recovery, you'll be disappointed. If you expect it to be an instruction manual for anorexia itself (e.g. if you plan to comb it for weight-loss tips and stop after chapter 3), I hope you'll be disappointed. (By the way, I ate a lot more, every day for most of my illness, than many ill-advised diet plans recommend, and I was never even hospitalized. If you're looking to self-trigger into catastrophic anorexia, you

can find much better role models. Or, ideally, just take a few deep breaths, ask yourself what the hell that slippery slope just was, and get back to something more interesting.) If you let this book be what books always can be—not nice, bland, good-for-us things like vitamin tablets, but risky, complicated, thought-provoking things like… um…?—then who knows, maybe something good will flow from me to you via it. I would love that.

If you want to increase the chances of interesting things happening, you could consider doing some regular journaling about what you're reading, or schedule a regular chat with someone you trust, to help you process it actively and constructively. This book was subjected prior to its publication to experimental testing to decide whether or not it should be published, and you're reading it because it passed the test. The results of that study—which I say more about in the Afterword—and other research findings suggest that this kind of post-processing may be pretty crucial to how positive health-relevant effects of reading materialize, when they do.

In the meantime, may something in these pages be what you need, whether or not you knew it. And if it's seeming like a bad idea once you get to page 20, set it down without a shadow of guilt, and turn instead to something you love.

PS The title of this book was going to be yet another Hunger Artist (after Franz Kafka's Modernist short story, my blog, my website, and my unreadable and unpublished early-20s memoir of an illness). But on a canal trip near Oxford on my narrowboat Lancer, sitting at the stern driving and chatting—I think with coffee, or maybe it was beer—an alternative arose: *The Hungry Anorexic (Eats a Meal)*. I remembered it as my mother's idea, then my partner claimed credit for it, and maybe it was a collective captain-and-crew effort. I instantly liked the feel of it and the way it punctures the "anorexics don't get hungry" myth, although I hadn't yet written a book that I thought it would fit. Now I think I have. I hope that even without its original subtitle, it might inspire you to do all kinds of new things with your hunger—especially eat!

PPS On almost the eve of publication, I showed the cover to a dear friend and she said that she loved the image and the blurb but the title made her think she'd never been thin or ill enough to qualify her to read the book. Considering other titles that do things with hunger, we found ourselves thinking of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and it seemed that adding a Very

might be a nice simple way to convey something of that original childish subtitle and make even clearer that this is not one of those "recovery" memoirs that spends 298 pages being fascinated by anorexia and 2 pages saying "and I then I got therapy and lived happily ever after". There's such metamorphic power in doing better than that.

Afterword

I never meant to write this book.

I had a misguided idea for a book that would be easy to write: choose the most popular posts from my Psychology Today blog, top and tail them a bit, done.

That was in 2015. It's now 2024.

Of course it didn't work. (If you ever find yourself thinking, "this'll be an easy book to write", stop; it won't be!)

The original title was *A Hunger Artist: The Art and Science of Letting Anorexia Go*. It was going to have seven sections ("Myths and Misunderstandings", "The Basics", "The Labyrinth", "Pre-Recovery", "Recovery", "Other People", and "Living Free"), each with five subsections, like "Resuming recovery after slip-ups and relapse", "The new beauty", and the myth that "People with anorexia look in the mirror and see a fat person".

I was trying to use my own diary, other personal writings, and blog readers' comments alongside the blog posts themselves, and it was all feeling very disjointed. To roll out that old author's cliché, I was failing to find my voice. I was also feeling that when I did find my voice, it sounded didactic and flat in a way that the blog posts themselves never did.

My mother's literary agent Donald Winchester read a couple of chapters, and he said: "The structure and flow of the telling seems, to my mind at least, a little on the convoluted side, and is lacking in the thing that can really make this work—a narrative structure." He also remarked: "I'm not sure you know what sort of book this actually is."

All of this was totally fair. But when I tried to act on his advice and include a bit of a narrative arc while keeping the discursive stuff, it all devolved into even more of a mess.

I kept battling on with it, even while suspecting that the amount of battling this felt like was probably inversely proportional to how readable a book it was going to be.

The battling got particularly bad when I contemplated tackling the section on anorexia and control. With this part, I spent quite a while alternating between simple procrastination and trying (but failing) to prevent it from turning into a complete labyrinth. I'd already used some questions in the

section headers elsewhere—like "Do you weigh yourself frequently and change what or how much you eat according to what the scale says?". And at some point in 2018, I thought, "what about a Q&A-style bit?".

The first attempt I made at a question-and-answer way of writing was just 800 words of an A/B dialogue beginning with B's question, "What's this whole control thing about, then?". I introduced the exchange like this: "There are many back-alleys in the territory of anorexia and control, and I hesitate on the brink of trying to map them out in my own voice. Instead I think I'll report on a conversation, between someone rather like my late-anorexic self and someone with a ??". I never did fill in the question-marked blanks, but the technique worked really well. It worked so well that I ended up rewriting the few chapters I'd drafted so far, not strictly as Q&A, but as a dialogue between several voices that contrasted with and complemented each other.

I'd always thought that dialogue was the last thing in the world I could write well. But I got better at it, with the help of plenty of reading aloud. And it became apparent to me that this dialogical form had all kinds of rhetorical advantages. For example, it allowed me to avoid stating *my* categorical opinion and instead let things be properly explored without all funnelling immediately into "the right answer". Even more importantly, it allowed the anorexic perspective to really get properly expressed but also never go unchallenged, because there's always the voice of reason—or of life, of hope, of pragmatism, of "don't be an idiot", of "just do it"—to come back in and offer an alternative. So all this was great. Who knew, Socrates was onto something!

I felt increasingly uneasy, though, because as soon as I started writing in dialogue form, I found that I was slipping into narrative. I was writing a story, and it was feeling more and more like autobiography. This continued until at some point I realized: Oh damn, I've only gone and written an anorexia recovery memoir, haven't I.

In the early days of my blog, *A Hunger Artist*, that too was mostly autobiography—no research in sight. Back when I started it, in 2009, I'd barely read anything about anorexia, not memoirs or scientific research or anything much else; only a self-help book or two that my mother had found for me when I was ill. I didn't really know what a blog was either, but the Psychology Today editors seemed happy for me to write about my experience of recovery and respond to readers' comments and questions. Gradually, what felt like

recovering gave way more and more to what felt like living. The phase in my life that had an eating disorder in it receded further into my past. And as it did so, it began to occur to me that knitting together my experience (and, in time, what I learnt from readers' experiences and later from coaching clients' experiences) with the research might be a way to make the blog more useful. More fundamentally than that, it was also a way to make the blog stay writeable for me, now that I no longer had an eating disorder and had no intention of ever having one again.

I never dreamt, when I started the blog as a personal chronicle, that within five or six years I'd be starting to conduct eating disorder-related research myself. In my academic life, I had long been fascinated by the Modernist Czech writer Franz Kafka and by what the term "Kafkaesque" really means. Before I started my PhD at Oxford, I had a bit of a crisis of faith about going ahead with it, and my parents encouraged me to ask myself, "Is there a question you really want to answer?" If yes, they suggested, I should pin down what it was. And if no, maybe I should go and do something that wasn't a PhD! I realized that the question I wanted to answer was "What makes Kafka's writing so weird and wonderful?", and I spent the next three years trying to answer it. In the end, I did answer it to my satisfaction, by discovering how his writing style taps with an unsettling directness into specific ways in which the human mind works.

None of this was very eating-disorder-y. But later, in my postdoctoral research, I started to join the dots between the fields known as cognitive literary studies (investigating literature with the help of methods and findings from the cognitive sciences) and the health humanities (a wide array of ways of joining up healthcare and the health sciences with the humanities—some a lot more interesting than others!). At first, I did this linking-up of cognition and health by thinking theoretically about how reading a text in the context of illness might affect the reading experience and interpretation and might also have effects back on the illness.

Staying at the stage of coming up with theories was never going to be enough, though—not for someone raised by three scientists where dinner-table chat so often involved coming up with experimental designs for random everyday questions like how cold the pondwater has to get to kill the tadpoles and whether psychics really can see a person's aura sticking out from behind a wall. So things soon got empirical, via a 6-month partnership with the UK eating disorder charity Beat. They were interested in reading because they ran a book-review section on their website and had little confidence in how to decide what to look out for or recommend. So when I reached out, they said yes to collaborating, and their Research Officer Jon Kelly and I designed and

ran an online survey that, to our amazement, nearly 900 individuals completed.

The main set of survey questions asked respondents to think about their experiences of reading eating-disorder fiction versus their preferred type of other fiction, in four areas: mood, self-esteem, their feelings about their body, and their diet and exercise habits. Our most striking finding was that people overwhelmingly reported that they believed reading narratives about eating disorders was harmful for them, in all four of those areas. (Interestingly, many individuals also didn't seem to differentiate between fictional and nonfictional narratives.) You can read more about the study and what we found via the reference (Troscianko, 2018) at the end of this section.

The survey data gathered with Beat were in my mind when I replied to my mother's agent Donald about his "add a narrative structure" suggestion. I made very clear that I didn't want to go down the memoir route: "another anorexia memoir is not what the world needs, I think, nor what I want to write", I told him.

So, now it's 2020, and all my nice dialogical rewriting on my accidental anorexia memoir is nearly finished, and it's the first Covid lockdown and I'm pulling up one of a million brambles that keep popping up on the bank next to the narrowboat I live on in Oxford, and I've just been reviewing a paper on eating disorders in French literature. I have in mind something that the author said about writers of recovery memoirs:

> The genre of the confessional memoir is often called 'true-life story' or 'tragic life story' or even 'misery memoir' in an English publishing context, and the more neutral 'récit-témoignage' (literally: eyewitness narrative, or testimonial) in French. In the case of ED memoirs, these typically include a claim that the book has been written in order to help other people in a similar situation, either within the text itself, often towards the beginning, or in the paratextual information such as a preface or the cover blurb. However, in the light of Troscianko's study, such claims may appear misguided, or even disingenuous; in some cases, authors claim that their goal is to help or inspire others and include details of how their *own* reading of ED memoirs and novels fuelled their disordered eating. (Jones, 2021, p. 315; original emphasis)

And it hit me as I battled with another bramble root: Oh god, I'm about to

become one of these disingenuous authors, aren't I. So maybe not greatly to my credit, that was my first reaction: just how bad this would look. "Oxford University researcher whose research has shown how dangerous ED memoirs can be has just gone and published one." Then, the second reaction was: Yeah, OK, this really could do people damage, couldn't it. I think that the potential to do harm hadn't fully hit me before because I'd made such efforts to circumvent it, and had grown pretty confident that the dialogue form would be a strong discouragement to the worst kinds of "triggered" responses reported by our survey respondents. But this confidence could, of course, be completely misplaced. Only a few years earlier, I'd written to Donald that I thought interweaving my own story with other people's and with scientific research was the only way to forestall the kinds of anorexia-blinkered reading that I'd learned can do so much harm.

So, how could I find out whether it would be ethically responsible to publish this thing? It would be no good just asking some people what they thought of the book; they might tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, or tell me the same thing they would say about any other book they'd read, or be unlike most other potential readers in some key ways, or… So what other options were there? Again my scientific upbringing came to the fore here, as well as everything I'd painfully learned in my efforts to start finding things out empirically in the resolutely anti-empirical academic discipline of literary studies. Human beings have developed no better method for asking questions about cause and effect than conducting controlled experiments: experiments where you take two (or more) groups and you hold everything as constant as you can between them and you change just one thing, the thing you want to find out about the effects of. And so I realized that there was nothing for it but to run an experiment.

Immediately, the next set of difficulties began. What should be the control condition? What exactly should I measure? Who should participate and how would I reach them? How would I fit doing all this into an already over-busy life that no longer included any academic salary? Above all: What should the stakes be?

Once I'd worked out answers to most of these questions, one of the big practical hurdles was getting ethical approval to run the experiment, as all academic researchers now have to do for empirical work involving humans. One of the reviewers for the Oxford University ethics review board posed a fairly blunt version of that last question about what the stakes should be:

> What will you do if the book triggers negative thoughts and results in relapse etc? Will the data you collect enable you to refine it or change it or will you have to bin it? It's unclear how you will use

> the data obtained once the study has been concluded. For example, if 39 participants found the book beneficial but one had a strong negative reaction would you still go ahead with publication? What would happen if it were 38:2 or 30:10? What weight would be given to minor negative reactions? Would the publisher's lawyers or the author decide? Would the book (if published) be obliged to carry a health warning or disclaimer? What if the author and publisher could not agree on the interpretation of the results?

And I decided that the answer had to be stark and simple: If the data show evidence of harm, I will have to bin the book. There's no point going to all the time and effort and cost of running an experiment like this if you don't have clear definitions of pass and fail. So my colleague and friend James Carney helped me decide what that cutoff should be, and we registered those details with the ethics committee. Now this was all feeling very real: The results would be the difference between publishing the book and, if not throwing it in the bin, at least letting it languish forever in a dark corner of my hard drive.

It's hard for the punchline not to be spoilt in advance, given you've now just read this book (or are thinking about it). As you'll have inferred, the results were good. Not only did the book not do serious and obvious harm, which was all it had to do to pass the test; it even seemed to be non-trivially helpful. The pre- versus post-reading results for both the standardized measures we used—one clinical severity measure and one "stages of change" measure of attitudes to illness and recovery—both showed significant improvement, with a particularly large effect size for the second measure. Interestingly, the book that the control group read—a book called *Ten Zen Questions*, by my mother Sue Blackmore—had similarly positive effects on both these measures. This raises questions about what's driving the beneficial effects: maybe something the two books have in common, or maybe something about the processes of reading or responding to them more than anything in the texts themselves.

I seem to make a habit of taking a very long time to write anything bigger than a blog post, and it took me over a year to write up the results of the experiment for publication. A lot of this time was spent exploring the participants' free-text responses in depth. They were vastly rich, and I learnt a lot from them about how individuals (who aren't me) read and react to material like this. In fact, I learnt so much that I rather overloaded the article with detail, and our peer reviewers asked us to remove lots of it! So another paper may have to be written… In the meantime, if you'd like to know more about what my colleagues and I learnt from conducting this experiment, you can find details of our primary paper (Troscianko, Riestra-Camacho, & Carney, 2024) below, or

visit my website at hungerartist.org/research.

The data we gathered not only allowed the book to be published; they also guided its editing. Another thing I spent that more-than-a-year doing was making a list of participants' comments to take into account in the final rounds of book revisions—both things to keep or enhance and things to sort out or get rid of—and then attempting to implement them. If you happen to have taken part in the experiment and were allocated to the group that read this book and have now read it again, I imagine that you'll have noticed some changes. I hope you think that they changed it for the better.

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