

second nature, but now frozen out, leaving us with a demoralised awareness that, amidst the technology, guidelines, protocols, and financial incentives, something important is missing. Zigmond cogently describes what this is and what happens without it. At its core is an erosion of relationships that nourish: both therapeutic and fraternal. We ignore his message at our peril.

Postscript

In July 2016, 1 year after the book's publication, Zigmond's surgery was closed as an emergency, 5 days after their second CQC inspection. This was enforced by a carefully and expensively choreographed summons and 8-hour hearing in Camberwell Magistrates' Court with neither opportunity for legal representation nor adjournment. The previous CQC inspection in February 2014 produced a glowing report. This time, remarkably, his practice was considered to be: *'... so extremely hazardous that the public need[ed] immediate protection by its closure'*. There had been no significant changes to his practice since the previous inspection and he never had a substantive complaint in 40 years of practice. He was always polite, but doggedly persistent; a maverick whose GP career ended ignominiously, or perhaps gloriously. The day after the hearing his patients turning up for their appointments found the surgery door locked and an official notice advising them to seek care elsewhere. It seems that Zigmond's real crime was to expose the roots of oppression and to scatter seeds of hope.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X697805>

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine Gail Honeyman

HarperCollins, 2018, PB, 400pp, £8.99,
978-0008172145



MEANINGFUL CONTACT

Loneliness is topical. This year the government accepted a series of recommendations from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and strategies have been devised to combat loneliness. Olivia Laing's 2017 non-fiction work *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* was widely read and positively reviewed. A quote from the latter is used as an epigraph for Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, a novel about a woman who has sealed herself in her own private world.

The eponymous narrator of the novel is a fine creation. She works in an anonymous office job, has no friends, consumes unhealthy amounts of strong liquor at home, and is content to pass through life without making any impression. She is blunt,

judgemental, formal in her dealings with other people, and has idiosyncratic ideas about what constitutes proper behaviour. There are hints of an abusive relationship and a troubled childhood; she has burn scars on her face. Her one connection is provided by phone conversations with Mummy, a caustic, belittling woman who has a massive negative effect on Eleanor's life.

There is sadness but humour too. Comedy comes from Eleanor's attempts to negotiate the routine — office politics, bikini waxing, supermarkets, a manicure — and with an infatuation with a small-time musician. However, I think the comedy is only partly successful. The crux of the novel comes with a chance event that forces Eleanor to make meaningful contact with two other characters, Raymond (the IT guy from her work) and Sammy (an older man who collapses in the street), after which her social network expands. Without wanting to spoil the novel, this propels her towards revelation, disaster, change.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine is an undemanding novel that edges towards meaningfulness in places. I asked myself two questions while reading the book. Can a character, possibly with autism spectrum disorder, convincingly move from trauma, emotional deprivation, and isolation to a fulfilling life and interaction with other people in 400 pages? And how would that affect her distinctive character, humour, and outlook?

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X697817>

