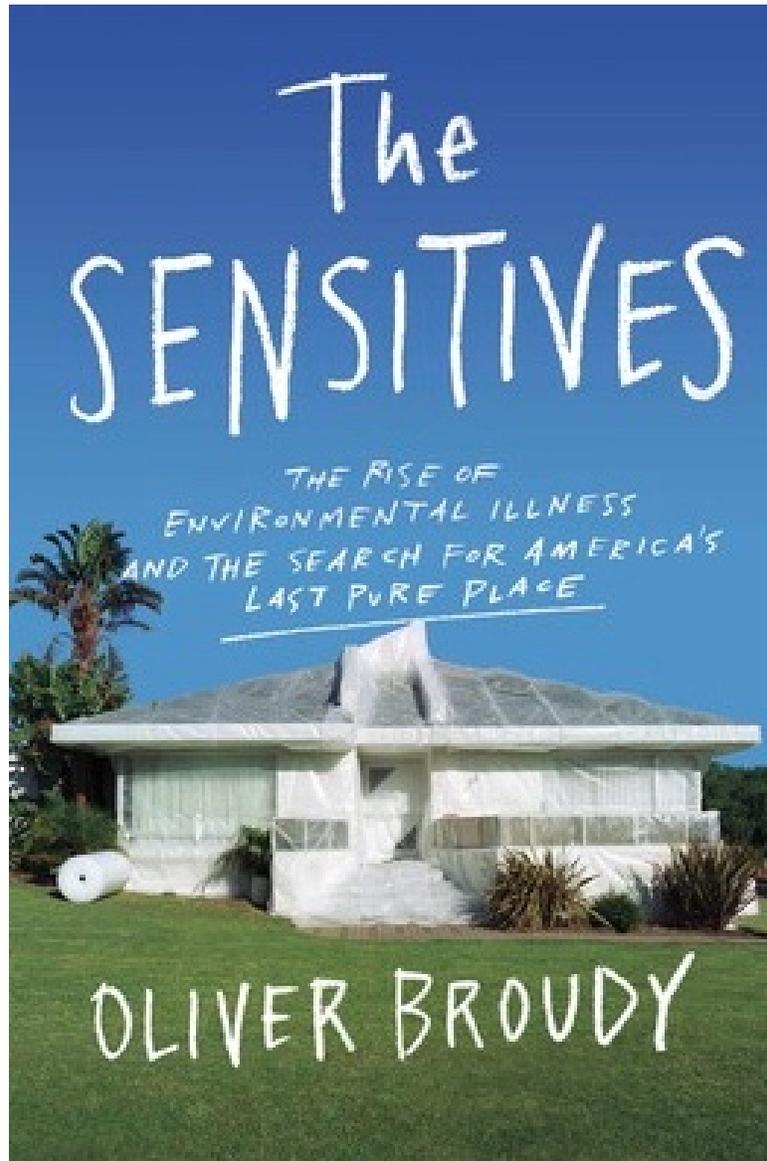


The Sensitives by Oliver Broudy

Book Review



Oliver Broudy travels around Arizona looking for people with environmental illness he can interview, while trying to make up his mind whether they are crazy or onto something.

Keywords: The Sensitives, Oliver Broudy, review, environmental illness, chemical sensitivity, MCS, Arizona, Snowflake

A road trip to EI land

This is a new twist on the classic American road trip story. Broudy teams up with a guy who recently got sick with environmental illness and roams around the Southwest for six days in search of people with the illness he can interview. He wants to find a person who is a frequent poster on social media and has gone off line for a while. He also wants to visit the EI community in Snowflake, Arizona.

The EI travel companion

Broudy meets up with James at a \$350-a-night five-star hotel in swanky Aspen, Colorado, where James used to own a series of houses. James is seriously rich and a successful real estate entrepreneur who got sick with MCS the year before from a big exposure. Like all newbies, he is still trying to figure out how to deal with his new situation and what causes his symptoms.

At one point James' hands are trembling. He thinks it is exposure to mycotoxins, though it could have several other causes. Broudy goes into a long discussion of "quasi-magical" and "superstitious" thinking, instead of realizing James is a newbie who is grasping to make sense of his situation, with very little reliable information available.

It is difficult to determine how sensitive James is. He stays in hotels, drives a recent model car, uses a brand-new inflatable mattress, constantly drinks energy beverages and shares the tight airspace of his car with a stinky journalist.

On the other hand, he is struggling with a lot of neurologic symptoms, which may be caused by these ongoing exposures. He uses a variety of stimulants to keep him going, which could actually be the cause of his symptoms as well. A common newbie error.

Broudy does not pick up on this, which is reasonable since he is a complete outsider. But it is also a good example of how difficult it is for an outsider to pass judgement on such a complex illness. Broudy mentions the pioneer of environmental medicine, Theron Randolph, multiple times. If he had read Randolph's 1990 book (see refs) James' seeming inconsistencies would make much more sense.

James comes across as a weird personality who can't relate to women, visits strip clubs and has trouble expressing himself. But he is very rich, so nobody can accuse him of "wanting" to be sick so he can mooch on society.

Opinions

The unstated central theme of this book is Broudy trying to decide whether environmental illness is a legitimate illness or not. He is a man with lots of opinions to share. He constantly seesaws between painting the sick people as mentally sick and then finding a reason to defend their sanity. Sometimes there is a danger of intellectual whiplash.

His sources of information are almost exclusively what he can find on the internet, in the form of newspaper articles, social media and some research papers. He spends a lot of time on EI social media - especially on Facebook. He comments (ch 3):

Much of the EI community was obsessed with mold. For many it seemed to represent a scourge worse than nuclear weapons, the internal combustion engine, and plastic shopping bags all rolled into one. The magazine articles that regularly appeared claiming to debunk the mold threat only further stoked their zealotry.

In typical form he then seesaws to smooth his prior statement:

Just because sufficient evidence had not been found didn't mean it didn't exist. In the field of mycology much remained a mystery.

Despite that social media are as dependable as supermarket tabloids, and not a good representation of the EI world, he seems fascinated and refers to several anonymous posters and people he talked to electronically.

Building up to Snowflake

The Snowflake EI community is mentioned throughout the book. He first arrives there in chapter 15, but keeps dangling it as a future attraction to encourage the reader to stay with the book and not jump ship during his long-winded passages. A doctor he talks to on the phone says:

I'm dying to hear about it. . . It's got this huge mystery to it. We all know of Snowflake, but I have yet to actually meet a human who's been to Snowflake (ch 9).

There is no shortage of opinions about the Snowflake community on social media. He quotes several people who have never even been there.

One person said it was like Hiroshima after the nuclear bomb. Another said people there stored their cell phones three feet underground. A third person admonished Broudy not to write about Snowflake as she believed it would make the milder cases of EI look bad.

Another person who'd never been to Snowflake said:

It's a strange community. . . There's all this jealousy and infighting. And the people there really seem almost obsessed with toxicity. . . (ch 19)

All of these statements are ridiculous.

To be even more sensational, Broudy states:

Suicides happen as often as twice a year in Snowflake. . . (ch 7)

In actuality, there have been a total of three suicides since the start in 1988. Two of them happened the same year (Molloy 2020). Technically, Broudy is right, but what a loaded and misleading statement to make.

Visiting Snowflake

Broudy expressed a lot of concern about a coal-fired powerplant they passed. He wondered why the EIs would live there. The plant is actually 35 miles (55 km) from the EI neighborhood and is rarely upwind. This shows Broudy himself is prone to the illusion that a big menacing smokestack far away seems much more dangerous than all the small sources nearby that actually are more problematic.

He is also concerned about the wildfires in the Southwest. They are certainly a problem, but not for daily living. Absent in his description are all the myriad problems that are absent in Snowflake.

He finds a detailed description of how many of the Snowflake houses are built to make them usable for people with severe EI. He summarizes it well and then comments:

The endlessly detailed specifications put you in the mind of a child fussily preparing for sleep: arranging all the stuffed animals, dictating how far the blinds should be lowered, which lights are left on, how much the door is left open . . . It is this hypervigilant behavior that led some critics to dismiss EI as nothing more than a baroque form of PTSD. . . (ch 13)

He never considers that the people who build these houses all have tried more regular housing and were not able to live in them. These houses worked. They made a much more normal life possible. Some people skimmed on the protocol and were not able to live in their new house. Broudy glibly thinks he knows better than decades of trial and error.

Broudy's visit to Snowflake is an anticlimax. He sees little of the community and says little about it beyond what the landscape looks like. To this city-person it appears that the landscape is empty, despite he is in a walkable neighborhood. He also shows no interest in how the houses are built.

The community saw a lot of media attacks earlier that year and people were reluctant to talk to another journalist. On the logic that if Broudy didn't talk to anyone he might distort reality even more, three people agreed to meet him. One of them had actual training in handling the media.

Broudy arrived stinky, like virtually all travelers do, so they had to meet outside and keep some distance.

Their skepticism was obvious to Broudy. He remarked that one of the three people had "eyes on me like a rifle on a prairie dog."

Here was his chance to really learn something about what he was writing about, but his focus was on their personalities as he perceived them. He was surprised how different they were from each other and didn't fit into his expected stereotypes.

In one of his swings to the "maybe they are not nuts after all" he writes:

It was as if I'd arrived from some grotesquely rich country at the doorstep of its impoverished enemy, begging to defect. Who would believe it? And yet the longer I talked, the more I felt like theirs was the side I wanted to be on. Out there in the desert with the outcasts who seemed to share a deep, unspoken understanding with each other. (ch 15)

For somebody who came from a big city, rural living in the desert was a big change. Broudy seemed culture shocked:

I was fascinated to see what a community of true apostates looked like. Folks who truly had cut loose from the mother ship and renounced the regime of pleasure and convenience that held the rest of us captive. (ch 7)

What Broudy fails to really understand is that Snowflake offers a place where people with severe environmental illness can live a more normal life than almost anywhere else. They can enjoy the outside without getting sick from toxic chemicals drifting in from their neighbor's use of dryer sheets, lawn chemicals, paint, etc. They can go visit their neighbors without the awkwardness, suspicion and health effects from visiting people living the chemical lifestyle. People in Snowflake do not have to live in social isolation with only the shallowness of social media for company.

This is huge, but he just spends one paragraph on it, where he paraphrases one of the Snowflake people. He clearly does not understand the importance of it.

Yes, there are no Whole Foods, Starbucks or Broadway theater just around the corner, but there are so many other advantages that are much more important.

Focus on personality

Broudy focuses on people's personalities more than anything else. That clearly interests him, and sometimes he says he believes EI is legit because of the personalities he met (before seesawing again, of course).

About the people in Snowflake he says:

The diversity of their characters and temperaments made it even more difficult to imagine how EI could be purely psychological. It's not as if they were all anxious, or shirkers, or dying for attention. In fact they were about as different as people could be. (ch 15)

He does great injustice to one of the people he met in Snowflake, Scott, whom he incessantly snipes at, and projects his stereotypes on. This reviewer has known Scott for 14 years and sees him regularly. At the interview Scott was very conscious that he was meeting with the media that had recently caused much harm to the community and wanted to be sure he didn't say anything that could be twisted and misused for sensational purposes.

Broudy's portrayal of James is also unfair, according to people who know him. At the time James was a newbie to a difficult illness, with apparent neurological symptoms, which all was incomprehensible to an outsider like Broudy.

Filler

When Broudy travelled around Arizona in 2016, he told people he was working on an article for *GQ* magazine. Apparently he could not interest any magazine in his article. As the years went by, he apparently decided to make it into a book. Publishers do not like thin books and he obviously did not have enough material, so there is a lot of filler.

He spends a lot of words describing the gorgeous landscapes with beautiful flowing prose. That's fine, but do we need to hear about the dog food factory in Flagstaff? Or the painfully long story of insuring risk, starting with the first policy that was written on February 20, 1543 to insure a ship sailing from Pisa to Sicily? Or that about quackery two hundred years ago?

The most long-winded and tedious parts are about what long-dead philosophers like Descartes, Husserl, Heidegger, Bertalanffy and others thought long ago. Very tedious and pointless reading.

There are more than three pages of references for his discussion of wildfires in the Southwest. This all gives an impression that this is a deeply researched book on the topic of environmental illness. But a lot is left out or are just opinions.

Windshield tourism

Much of this book is really windshield tourism, where he just skims the surface while hurrying on to the next sensational sight.

He claims that people with environmental illness call themselves “the sensitives” and makes it the title of his book. This name is constructed by media, and not what they call themselves. Many hate this imposed moniker, since it downplays the impact of the illness. It’s a wimpy term created by outsiders. The term is used, but not in the way Broudy uses it.

A reader new to this topic is left wondering what all the fuss is about. Everybody is “sensitive” to something such as allergies, which is easily fixable with a pill, they think. Are these so-called “sensitives” not just neurotic wimps?

The book does little to fill that void. Little to make a reader understand the impact of this illness. Little to explain that people with EI face a hostile world, but goes out into it anyway and the bravery it sometimes takes. Nothing about what it is like to have to constantly dodge the invisible chemical cloud surrounding most people – including Broudy himself.

The best we get is when our travelers stay at a motel in outback Utah and James tries to make it work before giving up and spending the rest of the night in his car. Another good part is Scott’s brief story in chapter 15. This barely scratches the surface, though Broudy does provide this astute observation from his Facebook readings:

Reading these threads, which sometimes topped a thousand comments, you began to get a sense of how much energy sensitives spent trying to achieve the homeostasis that most of us took for granted. It left you feeling that the greatest gift of all is not having to pay much attention to yourself. (ch 7)

Broudy obviously loves books, but there is zero about the authors who have the illness themselves and write about what that is like. Authors like Gail McCormick, Jacob Berkson, Jerry Evans, Alison Johnson, Diana Crumpler and Kate Grenville. Or film maker Susan Abod. Or the musicians Kim Palmer and Treasha deFrance.

He also doesn't use descriptions from researchers who document the impact of the illness, such as: Steve Kroll-Smith, Pamela Gibson, Anna Söderholm and Juliene Lipson.

Instead of these more mainstream EI sources, Broudy goes for the exceptional and sensational, like the woman who yanked out a tooth to avoid going to the dentist and who didn't wash her bedding for nine years. Or the guy who strangely believes he somehow contaminates the soil if he camps in the same spot two nights in a row.

His choices of the main characters for the book, James and Brian, also seem sensational, especially Brian who camps like a hermit in the deep woods behind the Grand Canyon.

He doesn't inform the reader that the severely ill EIs – those he interviews – comprise just about 3% of the overall EI population (Berg 2008; Kreutzer 1999).

Three times (ch 5, 13 and 23) he brings out the claim, much promoted by the chemical industry in the 1990s, that EI is caused by childhood abuse. This idea comes from a small 1993 study by Herman Staudenmayer – one of the most vocal deniers of EI. Broudy does not mention that this idea was repudiated in 2007 by a team of German psychiatrists – much to their own chagrin (Bailer 2007).

Largely absent is anything about the efforts by powerful special interests to deny and discredit the legitimacy of environmental illness. An effort that has been very successful with major consequences, including preventing funding for medical research (McCampbell 2001; Meggs 2017).

Broudy's style is like someone who writes a book about journalism, and only covers journalists who write for tabloids, so the reader gets the impression that is all journalism is about.

The medical system

Broudy is no fan of mainstream medicine and he takes a lot of satisfying potshots at them and their trouble dealing with EI patients:

Nothing made doctors grumpier than unexplained symptoms. Because medically unexplained symptoms made them feel helpless. The easiest way clear of that helplessness was to blame the patient. (ch 5)

And this more philosophical comment:

. . . dismissing EI because it couldn't be explained implied that it was only possible to suffer from that which was already understood. In which case there was a great deal to be said for ignorance. (ch 12)

He touches upon the decades-long trench warfare between the scientists who believe EI is all psychological and those who accept EI as genuine, and contends:

If the debate around EI revealed anything, it was just how much skill and dedication being ignorant required. (ch 5)

He also seems to understand that when EI patients (and those with other incurable illnesses) get no help from mainstream medicine, they try alternative medicine. But he is no fan of alternative medicine. In the book's index the entry for "quackery" refers the reader to "alternative medicine."

He disparages most doctors who try to help the EIs, especially Dr. William Rea who died in 2018. Here he launches a vicious attack on a person who has done more to help the EIs than anybody else, and who was willing to keep experimenting where few others cared. That included trying radically new things.

Rea was a clinician and focused on helping the patients who sought his help. He did not have a big research budget and offered what treatments seemed to help some people. Funding for EI research is nearly non-existent because of the stigma (Meggs 2017). A stigma Broudy propagates.

Broudy makes much of Dr. Rea's allergy shot for "the north wind." This reviewer has actually met the person it was made for. It is not the nefarious fraud Broudy portrays it as. The woman simply felt bad whenever the wind came from the north, but didn't know what was carried in on the wind in terms of pollen or other incitants. So Rea used a specialized air sampler to gather what the wind carried and made a shot out of it. He has done several similar attempts.

Broudy even attacks Rea's credentials:

. . . given his lack of formal training in allergies, toxicology, or genetics, it was doubtful that Rea was even qualified to practice. The only board-recognized training he had had was in thoracic surgery. (ch 18)

If Broudy had looked up Rea's curriculum vitae (available on the web) he would have found four board certifications, 145 research articles, 9 medical fellowships and much else.

Bottom Line

A six-day road trip and a lot of roaming on the web does not make an expert. Broudy really should have gotten some feedback on his manuscript from someone who has a long and deep understanding of the world he is trying to write about.

It is difficult to see an audience for this book. The distortions, the reliance on low-quality sources, the sensationalism and Broudy's opinionated style makes the book unusable as an educational resource. It is not a book people in the EI community would enjoy reading – who wants to be insulted on every third page with insidious accusations that people with this illness are crazy or neurotic? Much of the book could be read for entertainment, but all the fillers are a tedious deterrent.

About the reviewer

This reviewer has lived in the Snowflake area for well over a decade and knows four of the EI patients Oliver Broudy interviewed. I declined Broudy's request for an interview since he said he got interested in the Snowflake community after reading the attack-piece in *The Guardian*.

References

- Bailer, Josef et al. Trauma experience in individuals with idiopathic environmental intolerance and individuals with somatoform disorders, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 63, 657-661, 2007.
- Berg, Nikolaj et al. Prevalence of self-reported symptoms and consequences related to inhalation of airborne chemicals in a Danish general population, *International Archives of Occupational Health*, 81, 881-887, 2008.
- Broudy, Oliver. *The Sensitives: the rise of environmental illness and the search for America's last pure place*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Kreutzer, Richard et al. Prevalence of people reporting sensitivities to chemicals in a population-based survey, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 150, July 1, 1999.
- McCampbell, Ann. Multiple chemical sensitivities under siege, *Townsend Letter for Doctors and Patients*, January 2001.
- Molloy, Susan. Has lived in the Snowflake community since 1992. Personal communication, 2020.
- Meggs, William. History of the rise and fall of environmental medicine in the United States, *Ecopsychology*, 9, June 2017.
- Randolph, Theron and Ralph Moss. *An alternative approach to allergies (revised)*, New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

More Information

Reviews of other books and films about environmental illness are available at www.eiwellspring.org/booksandreviews.html.

2020