



## ARTS AND LITERATURE & NATURE (ALAN)

Stories reach us in diverse forms. In this issue, ALAN contributors bring readers on a journey of place, senses, and curiosity. The *Banshees of Inisherin*, reviewed by Lind Grant-Oyeye, is a movie set in Ireland on a backdrop of green fields and rural ambiance. The film is a tale of two old friends in the middle of a conflict that defies reason. Grant-Oyeye, at the time of acceptance for publication, predicted a successful award season for the movie. Through nature photography, Peter Braunberger invites us to share his love for nature with his photo titled, “Another world at the foot of the great trees of the Carolinian forest. Lina Anang reviews “Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories that Make Us” by Rachel Aviv. In Aviv’s book, mental illness is discussed from the perspective of individuals with lived experiences of mental illness.

Finally, I invite JACAP readers to submit reviews of movies, books, and other art forms for forthcoming issues.

*Lind Grant-Oyeye*

### A Review of The Banshees of Inisherin

#### **Recommended by Lind Grant-Oyeye**

*The Banshees of Inisherin* is a 2022 dark tragicomedy movie that has received several high-profile reviews in magazines such as the *New Yorker* (1).

Brendan Griffin plays Colm, a fiddle musician, and Colin Farrell plays Padraic, a dairy farmer. The movie is set in a fictional rural Irish town and unfolds on a background of rugged pathways, greenery, sea, and rock fences. The film alludes to, and sometimes directly references, the Irish civil

war, which occurred after the battle of independence. The metaphoric presentation of the seemingly senseless conflict between Padraic and Colm allows the viewer to reflect on the purposelessness of wars.

Colm has built a close relationship with Padraic over time but suddenly stops talking to him. Colm goes as far as threatening to cut off his own fingers one by one should Padraic ignore his demand to be left alone. Viewers are left to ponder the seriousness of the threat, given that Colm is a fiddle player whose fingers are essential to his art. At various points in the movie, Colm clarifies that he has cut off Padraic, not because of any specific ill act towards him, but because “I just don’t like you anymore.” He describes Padraic as dim someone, who rambles about meaningless things and wastes time. Their conflict weaves through different turns, with fellow Inisherin dwellers weighing in. Whether Colm follows through with his threat to self-mutilate is revealed later in the movie.

While most reviews focus on the main characters, my interest was piqued by Dominic, a young adult whose own story raises questions about society’s reception of individuals perceived to function outside the social norm of their community. Dominic suffers abuse at the hands of his policeman father and, on one occasion, seeks refuge in the home Padraic shares with his sister. Others somewhat ostracize Dominic in the community who are intolerant of his awkward skills compared to Padraic. Dominic, however, also demonstrates at various moments through the movie a deep understanding of characters and personalities. For example, he confronts Padraic on one occasion for what he deems an insensitive prank on an emotionally vulnerable individual.

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The movie spotlights the conflictual aspects of Colm and Padraic's relationship while drawing parallels to Dominic's emotional journey. Dark humor is liberally employed throughout the movie, and some scenes may trigger a tear or two from the viewer. For example, Dominic's seaside interaction with Siobhan, Padraic's sister, has some emotionally charged moments.

The movie reminds me of the Irish pastoral literary era in the creative use of mundane rural life to tell a powerful story. Considering the sophisticated use of literary tools, the human aspect of the sub-plots, and the unique humor style, I join other reviewers who believe that *The Banshee of Inisherin* movie should perform well in significant movie awards.

Dr. Lind Grant-oyeye is a child & adolescent psychiatrist based in New Brunswick.

## References

1. Lane, A. (2022, October 14). *Whimsy and violence in "The banshees of inisherin"*. The New Yorker. Retrieved February 25, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/10/24/whimsy-and-violence-in-the-banshees-of-inisherin>

## **Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories that Make Us** by Rachel Aviv (2022)

### **Reviewed by Polina Anang**

Rachel Aviv's first book, *Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories that Make Us*, begins with her own journey, as a 6-year-old being separated from her parents and admitted to an inpatient psychiatric unit with "Anorexia". Would we call it ARFID in today's DSM-5 jargon? Nonetheless, Aviv narrates her own, as well as five other stories, to teach us how little we know about people when we know what they were diagnosed with. *Strangers to Ourselves* challenges our psychiatric training, a reminder of how much humanity is lost when we teach that people with REAL pain, warmth, passion and creativity can be fully captured by DSM-5 categories. Are we in the business of identifying illness or hearing convoluted gut-wrenching stories? Aviv uses journal entries, poems, essays, prayers,

and interviews with family members to tell the exuberant and terrifying life stories of Ray, Bapu, Naomi, Laura, and Hava. Sometimes she quotes their psychiatric records. Realizing that it could have been me reducing a talented multifaceted sparkly character into routine terms of mental status exam made me physically uncomfortable.

Aviv acknowledges that she is not trained in medicine or in psychology. She is a journalist, and her writing is haunting. She knows how to take your breath away, and how to allow the silence to set in to give you space to read between the lines. Ray could be read as a story of how our children might understand us better than we understand ourselves. Bapu is a story of cultural humility. Naomi teaches us about intergenerational trauma, power imbalance, social injustice, and how easy it is to misuse psychiatry as a punitive instrument of the state: *"Thirteen years earlier, she couldn't meet the legal bar for insanity, but now she was deemed ill enough to be indefinitely detained"* (p. 170). Laura has been featured in a New Yorker article on how little thought we as prescribers give to stopping psychiatric medication. The chapter on Laura's story takes a sharp U-turn and explores what attracts young people to building their identity around mental health struggles. Hava follows suit with painstaking details of how much of her life story was dedicated to documenting her struggles with anorexia nervosa. Aviv, who looked up to Hava during their shared time as inpatients, contemplates how easily her story could have unfolded in parallel, with recurrent admissions, relapses, and symptoms of anorexia taking over her life. While mourning the loss of her friend, Aviv invites us to reflect on the ambiguity inherent to our profession as the art of story telling: *"There are stories that save us, and stories that trap us, and in the midst of an illness it can be very hard to know which is which"* (p. 24).

Some of us will have the courage to explore our own vulnerabilities; others will choose the safety of categorical DSM-5 boxes and medication options. No matter where you fall on that spectrum, reading *Strangers to Ourselves* will be a good way to exercise compassionate self-care.

Dr. Polina Anang is a child and adolescent psychiatrist based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and a community psychiatrist in Nauyasat, Nunavut.

## Another world at the foot of the great trees of the Carolinian forest



Photo Credit: Peter Braunberger

Dr. Peter Braunberger is a child and adolescent psychiatrist based in Penetanguishene, Ontario.