

Book review



The Woman Who Cracked the Anxiety Code

The extraordinary life of Dr Claire Weekes

Category: Book Reviews / Non-fiction

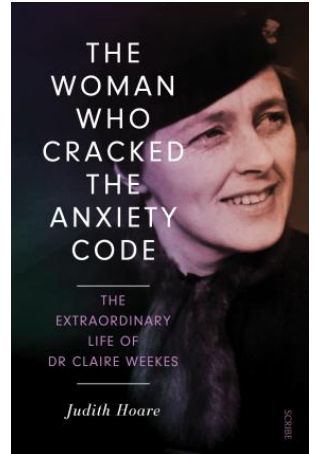
Author: Judith Hoare

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Audience: For Community



Summary: Biography of a pioneer in the treatment of anxiety and panic disorder

The Woman Who Cracked the Anxiety Code is a comprehensive and fascinating biography of Dr Claire Weekes, the Australian doctor who built a self-help empire with her bestsellers *Self-Help for your Nerves* (1962), *Peace from Nervous Suffering* (1972) and *Simple Effective Treatment of Agoraphobia* (1976). The book traces Dr Weekes' life from her birth in Sydney in 1903 all the way to her death in 1990: a life that encompassed almost 100 years of tremendous change – for women, for science, for psychiatry, and for the world as a whole.

We learn about Dr Weekes' upbringing in a pretty Sydney suburb in a tumultuous family to her time as one of the first women to study science (biology) at an Australian university and work as a serious researcher and scientist. We find out about her own period of ill health, a suspected bout of tuberculosis with treatment in a sanatorium, and the subsequent development of her anxiety disorder. We are there when Dr Weekes makes her breakthrough, based on advice of a friend who had been a soldier in the trenches of WWI and was well familiar with fear. And we read about the revolutionary development of her treatment protocol for anxiety and panic attacks, which she made available to patients all around the world directly through her books.

Claire Weekes had a fascinating life – bicycling through Europe with a girlfriend in the 1930s, frequently changing her career in unexpected ways from science to music to travel to medicine, living with a woman and forging her own path throughout. The book is strongest where it traces Weekes' development of her treatment for anxiety and her understanding of the mind-body connection. Decades before the West would be introduced to an Eastern understanding of "letting go" and "acceptance", Weekes developed her own ideas about accepting the fear, experiencing it, but letting it pass. Her mantra was "face, accept, float, let time pass", and this has helped thousands of patients around the world now for decades.

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Claire Weekes was a medical doctor, not a psychiatrist, and she was forever an outsider in the world of psychiatry. Even as the popularity of her books grew, and many testified to the usefulness of her method, psychiatry on the whole did not take her seriously. She came from a perspective of really listening to the patient and their experience – and in fact did so, often for hours, on the phone with patients from around the world. She was not on board with contemporary approaches to psychiatry, such as the ever-more-detailed labelling of different disorders (all fear was just fear to her) or the development of pharmaceuticals for anxiety. But what was most revolutionary was that she did promise patients that they could get well – even speaking the word “cure”, which was seen as a no-no by psychiatry as a whole. Instead, Dr Weekes’ biggest supporters for decades were the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, American TV talk shows and BBC interview shows – and this is how she became a household name in the English-speaking world and beyond.

The *Woman Who Cracked the Anxiety Code* does not hold back on telling us all about some unsavoury aspects of Claire’s biography, such as the issues with her family and business partners, and as a reader I would have preferred a much more stringent approach to editing! Judith Hoare obviously put a lot of time and effort into her research, and one feels that every scrap of information gleaned made it into the book – even if of questionable value to the reader. But if you are willing to put up with a bit more personal gossip than was necessary, this book will give fascinating insights into a pioneer in the worlds of science, publishing, and the world of self-help.

Reviewed by Zooey Neumann, Publications Coordinator, Mental Health Foundation

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