

Reading Group Guide

1. Discuss the book's title. Does the term "the great pretender" change meaning for you over the course of the book, and if so, how? What different things does it represent to you by the end of the book versus the beginning?
2. In chapter 1, Susannah encounters a woman whose disease was similar to her own, but her fate was drastically different. She begins to refer to her as her "mirror image." How does this figure—and the author's awareness of her background presence—help shape the rest of the book? What would such a person look like in your own life?
3. Why do you think "On Being Sane in Insane Places" hit such a nerve in American culture in 1973, and caused such a sea change in the history of psychiatry? How was it different from the work done by Nellie Bly and other brave pseudopatients and reporters in previous decades?
4. Try to imagine what mental health care in this country would look like now if Rosenhan had never published his work. Would we be in a better place? A worse one? Why?
5. Dr. Levy described Susannah as a ninth pseudopatient. In what ways do you feel that Susannah fills this role in the book?
6. The central mystery of the book propels Susannah down a number of rabbit holes, and to a frustrating series of dead ends, before she discovers the truth. Once she does, she realizes that the answer has been staring her in the face the whole time. How did you feel about this revelation? Have you had any experiences in your own life that have been similarly surprising?
7. From the beginning, psychiatry has struggled with identifying the divide between the body and the mind, between the biological and the psychological, between the "real" and the idea that something is "all in your head." Do you agree that this line needs to be drawn, and if so, where would you draw it and why? Is there a better system of diagnosis than the one we have currently?
8. If you had to write policy for revamping the mental health care system in this country, what would you tackle first? What approach do you feel is the most likely to succeed long term?
9. What was the most exciting, dramatic twist, or piece of evidence, that stuck with you over the course of the book?
10. Susannah describes herself as in awe of Dr. Rosenhan, early in the book, and her drive to understand his study is fueled by her admiration for him; his students frequently describe him as "charismatic" and "charming." But of course, the secrets she uncovers considerably complicate her—and our—portrait of him as a man and a scientist. Have you had any experiences in your own personal or professional life with the fall of a hero, someone you admired who, in one way or another, failed to live up to your expectations? Discuss.

11. If you were Rosenhan's student and he recruited you to participate as a pseudopatient in the study, would you have done it? Why or why not?

A Q&A with Susannah Cahalan

1. **What drew you to this topic? Did you go looking for such an explosive story, or was it luck?**

It started from a highly personal place. When I first read David Rosenhan's study, his experience with depersonalization and labeling rang so true to my own experience. But chancing upon that explosive story (as you describe it!) was total luck. When I was writing the book, I didn't see these issues as a positive thing for the narrative—I worried that this book was done with!

2. **Why do you feel it is important or urgent for readers to be discussing Rosenhan and his work?**

Even though Rosenhan's study is now almost fifty years old, so many of the questions that he raises in it—how to distinguish “sanity” from “insanity,” how to treat serious mental illness, the role of context in diagnosis—have remained with us. Rosenhan's study crystalizes the importance of asking these questions and the importance of being honest and open about the limitations in answering them.

3. **What was your favorite part of researching the book? Of writing it? What was the biggest surprise?**

I had such a joyous time writing this book—mostly because of the extraordinary people I met—among them David’s close friend and confidant Florence Keller and his son, Jack Rosenhan, both of whom are now close friends. I loved mining Rosenhan’s personal files and getting access to his mind. I loved learning about the history and digging through archives. And I loved discussing these impossible topics with some great thinkers. The whole experience, as difficult and dark at times as it was, was such a gift.

4. **You were a journalist before you were a bestselling memoirist. In what ways do you think *Brain on Fire* influenced your writing of *The Great Pretender*? Would this be a different book if you were just coming in as a pure outsider, a journalist curious about the mysteries Rosenhan left behind?**

Brain on Fire touched every page of this book. The Great Pretender is not only informed by my experience with misdiagnosis; it’s also a reaction to the reader responses and my own shifting views on what happened to me. Without the experiences chronicled in my memoir, I would not have been able to write the book as it stands. Even though most of the book is not about me, my interests, my fears, my obsessions are all over the narrative.

5. **What do you want readers to take away from the book?**

I hope that this book raises questions that you may feel more comfortable discussing, even if you don’t (and you won’t) have all the answers. I hope that it provides an education and that it gives some insight into the terrible ways we’ve dealt with these issues in the past. I hope that the book both makes you more skeptical about modern

medicine and mental health care but also more optimistic. I hope that people who live with serious mental illness or people who have family members or friends who do, walk away with a deeper understanding of our shared history—a history we need to fully understand if we expect to move forward.

6. What three books would you recommend to readers interested in learning more?

This is a tough one! There were so many books that informed my thinking (check out the notes for a full list). I particularly love Ron Powers's No One Cares About Crazy People which is rallying cry in the form of a deeply moving memoir. I found Andrew Scull's Madness in Civilization indispensable. And although I wasn't lucky enough to read this miraculous book when I wrote The Great Pretender I highly recommend Esme Wang's The Collected Schizophrenias to anyone interested in hearing a gorgeous writer discuss what it's like to live with a serious mental illness.