So You've Been Publicly Shamed

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JON RONSON

Jon Ronson was born in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, and lived there for most of his youth before moving to London to study media. A journalist who frequently weaves his own voice and experiences into his narratives, Ronson has written books on a wide-ranging series of topics, from religious extremism and conspiracy theories to the psychology of psychopathy to how social media impacts contemporary life. He is a regular contributor to the *Guardian* and to the NPR program *This American Life*. Ronson's work has frequently been adapted for the screen—the 2014 movie *Frank* and the 2009 film *The Men Who Stare at Goats* are based on his books. Ronson is also the co-writer of the screenplay for the 2017 movie *Okja*. Ronson lives in Upstate New York with his family—he is a dual citizen of the U.S. and the U.K.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

So You've Been Publicly Shamed was written between 2013 and 2015, and it mentions (or covers in-depth) many real-world and social media scandals, as well as political and human rights issues that are still relevant today. The social media shamings of Justine Sacco and Lindsey Stone are two of the social media snafus Ronson covers—but he also ties these women's stories in with larger narratives about power and who gets to be the arbiter of shame in the modern world. The book discusses Mike Hubacek's 1996 drunk driving case in Houston, Texas; the 2013 discovery of a brothel being run out of a Zumba studio in Maine; and the 2012 scandal that rocked the New York media world: the discovery of journalist Jonah Lehrer's long history of plagiarizing or fabricating his work.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Jon Ronson's other books (such as *Them: Adventures with Extremists* and *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry*) see Ronson essentially become a character in his own story. Other famous works of journalism that are written in this way include Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, David Foster Wallace's *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, and the work of journalists Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese. *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* is also a unique piece of journalism in that it reckons with how social media is changing the ways that people talk to and interact with each other. Other recent titles that examine social media include Richard Seymour's *The Twittering Machine* and Nick Bilton's *Hatching Twitter: A True Story of Money, Power, Friendship, and Betrayal*. Jon Ronson also invokes Nathanial Hawthorne's classic story of shame in a small Puritan town, *The Scarlet Letter*, throughout the book.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*
- **When Written:** Roughly between 2013 and 2015
- **When Published:** March 31, 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary journalism
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, reportage, cultural criticism
- **Setting:** London, England; New York, NY; Los Angeles, CA; Kennebunk, ME; New Jersey
- **Climax:** A media firm specializing in reputation management helps Lindsey Stone beat Google's algorithm and suppress the negative search results associated with her name
- **Antagonist:** Shame
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Policies in Place. Since 2015, when Ronson's book was published, Twitter and many other social media sites have taken measures against hateful language and threats of violence. The internet's role in contemporary free speech is always a fraught one, but many activists and experts have begun to examine more closely the relationship between online hate speech and real-world violence.

PLOT SUMMARY

After a researcher at the University of Warwick created a spambot that splices and recycles content from journalist Jon Ronson's **Twitter** to humiliating effect, Ronson sets out to investigate the internet as a place where contemporary versions of old-fashioned public shamings unfold. An avid internet user, Ronson believes that social media has become a place where people are made to feel "powerless and sullied" for transgressions both major and minor. In the 18th and 19th centuries, public shamings were sanctioned by a court or church, governed by specific processes, and carried out in a town's public square. Now, shamings are less of a "process" and far more chaotic—and thus, in a way, even more humiliating and dangerous.

Ronson begins the book in familiar territory: the literary world. He tells the story of the writer Jonah Lehrer, who was publicly shamed in 2012 after a fellow journalist, Michael Moynihan, uncovered fabrications in one of Lehrer's bestsellers. Lehrer

was excoriated across the internet. Desperate to redeem his image, he attended a luncheon for the Knight Foundation, an American nonprofit that that funds journalism grants, and delivered a public apology in front of a screen broadcasting a livestream of tweets responding to the address. Some readers were ready to forgive Lehrer—but others called him a "sociopath" and maintained that his career was toast. When it was discovered that Lehrer received a $20,000 speaking fee for appearing at the luncheon, the internet turned against him once again.

Ronson also shares the story of Justine Sacco, a New York PR executive who was torn apart by the internet after she tweeted a joke ("*Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!*") that was meant to lampoon American ignorance and exceptionalism. But the tweet's poor wording (and, Ronson thinks, the internet's thirst for a scandal) meant that Sacco was immediately brutally shamed. Ronson found Sacco's story to be an example of a person misusing their privilege—and the internet responding to the transgression with an all-out attempt to destroy that person's life.

As the book continues, Ronson investigates where the impulse to publicly shame someone comes from. Through the story of "Hank" and a woman named Adria Richards, Ronson illustrates that many people participate in pile-ons because they think they're doing something good. When Adria Richards called Hank out on the internet for making lewd puns in the audience of a presentation at a tech conference, the internet attacked Hank so virulently that he lost his job. But once he did, men's rights activists on platforms like 4chan began assaulting Adria Richards with threats of violence, rape, and murder. She, too, lost her job—a casualty of the ever-escalating, game-like nature of remote internet shamings.

Inspired by the story of Max Mosley—a British socialite who survived a public shaming after a tabloid printed pictures of Mosley at a German-themed orgy—Ronson sets out to see if there is such a thing as a "shame-free paradise." Ronson is hopeful he'll be able to interview Mosley about how he made it through his shaming, but Mosley himself has no idea how he made it through and resisted shame.

Ronson attends a public-shaming-themed porn shoot where the participants seek to free themselves from shame by embracing fantasy. He then joins a self-help group dedicated to using the concept of Radical Honesty to eradicate shame by embracing the truth. He interviews Mike Daisey, a theatrical monologist who fabricated parts of his one-man show about worker abuses in Apple factories in China, and who salvaged his reputation by leaning into the error of his ways—and the good intent behind that error. By actively working to reject feelings of shame, Ronson begins to believe, people might be able to avoid the effects of public shamings entirely.

But the road to eradicating shame often proves more difficult than just rejecting feelings of ashamedness. People like Lindsey Stone, who had a satirical photograph of herself go viral and subsequently lost her job, feel haunted by their Google search results. Some people who acted out of shame—like prison inmates who committed crimes to combat the numbness inspired by painful pasts—became trapped in cycles of violence. Ronson visits a prison to witness how unhelpful incarceration is in mitigating shame, and he secures Lindsey Stone the help of a service that promises to help her manipulate Google search results and rehabilitate her online reputation.

Ronson ultimately determines that feedback loops—psychological phenomena in which people find that they're incentivized to repeat behavior that is instantaneously rewarded—are at the heart of uncontrollable social media frenzies. While tech professionals believed that the internet was a "new kind of democracy," Ronson comes to believe that echo chambers and feedback loops are only tearing down anyone who existed outside of what was considered normal and acceptable.

In an afterword written for the paperback edition of the book, Ronson recounts the difficulty of publishing a book about public shamings at the height of contemporary public shamings. Ronson faced readers who tweeted out lines from uncorrected advance reading copies—lines he cut from the published version—and audience members who heckled him at his readings. More sensitive to public shamings than ever, Ronson spoke up online to defend the maligned Rachel Dolezal in June of 2015—and he himself was shamed for sharing his opinion.

Ronson concludes that he remains hopeful that social media will be used as a tool to call out true abuses of power like police brutality. But he also admits his fear that the medium is ultimately too dismissive of nuance and too encouraging of sameness and homogeny. He urges his readers to ensure that the world isn't turned into one in which being "voiceless" is the simplest way to survive.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jon Ronson – In *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, British-American journalist Jon Ronson sets out to unravel the history of public shamings, focusing on interview subjects in the U.S. and Britain alike. An avid internet user who, in the early 2010s, found himself perturbed by his own desire to participate in **Twitter** shamings, Ronson looks to instances of public shaming in the literary world, the tech world, and in ordinary slices of suburbia to explore why a well-intentioned attempt to call out a wrongdoing can spin so quickly out of control. Ronson often inserts himself into the book as a character, using his own thoughts and opinions as a jumping-off point for a deeper reckoning with contemporary shamings. He carefully examines his own preconceived notions about shame, groupthink, and

the uses of the internet as he conducts interviews with people from all walks of life—4chan users, porn actors, British socialites, American politicians, and renowned psychological experts—to get to the bottom of what really drives attempts to publicly shame people. Ronson's narration is quippy and lighthearted, yet his work becomes gravely serious as he draws connections between shame, violence, misogyny, and cycles of abuse. Ronson's dislike of his own propensity to draw moral lines leads him to a deeper investigation of the "gray areas" that all humans inhabit. In Ronson's estimation, a culture centered around thirst for public shamings will always suffer: until humanity can accept the messiness that defines us and reject the concept of shame entirely, we will never be able to live authentically.

Jonah Lehrer – Jonah Lehrer is a writer and journalist who was publicly shamed in 2012 when the journalist Michael Moynihan exposed a series of fabrications and embellishments in Lehrer's nonfiction bestseller *Imagine: How Creativity Works*. Though Lehrer begged Moynihan not to publish the article exposing him, Moynihan felt a journalistic responsibility to call out Lehrer's malfeasance. Following the publication of the article, Lehrer resigned from his position at the *New Yorker* and watched as his publisher withdrew and destroyed every copy of *Imagine* still in circulation. Lehrer vanished from the literary scene—but months later, he decided to give a public apology at a Knight Foundation luncheon for journalists in front of a screen broadcasting a live **Twitter** feed of users responding in real-time to his address. The speech didn't go over well—and when it was revealed that Lehrer received a $20,000 speaking fee for the apology, he was again shamed mercilessly. Lehrer shopped a new book proposal around afterwards, but the proposal leaked, and it was found to contain plagiarized and recycled language. Jon Ronson uses the account of Lehrer's repeated missteps and serious public shamings to illustrate how people who have been shamed often find that the emotional weight of the "public shaming process" numbs them to the point of appearing disaffected or even sociopathic, as Lehrer's most virulent detractors called him at the height of his shaming.

Michael Moynihan – Michael Moynihan is a New York-based writer and journalist. His 2012 article in *Tablet* magazine about Jonah Lehrer's plagiarism in his book *Imagine: How Creativity Works* led to Lehrer's intense, merciless online public shaming. At the time, Moynihan was a struggling blogger who needed a scoop when he found himself questioning the veracity of certain quotations in a pivotal section of Lehrer's book centered around musician Bob Dylan. Moynihan's fact-checking led him to discover that Lehrer had embellished the wording of several Dylan quotes. Moynihan described himself to Jon Ronson as a "schlub" who was just doing his job. He claimed to feel bad about doing journalism that could hurt Lehrer's career—until he realized that Lehrer, a well-to-do former Rhodes scholar, lived in a two-million-dollar home in Los Angeles. Moynihan expresses no pride about his role in Lehrer's public shaming, but he believes that shaming a transgressor or wrongdoer is sometimes necessary.

Justine Sacco – Justine Sacco is a former PR executive who was publicly shamed after she tweeted a satirical but insensitive joke about white privilege. When Sacco tweeted "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" just before her plane took off, she thought that her relatively small group of **Twitter** follows would pick up on the fact that she was satirizing white Americans' sense of privilege and isolation from the problems of developing nations. Instead, over the course of Sacco's 11-hour flight from Europe to Cape Town, her tweet went viral—and millions of people began calling for her to lose her job and suffer consequences for what they believed was a tweet made in earnest. Sacco later lost her job, and over the course of the last ten days of December 2013, she was googled 1,220,000 times. Sacco's name became synonymous with contemporary Twitter shamings, and many claimed that her Twitter infamy "destroyed" her life. But Jon Ronson uses Sacco's story to illustrate the pettiness, cruelty, and misplaced intents of the internet mobs that seek to punish people like Justine who are perceived to misuse their privilege. Sacco's story is central to the plot of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, and while Ronson alleges that her tweet was ill-advised and unfunny, he defends her as a victim of the feedback loops and mob mentality that make the internet such a volatile place for contemporary users.

Lindsey Stone – Lindsey Stone is a woman who was publicly shamed on the internet in 2012, shortly after a satirical picture she took went viral. While visiting Washington, D.C., Stone and a friend—who had a tradition of taking silly pictures with public signage—staged a photograph in which Stone was raising her middle finger at a sign asking for silence and respect at Arlington Cemetery. When the picture, which Lindsey's friend posted, went viral, incensed mobs of people on platforms like **Twitter** and Facebook called for Lindsey to lose her job and to suffer violence and assault. Lindsey did end up getting fired from the care facility where she worked, and the press hounded her and her family so intensely that she suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and barely left the house for a year. Jon Ronson uses Lindsey's story to illustrate the misogyny behind many public shamings, as well as the long-term ramifications that a slightly offensive but ultimately innocuous misstep can have for an ordinary person. Stone was eventually able to secure the help of Michael Fertik's firm Reputation.com. Together with Fertik and his associate Farukh Rashid, Lindsey was able to flood the internet with positive search results for her name and drive down the negative ones to relative obscurity.

Max Mosley – Max Mosley is a British socialite and former Formula One motor racing chief whose parents rose to infamy

in Britain because of their ardent support of Hitler and their leadership of the British Union of Fascists during World War II. When the press caught Mosley at a German-themed orgy in 2008, the tabloid paper *News of the World* published photos of the encounter and described the event as Nazi-oriented. Mosley, however, went on the offensive—he insisted that there was no Nazi imagery present at the orgy, sued the paper for defamation, and won his suit. The paper later folded. Jon Ronson was fascinated by Mosley's ability to emerge from his public shaming relatively unscathed and firmly in control of the narrative. By pointing out the pettiness of shaming someone for their sexual preferences, Mosley had maintained control of his own narrative and refused to feel shame for who he was and what he liked.

Luke Robert Mason – Luke Robert Mason is a researcher at Warwick University who created a spambot (or infomorph) using Jon Ronson's tweets. Ronson felt humiliated by the bot's presence, afraid that people would think he himself was behind it, so he demanded that Mason take the bot down in a private meeting. But when Mason refused, Ronson published a YouTube video of their encounter and rejoiced as the internet began to tear Mason and his fellow researchers who'd created the spambot apart. Eventually, Mason was "shamed into acquiescence" and took the bot down.

Ted Poe – Ted Poe is a Houston judge turned representative for Texas's Second Congressional District. As a judge, Poe was notorious for meting out unusual punishments to lawbreakers. For instance, he offered a young man who'd killed two people driving drunk the chance to forgo prison time if he agreed to publicly carry around a sign that read "I KILLED TWO PEOPLE WHILE DRIVING DRUNK" once a month for ten years, carry a picture of the victims in his wallet, and complete other tasks that would remind him of his mistake.

Philip Zimbardo – Philip Zimbardo is a psychiatrist who is famous for creating the Stanford Prison Experiment. In that experiment, Zimbardo selected several young men to playact as "guards" and "prisoners" in the basement of a laboratory to observe whether deindividuation—the process of losing one's identity and becoming more likely to display uninhibited behavior in a high-pressure situation—was a real phenomenon. Zimbardo's experiment has long been regarded as successful, given how it seemed to show that when stripped of their identities and placed in pressurized power dynamics, people would quickly turn against one another. But in the years since the 1970s experiment, the integrity of the experiment has been questioned by many experts (and debunked by many participants, including Dave Eshelman, a "guard" who claimed he was only acting in the way he believed Zimbardo wanted him to.)

Dave Eshelman – Dave Eshelman gained notoriety as a member of Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment. Eshelman appeared to go off the rails during the experiment, violently persecuting his fellow "inmates" during the experiment. But when Ronson spoke with Eshelman, Eshelman revealed that he'd only been acting the way he believed Zimbardo wanted him to.

Hank – Hank (which is an alias) is a man who was publicly shamed for making vaguely lewd puns at a tech conference in 2013. Adria Richards, a Black Jewish woman who was also in attendance at the conference and sitting in front of Hank and his friend, took a picture of the men and posted it to her **Twitter** to shame them for speaking insensitively. The internet quickly turned against Hank—but when he was fired from his jobs, suddenly men's rights activists began to launch a misogynistic attack against Adria Richards. When Hank spoke with Jon Ronson, he seemed overwhelmed by how quickly the situation had spiraled out of control, empathetic toward Richards, and condemning of the unfairly gendered harassment to which Richards was subjected.

Adria Richards – Adria Richards is a woman who was publicly shamed after she attempted to publicly shame someone herself at a tech conference in 2013. When Richards noticed a pair of men sitting behind her at a presentation making suggestive puns about tech lingo, she took a picture of the men and posted it to her **Twitter**, complaining to her followers about the things that women in tech (especially women of color and women who belong to religious minorities like Richards) were forced to put up with. The internet turned against the man, Hank, and his friend—but once they lost their jobs, the tides turned, and darker corners of the web turned against Richards. Men's rights activists called for her to be raped and killed, and Richards herself ended up losing her job over the fracas. Jon Ronson relays Richards's story to illustrate the heavily gendered nature of online shamings; men and women are punished differently by internet mobs for their perceived transgressions.

Mercedes Haefer – Mercedes Haefer is an internet user and "4chan denizen" who spoke with Jon Ronson about the public shamings of Adria Richards and a man known as "Hank." When Hank and a friend made some lewd comments at a tech conference, Richards took to the internet to post pictures of them and shame them. Hank was publicly shamed on the internet and eventually lost his job—and when he did, men's rights activists on platforms like 4chan in turn shamed Richards, calling for her to be raped and murdered. Ronson talked with Mercedes at length about the uniquely misogynistic tenor of many public shamings, and Mercedes speculated that in order to shame men, the internet tends to go after the things that degrade masculinity (i.e. calling for a man to lose his job or livelihood). But when the internet wants to shame women, they call for the things that degrade femininity—for example, for a woman to be raped. Haefer's blasé approach to the internet's desire for shame and violent speech surprised Ronson, but Haefer suggested that the remote nature of the internet led

many users (especially on platforms like 4chan) to see one-upping one another's egregious language and bad behavior as a kind of game.

Mike Daisey – Mike Daisey is a theatrical monologist who was publicly shamed on the radio and the internet after his successful one-man show about worker abuses at Apple factories in China was revealed to contain information that Daisey had fabricated and embellished to make his story more compelling. Daisey, who'd experienced suicidal thoughts at earlier points in his life, was driven into a deep depression and a near-suicidal state following his public shaming, which began on-air during an appearance on an NPR program. But instead of giving into despair, the gregarious Daisey decided to reframe the narrative around his shaming and focus on the fact that while parts of his story of his trip to China were embellished, others were based in truth—and that his intentions of shining a light on a major corporation's abuses were still as pure as they had ever been.

Donna Dolore – Donna Dolore is a porn empresario who turned her childhood struggles with intense shame into her own liberation. Jon Ronson visited one of Donna's shoots—the theme of which was a public shaming—to explore how oftentimes, porn actors are able to avoid feeling any shame because they take care of one another, protect one another, and take refuge in the idea of lessening other people's shame by making private fantasies public.

Brad Blanton – Brad Blanton is the leader of a shame-eradication workshop whose ethos centers around Radical Honesty, the practice of minimizing shame and secrecy by being completely transparent in all of one's interactions with others. Jon Ronson visited Blanton's workshop as part of his research for the book, and while Ronson didn't feel he benefited personally from the idea of Radical Honesty, he was amazed by the concept's power to improve the lives of other participants.

Andrew Ferreira – Andrew Ferreira is a former pastor who was outed for having visited a brothel run by Zumba instructor Alexis Wright in Kennebunk, Maine. Though Ferreira expected that because of his position in the faith community in his town, he'd be shamed brutally and publicly, the shaming he dreaded never came—in fact, the revelation of the truth about his secret life brought him closer with his children and made those around him see him as more human.

Alexis Wright – Alexis Wright is a former Zumba instructor who was found to have been running a brothel out of her studio in Kennebunk, Maine. Wright's list of over 60 clients was made available to the public and the press—and yet Wright and her lone female client, in a classic example of misogynistic public shaming, were judged far more harshly than the male clients who sought out her services.

Michael Fertik – Michael Fertik is the owner of a company called Reputation.com, which helps people restore their reputations, remove compromising Google search results, and rehabilitate their internet presences after public shamings or other compromising public incidents. Fertik has a code of ethics and doesn't take on clients who are, for example, pedophiles or neo-Nazis. Jon Ronson reached out to Fertik to see if he would help rehabilitate Justine Sacco's reputation. While the firm refused to help Justine, believing she'd require too many financial resources to take care of, they did agree to take on Lindsey Stone's case.

Jim McGreevey – Jim McGreevey is an American politician and the former Democratic governor of New Jersey. During his initial run, McGreevey presented himself as a wholesome family man—but he was hiding the fact that he was gay. When McGreevey's affair with an Israeli man named Golan was about to be exposed to the public, McGreevey came out, resigned, and stepped out of the public eye. He began covertly running a correctional facility in New Jersey, and Jon Ronson accompanied him there to observe how shame affects incarcerated people.

Golan – Golan is an Israeli man with whom politician Jim McGreevey began an affair during a trip to Israel in the mid-2000s. McGreevey created a position in his administration for Golan in order to bring the man back to the U.S.—but when McGreevey feared that those around him would notice the affair, he distanced himself from Golan, and Golan threatened to sue for sexual harassment. McGreevey held a press conference, admitted to the affair, and resigned.

James Gilligan – James Gilligan is a renowned psychiatrist and an expert on shaming whose work with prisoners and mental patients throughout Massachusetts in the 1970s produced groundbreaking evidence about the relationship between shame and violence. Gilligan observed that some inmates who were affected by traumas from earlier in their lives felt a numbness that allowed them to commit serious acts of violence. Others acted violently in order to regain a sense of control that they felt humiliation and shame had stripped away from them.

Raquel – Raquel was an inmate at a New Jersey correctional facility run by Jim McGreevey. Jon Ronson traveled to the facility with McGreevey to research how shame affects incarcerated people, and he found himself moved by Raquel's devastating story of becoming trapped in a lifelong cycle of abuse, violence, and shame.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gustave LeBon – Gustave LeBon was a 19th-century French doctor who sought to prove scientifically that revolutionary movements could be attributed to the "madness" of psychological contagion and loss of individuality in crowds and mobs. LeBon was a virulent racist and eugenicist whose work

has since been debunked.

Andrew Wylie – Andrew Wylie is a powerful literary agent who represented disgraced writer Jonah Lehrer in the early 2010s.

Farukh Rashid – Farukh Rashid is an employee at Michael Fertik's reputation management firm. He helps Lindsey Stone to rehabilitate her internet presence and drive down negative Google search results related to her shaming incident.

TERMS

Spambot/infomorph – A spambot (or infomorph) is a program that creates algorithmically generated content and posts it online, often on Twitter. Sometimes spambots use neural networks or the language of existing Tweets from a specific user to craft their posts. Author Jon Ronson became frustrated and humiliated when a group of London researchers created a spambot modeled after his Tweets—the bot collected random phraseology from Ronson's own Twitter and reproduced them in sometimes embarrassing and offensive combinations.

4chan – 4chan is a website that consists of anonymous public forums and message boards dedicated to wide-ranging topics. 4chan sees tens of millions of users visit the site each month—and it has become a hotbed of misogyny and white supremacy due to its central ethos of permitting free speech, no matter how terrible the subject matter.

Pillory – A pillory was a wooden frame with holes for the head and hands, in which a transgressor was held and subjected to public abuse and ridicule.

Stop-and-Frisk – Stop-and-frisk was a New York City Police Department practice of stopping, questioning, and frisking (or searching) civilians on the street, especially in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods. In the early 2010s, the NYPD reported stopping and frisking over 684,000 New Yorkers in one year. Nine out of ten people subjected to stop-and-frisk during that time period were found innocent—and 87% of those targeted were Black or Latino.

Feedback loop – A feedback loop is a psychological phenomenon in which one is given instantaneous feedback on their behavior, either incentivizing that behavior to continue or incentivizing changes to that behavior. **Jon Ronson** points to the example of YourSpeed devices attached to speed limit signs in high-traffic areas: when drivers see in real time that their speed is too high, they alter their behavior in order to receive the validation from the sign that their behavior has become correct. And when they're already driving at the right speed, they're more likely to stay the course and remain at their current speed because they've gotten that feedback. Ronson believes that social media works similarly: getting real-time feedback on one's behavior and opinions (via likes, retweets, etc.) leads people to conform more strictly to social norms and received wisdom, and it also can lead to a mob dynamic in which users reinforce one another's behavior during a shaming.

Deindividuation – Deindividuation is a proposed (but hotly contested) psychological phenomenon in which uninhibited behavior becomes easier and more acceptable in violent crowds and mobs.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GOOD, EVIL, AND INHUMANITY

Public shamings in the United States trace back to the 17th and 18th centuries, when people who transgressed against the laws or norms of their communities were publicly punished for their crimes. In writing *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, author Jon Ronson traces how contemporary public internet shamings echo the brutality and inhumanity of public shamings of yore. While conducting research on social media shamings that took place throughout the early 2010s, Ronson found that while the ringleaders of online public shamings earnestly believed they were doing the right thing, they were often behaving more immorally than the people they were trying to punish, as they were instigating devastating online abuse and harassment. Throughout the book, Ronson argues that the evil and inhumanity of online mobs are often even more severe than the perceived transgressions those mobs are trying to rebuke—and that this results in intense human suffering.

Those who participate in contemporary social media shamings often believe they're doing the right thing by punishing someone whose actions seem to be a moral transgression or a misuse of privilege. Ronson uses the phrase "citizen justice" to describe what people who publicly shame others think they're doing; they think they're taking justice into their own hands and righting a wrong. People who participate in public shamings online, according to one *Guardian* writer, tend to "complacently think of themselves as basically nice." In other words, people who lead public shamings think they're doing the right thing and sticking to the side of goodness by leading or participating in a shaming against someone who's perceived to have transgressed against the status quo. By essentially patting themselves on the back for participating in the destruction of people's reputations, Ronson suggests, these people are remaining willfully blind to the seriousness of public shamings in relation to the (often minor) transgressions that are being shamed.

As these new public shamings spiral out of control online, those

leading the mob often act even more cruelly and brutally than those they're trying to shame in the first place. Jack Levin, a professor at Northeastern University, asserts that "[when] people get together in a group [they may] commit acts of violence that they would never dream of committing individually." In other words, Levin believes that collective action—while a powerful tool of solidarity and social justice—can sometimes be dangerous online due to the anonymity the internet offers, which can allow people to behave in ways they normally wouldn't. Ronson shows how online punishment can often be worse than the initial transgression by telling the story of Lindsey Stone. A warm and bubbly young woman, Stone was shamed online for taking an insensitive picture in which she flipped off a sign at Arlington Cemetery calling for "SILENCE AND RESPECT." As a result of her online shaming, she lost her job and suffered such debilitating trauma and paranoia that she didn't leave the house for almost a year. "I wanted to scream, 'It was just about a sign,'" Lindsey told Ronson. While her picture might have been disrespectful, the threats she received and the invasion of her and her family's privacy (news crews repeatedly showed up to her doorstep, harassed her parents, and painted a public portrait of the Stones as "hillbillies") were far worse than what she did.

The intense human suffering that these public shamings create can be hard for shamers to recognize, but Ronson asserts that people who participate in online mobs must recognize the consequences of their actions. In December of 2013, PR executive Justine Sacco tweeted a tasteless joke that went viral. As a result, she became the target of an online shaming mob comprised of millions of Twitter users. She lost her job and endured "the darkest time in [her] life" as a result of the relentless shaming. Listening to Sacco's story caused Ronson to realize that "it was decent, smart people who tore Justine apart"—it turned out a fellow journalist had started Sacco's shaming. Someone who wanted to call out an offensive statement—on its own, a noble goal—got carried away. And in the process, they perpetrated an even worse wrong than the one they set out to right. When the flame starts "burning too hot," Ronson suggests, it's important for people to take a step back and examine why they're piling on, adding their voice to a mob that's seeking to derail a person's life. Remembering the shared humanity of everyone involved in a public shaming—whether it's the person being shamed or the faceless online accounts participating in the "free-for-all"—is the key to putting out the fires of public shamings.

SHAME AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Throughout So You've Been Publicly Shamed, journalist Jon Ronson pays careful attention to how the internet has become the new public square—and how **Twitter** dogpiles and viral articles are the new public lashings. Public shaming was once a careful, nuanced "process" that was carried out by courts and churches in response to a moral or legal transgression. For instance, if someone committed adultery, they and their lover would be whipped in the public square for all to see. But now, the ubiquity and accessibility of social media has created an environment in which shaming is in the hands of everyday people who can easily begin a "free-for-all" against anyone who's perceived to be misusing their privilege, violating a social norm, or simply behaving badly. Ronson argues that this leap from structured process to mob takedown has made public shamings more horrific than ever before. In Ronson's opinion, stopping this madness requires people to become more responsible and measured when it comes to social media.

Early in the book, Ronson contrasts the structured (though still brutal) processes that governed public shamings in earlier centuries against the frenzied social media shamings that take place today. In earlier centuries, there were protocols for public shamings; certain crimes carried certain punishments, and judges meted out the penalty that seemed best. But even those more measured public shamings drew broad criticism. Newspapers in the 1800s, for instance, ran criticisms of public shamings, calling the punishments—and the humiliation they caused—"worse [...] than death." This widespread criticism led to public shamings being phased out as a method of punishment, as they were seen to be inappropriate and excessively punitive. But while contemporary social media shamings might seem to do less harm by comparison (since they don't involve physical violence), Ronson believes that modern-day online shamings can have even greater consequences than their outdated counterparts. Public shamings used to be confined to a local community, for instance. But now, in the age of social media, millions of people across the globe can instantly view someone's greatest secrets, embarrassments, and mistakes. Moreover, because public shamings aren't meted out through a judicial process anymore, there's no telling when they'll end and there's no guarantee that the punishment will even remotely fit the crime. A public whipping was a terrible burden to bear—but when it was over, it was over. With the advent of the internet and social media, the shamings can go on for years, flaring up and dying down over and over again. And because so much personal information is available online, people's families, homes, and personal safety can be threatened—sometimes all for a tasteless joke. The chaos of contemporary public shamings, in Ronson's estimation, makes them even more "ferocious" than they used to be.

While social media can be a useful tool to bring attention to political issues, Ronson urges users to learn to differentiate between a "powerful and important" call to action and a "pointless and nasty cathartic alternative." Ronson acknowledges that social media does have the power to be

used for good, and that some shamings are necessary. For instance, videos of police brutality can be used to hold law enforcement accountable and raise awareness about racism. But rallying the power of millions of users to take down someone like Justine Sacco or Lindsey Stone, Ronson suggests, isn't just "pointless and nasty"—it can ruin and endanger lives. "We are the ones with power," Ronson writes in the book's afterword, referring to internet users and participants in social media shamings. Thus, it's "incumbent upon us to recognize the difference" between necessary, productive callouts that create meaningful discourse and the violent, inhumane attacks that derail people's livelihoods and reputations forever.

CYCLES OF SHAME, TRAUMA, AND VIOLENCE

At a pivotal point in *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, author Jon Ronson describes a study conducted by psychologist James Gilligan, who worked with inmates at a Massachusetts prison in the 1970s. "Universal among the violent criminals was the fact that they were keeping a secret, […] and that secret was that they felt ashamed." Here, Gilligan links the experience of intense, "chronic" shame—often the result of trauma—to the desire to enact violence against others. But being violent towards others also begets more shame and suffering. As Ronson reflects on this research, he connects it to the proliferation of social media shamings, which are a kind of emotional violence towards those being shamed. In light of this, Ronson suggests that public shamings are part of a cycle whereby a person's private shame leads them to lash out against strangers, intensifying those people's own shame, which leads to more lashing out.

Throughout the book, Ronson examines several anecdotes that show how shame leads to violent fantasies—and sometimes even violent actions. David Buss, a Texas-based psychology professor, conducted a unique study in 2000. After witnessing a fight at a party during which a man became so upset that he expressed fantasies about killing his wife, Buss surveyed 5,000 people to ask if they'd ever fantasized about murder. 91% of men and 84% of women said that they had. And when Buss asked participants what inspired their violent thoughts, most of them admitted to seeking revenge on someone who'd humiliated them. None of the fantasies were a response to danger—they were all rooted in "the horror of humiliation." From this, Ronson realizes that "shame internalized can lead to agony," and if people don't find a healthy way to process their sense of shame, they might act on their darkest impulses in order to regain a sense of control and confidence.

When people do act on their violent fantasies, of course, they feel even more ashamed of themselves—and this can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of shame and violence. In one memorable section of the book, Ronson shares the story of Raquel, a mother of two who was herself sexually, verbally, and physically abused as a child. Raquel was not the best mother she could have been to her children—during a fight with her teenaged son, she threw a knife at him—but a court later accepted Raquel's defense team's claim that Raquel's actions only happened because she was a victim of an "abuse cycle." Raquel suffered throughout her life as a result of the shame she was made to feel as a child. And as an adult, she repeated the abuse cycle she'd endured as a child—likely creating even more shame, humiliation, and pain in the lives of her children. Gilligan also observed that many of the prisoners he studied in Massachusetts were motivated by shame. Many people had been abused as children and had gone on to lives of crime, while others acted violently toward their fellow inmates because of small humiliations that took place within the walls of the penitentiary. In general, Gilligan's work with prisoners made it clear to him that shame makes people feel "dead inside." This feeling of numbness enables people to do terrible things to others. Ronson even connects this phenomenon to the story of Jonah Lehrer, a journalist who was called a "sociopath" in the midst of his public apology for plagiarism, because he didn't appear to have any emotions as he spoke. But perhaps Lehrer was so ashamed of himself in that moment that he wasn't able to feel his own feelings. Unfortunately, this led many observers to find him insincere, which only intensified his public shaming, leading him to even more numbness and shame.

While shame creates a vicious cycle, there are ways out. One of the methods of shame reduction that Ronson explores is the practice of Radical Honesty. Pioneered by a man named Brad Blanton, Radical Honesty is devoted to eradicating shame by helping participants be honest and transparent about their feelings, their resentments, and their past shame. While Ronson's visit to Blanton's Radical Honesty workshop didn't help him eradicate his sense of shame, many other participants found solace in the freedom to say what they felt, to act without fear of being judged, and to incorporate productive shamelessness into their lifestyles. Another method of shame reduction is rooted purely in human will. Max Mosley is a British man who was already dealing with a lifetime of shame (his parents were Nazi sympathizers) when he was caught on-camera at a kinky German-themed orgy in 2008. Mosley described feeling a "whoosh" of anger as he read the article about his participation in the orgy, but he refused to give into his humiliation. Instead of retreating into shame and silence, Mosley gave interviews about the pettiness of shaming a person for their sexual preferences—and he sued the paper that printed the story. By refusing to give into shame and by standing strong in one's beliefs, victims of unfair attempts at public shamings can head off the dangerous cycle of shame, trauma, and, potentially, violence. Only in breaking the cycle can the world become a place where public shamings are no longer conducted with frenzied, gleeful vitriol—and instead a place where public shamings are used to call attention to political and social inequity and major issues of justice.

SHAME, FREEDOM OF SPEECH, AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Jon Ronson believes that human beings, as a rule, are living, breathing "gray areas." In other words, Ronson feels that no one is perfect, and that everyone is constantly in the process of trying new things, exploring different kinds of views, making mistakes, and figuring out new things about themselves and others. Public discourse, Ronson believes, should reflect the messiness of the human experience. But social media's instantaneous and frequently text-based nature tends to flatten nuanced discourse. As a journalist, Ronson is perturbed by this development. And he's even more worried that the fear of being publicly shamed or widely misunderstood has made many people feel less free to speak up about their beliefs publicly—especially in situations of moral uncertainty. Over the course of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, Ronson suggests that if people don't find a way to eradicate feelings of shame from their lives and resist the pressures of public shamings, humanity as a whole will gradually become more and more flattened, timid, and "voiceless."

Since social media rewards constant engagement and pithy, confident responses, Ronson believes that communicating via social media will inherently lack nuance. When someone is using the internet, they're able to get "instant real-time feedback" on their behavior. So when someone begins a social media shaming and others quickly join the attack, those joining in receive positive feedback for their opinions, which propels their behavior and encourages others to pile on. Ronson himself admits to being "beguiled by the new technology" of the internet and participating in many, many social media pile-ons—more, he honestly reports, than he can remember. Ronson denies that the internet creates a "contagion" that spreads from person to person, as some psychological experts have suggested (akin to the phenomenon that makes some riots spin out of control). Instead, Ronson thinks it's that social media's remote nature enables people to do and say things virtually in the heat of the moment that they might not do face-to-face. All of this is an issue in Ronson's view, because complicated issues discussed on public platforms require measured, considered responses that take into account the messiness and moral complexity of the human condition. When social media shamings start to spin out of control, the internet becomes an "echo chamber where what we believe is constantly reinforced by people who believe the same thing."

As a result of this, people may be more afraid than ever to speak up about complex issues; it doesn't make sense to weigh in if a poorly-worded tweet or a single bad take could possibly destroy their lives. The internet, in Ronson's view, isn't really the "new kind of democracy" that people sometimes claim. In a true democracy, everyone's voice is equal—but on the internet, pieces of information or opinions that challenge the favored discourse "get squeezed out." Anyone who presents an opinion that differs from the status quo creates a "furious" reaction, and others seek to "eject" that opinion and "regain stability." This, Ronson asserts, is why social media pile-ons become so dangerous and uniform so quickly. When the internet decides to rally against a transgressor like Justine Sacco or Jonah Lehrer, anyone who sticks up for the shamed person becomes a "destabilizing fragment" that needs to be removed from the discourse. And when dissenters see what's being done to the person they're defending, the "tidal wave of negative feedback" can easily cow them into recanting and moving towards an opinion that's safer to espouse but perhaps not truly their own.

Ronson's solution is for people to refuse to give into shame—only then will people find the confidence and strength to use their voices proudly and productively. To change the norm whereby "some bad phraseology in a tweet" can topple a person's life, people must start treating the internet as a collection of humans. "We are gray areas," Ronson says, and because of that, he believes that people should accept that the internet was made to be a cacophony of differing opinions—good, bad, and in-between. To Ronson, a great aspect of the internet was that it "gave a voice to voiceless people"—it allowed people all over the world to connect with others and make their voices heard. But online discourse has gotten to a place that disincentivizes people from sharing their authentic selves online and instead encourages them to focus only on remaining un-shameable in order to "survive." To Ronson, this is akin to people becoming voiceless again. Ronson admires people like Max Mosley, the British socialite who refused to let himself feel shame after a large newspaper tried to expose his sexual fetishes. By simply ignoring the pressure to feel shame, Mosley toppled the internet's shame economy. If more people resist feeling shame themselves—and "speak up on behalf of the shamed" more often—people can, together, take away the internet's power to make people voiceless.

SHAME AND GENDER

When it comes to public shamings, men and women aren't treated the same. As one of the book's interviewees says, "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them and women are afraid that men will kill them." In 17th and 18th century America, women were subjected to public punishments just as brutal as the ones men faced—but now, in the contemporary era, it seems to Jon Ronson that women are even more heavily scrutinized than men online. Justine Sacco, who tweeted an offensive joke in 2013, lost her job and received threats of violence, rape, and murder. Lindsey Stone, who posted a tone-deaf photo on Facebook, was hounded so severely that she didn't leave her house for nearly a year. Meanwhile, men who've been subjected to social media shamings, like the disgraced journalist Jonah Lehrer, often bounce back from their failures and go on to continued success (Lehrer has continued to publish books and enjoy literary

success since his 2012 shaming). So while a public shaming can ruin anyone's life, women are more likely to face long-lasting societal prejudice, emotional damage, and stigma after being publicly shamed.

During online public shamings, women often face threats of rape and murder (in addition to personal consequences like being fired from their jobs), while men are more frequently able to find defenders online (and are generally able to move past the shaming and onto new jobs with fewer consequences). As an example of this, Ronson tells the story of a man named Hank and a woman named Adria Richards. At a tech conference in 2013, Hank and a friend were making silly, lewd jokes while sitting in the audience of a software presentation. The woman sitting in front of them, Adria Richards—who was Black and Jewish, and who felt threatened by their sexually-tinged comments—took a picture of them and posted it to her **Twitter**, sharing with her small group of followers what had happened. But when the story blew up online, many people began directing vitriol at Richards and defending Hank from what they perceived to be cancel culture in action. Hank lost his job over his actions, but he quickly found a new one. Richards lost her job, too, but she did not receive a new job offer in a timely manner, and she faced daily threats of violence, rape, and murder from users on platforms like 4chan. This illustrates that in contemporary public shamings, men—even when they're the original perpetrators of an act that's seen as shameworthy—often emerge relatively unscathed, while women are left to bear the shame and trauma of gendered harassment and verbal abuse.

The public shaming of Max Mosley—a British socialite who was shamed after a newspaper published photos of him attending a German-themed orgy—also reveals a lot about the gender dynamic of shamings both online and offline. After Mosley's shaming—which targeted his sexual proclivities—Mosley was able to regain control of the narrative by refusing to give into his feelings of shame. Mosley's scandal all but fizzled out—he wasn't a victim of "the online misogynists who tear apart women who step out of line." Mosley didn't suffer any long-term consequences as a result of his shaming—and Ronson implies that he was able to emerge unscathed because he was a wealthy white man. Women—especially women of color—face uniquely terrible public shamings because of the misogynists who come out of the woodwork to attack them at the slightest provocation. But men are able to get off scot-free, avoiding the threatening specter of heavily gendered threats and violence.

Women's outsized suffering is significant not just because misogyny is vile, but because gendered shamings deepen division. 4chan user Mercedes Haefer explains that online shamings often become so violently misogynistic because when men are being shamed, the online mob seeks to degrade their masculinity. Because men are traditionally seen as providers, taking away their masculinity means calling for them to lose their jobs and livelihoods. But when women are shamed, the mobs seeking to degrade their femininity do so by calling for rape. Haefer's comments make an interesting point: when there's a new public shaming, those participating in the pile-on change their approach based on the shamee's gender. Shaming someone in a particular way based on whether they're a man or a woman speaks to the vast social division—and indeed social prejudice—that still defines life on and off the internet for men and women alike. The meta-commentary on women's gendered public shamings is yet another aspect of the shaming process that deepens social divisions between men and women. When men write about the public shamings women have endured, they claim—even in cases where "palpable misogyny" is driving the shaming—that only certain women are "sympathetic [enough] figures" to be defended from the online shame machine. Justine Sacco, who went viral after tweeting a badly worded joke that many took to be racist, faced criticism for positioning herself as an "archetypically vulnerable [...] damsel" in the media. Sacco, who is white, was essentially seen as a whiner. Her shaming was intense, ongoing, and deeply misogynistic—she received repeated threats of sexual violence—but men who covered her story essentially stated that other women had it worse than she did. These men—and many others who observe gendered shamings online and off—deepen divisions between themselves and their female counterparts because they fail to take misogynistic words and actions seriously.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TWITTER

Throughout *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, the social media platform Twitter reflects the state of modern society: the world has become interconnected in unprecedented ways, but connecting with strangers has, in many ways, made people less humane. To Jon Ronson, Twitter plays a similar role to the public stocks in centuries past. Stocks were a form of public humiliation in which wrongdoers were bound in a public square and forced to endure the derision of passersby from the community. This form of punishment gradually died out as societies found it more and more inhumane to humiliate people as punishment for their misdeeds. But with the rise of Twitter, Ronson has seen public shaming come back to the fore: online mobs quickly and mercilessly descend on people for misdeeds both big and small. And while this can sometimes be helpful in securing justice—as by calling attention to police brutality—it is often excessive and misguided, as when Justine Sacco's insensitive joke about white

privilege was seen by more than a million people and led her to lose her job, endure death threats, and remain haunted by her Google search results for years to come.

To Ronson, the nature of social media itself explains the brutality and ubiquity of public shamings: users have the option of anonymity, they're incentivized to weigh in on everything (but never with nuance because of character limits), they rarely see one another face-to-face, and users are rewarded (with likes and retweets) for sharing a popular opinion, while they can be pilloried for even a minor perceived transgression. This has created an environment in which someone can believe they're behaving morally when they join a mob to destroy a stranger's reputation online. To Ronson, this has torn at the social fabric and hurt the ability to have humane, nuanced discussions of complex issues.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* published in 2016.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I won. Within days, the academics took down @Jon_Ronson. They had been shamed into acquiescence. Their public shaming had been like the button that restores factory settings. Something was out of kilter. The community rallied. The balance was redressed.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Luke Robert Mason

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson recalls how he "shamed into acquiescence" a trio of London researchers who'd created a spambot modeled after Ronson's own Twitter page.

When journalist Jon Ronson noticed that a spambot (a program written to tweet random combinations of previous tweets) bearing his name and likeness had appeared on Twitter, his favorite social media platform, he became angry and embarrassed. He was able to track down the creators of the spambot—a trio of researchers at the University of Warwick who were studying Twitter algorithms—and, after publishing to YouTube a video of a meeting during which he begged the researchers to take the bot down, the men faced a barrage of vitriolic attacks and threats of violence on the internet. This passage is significant because it shows the exact moment at which Ronson realized just how powerful online public shamings truly were.

After noticing how the internet mob on Twitter and YouTube used threats of violence to thoroughly shame and intimidate the researchers, Ronson became intrigued by the outsized response to something that was merely "out of kilter" on the internet. The shaming largely took place on Twitter, a platform that Ronson introduces here and develops throughout the book as a symbol of how out-of-control the internet has become when it comes to the thirst for a public shaming. Ronson's own role in catalyzing these researchers' shaming is one he's proud of in this passage—but as the book continues, he'll reflect on this incident with a measure of doubt and concern about how he "rallied" the internet against a group of men whose only real transgression was making Ronson feel a bit embarrassed about his internet presence. So as Ronson raises questions about the ethics of inciting internet mobs, he can reflect on how he himself has done the very same thing and, in the moment, thought it was justified. It's difficult, he suggests, to understand the power and consequences of an internet mob in the moment, and part of the goal of his book is to make readers understand that while it may feel like participating in a shaming is a moral and just act, it can have unintended and devastating consequences.

We were at the start of a great renaissance of public shaming. After a lull of almost 180 years [...], it was back in a big way. When we deployed shame, we were utilizing an immensely powerful tool. It was coercive, borderless, and increasing in speed and influence. Hierarchies were being leveled out. The silenced were getting a voice. It was like the democratization of justice.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson outlines the motivating idea that set him off on a journey of investigating the history of public shamings in the U.S. and the U.K.

Ronson was familiar with British and American histories of

public shamings, but when he realized that modern-day Twitter pile-ons were, essentially, at the forefront of a "great renaissance of public shaming," he set out to understand the relationship between the violent, corporal public shamings of yore and the remote—but no less punitive and brutal—public shamings of today.

This passage is significant because it shows that Ronson is intrigued—and ostensibly a bit frightened—by the immense power of shame. Shame is a feeling that a lot of people keep inside—but when shame is leveraged against someone publicly, it can become an incredibly destructive force. And contemporary shamings, which take place on the internet, are (as Ronson points out here) all the more intimidating and fearsome because of their "borderless" and rapid-fire nature.

This passage is also important because it shows that Ronson, at the start of his journey into exploring the history of shame, saw contemporary public shamings as a tool of "democratization." As Ronson delves further into his research and the book continues to unfold, his notions of public shamings as "level[ing]" and democratizing forces will grow much more complicated.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ We all have ticking away within us something we fear will badly harm our reputation if it got out—some "I'm glad I'm not *that*" at the end of an "I'm glad I'm not me." [...] Maybe our secret is actually nothing horrendous. Maybe nobody would even consider it a big deal if it was exposed. But we can't take that risk. So we keep it buried.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Jonah Lehrer, Michael Moynihan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Jon Ronson meditates on the power shame has to define people's lives, suggesting that everyone alive has something shameful that they keep "buried." The idea that shame is universal and even somewhat banal is one that Ronson returns to again and again throughout the book. Shame's power, according to Ronson, lies in the fact that people work so hard to keep it buried. By refusing to acknowledge that shame is something that people deal with each and every day, humanity is only making itself more vulnerable to shame's debilitating effects.

Ronson believes that, regardless of whether the things that bring us shame are actually "horrendous" or morally egregious, shame has the power to define how humanity moves through the world. Having a shameful secret impacts how someone relates to those around them, how they see themselves, and how they handle social and professional interactions. Someone like Jonah Lehrer—who was shamed over journalistic malfeasance—wasn't hiding anything morally terrible, violent, or dangerous. But his secret was so shameful that its exposition very nearly torched his entire career. By pointing out how harboring shame prevents people from taking risks, from connecting deeply with others, and from doing anything that might result in the exposure of their shame, Ronson again highlights how powerful and stifling a force shame truly is.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The common assumption is that public punishments died out in the new great metropolises because they'd been judged useless. Everyone was too busy being industrious to bother to trail some transgressor through the city crowds like some volunteer scarlet letter. But at the archives I found no evidence that public shaming fell out of fashion as a result of newfound anonymity. I did, however, find plenty of people from centuries past bemoaning its outsized cruelty, warning that well-meaning people, in a crowd, often take it too far. [...] They were stopped because they were far too brutal.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Jon Ronson dives into the complex history of public shamings in the U.S. While most people believe that public shamings died out because they became irrelevant as more and more people flocked to cities with anonymous ways of life, the reality is that the shamings ended because they were so unrelentingly brutal that people couldn't take them anymore. This revelation is significant, because it shows that the "outsized cruelty" of public punishment was, at the very height of its popularity, recognized as intolerable and unbearable.

This passage shows that while people several centuries ago could recognize that it was wrong to brutally shame someone for a major or minor moral transgression, people today still don't necessarily understand just how

demoralizing and life-altering a public shaming can be. Because public shamings nowadays don't take place in a town square, and because they generally don't involve corporal punishment, humanity tends to see them as less brutal. But as the book continues, Ronson will argue that the strain of brutality and inhumanity that once defined public shamings persists to this day.

It didn't seem to be crossing any of our minds to wonder whether the person we had just shamed was okay or in ruins. I suppose that when shamings are delivered like remotely administered drone strikes nobody needs to think about how ferocious our collective power might be.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

This passage highlights how people often miss the brutality of online public shamings because the shamings aren't happening in person. He compares the remote nature of internet-based public shamings to "drone strikes"—attacks whose brutality the attacker never has to witness. These impersonal attacks take place through the internet, a medium that lessens people's capacity for empathy. The attacks aren't seen as particularly brutal or dangerous because they aren't taking place in person, but Ronson suggests that this is simply a failure of empathy—a failure to actually ask whether the person being shamed is okay.

While people's intents in beginning a public shaming on the internet might be good—they might see themselves engaged in the righting of a wrong or heading up an instance of citizen justice—the "collective power of the internet" is, in Ronson's estimation, nothing short of ferocious. He wants people to keep this in mind before they begin or participate in public shamings on the internet. These cyberattacks can have devastating real-world consequences, often costing shamees their livelihoods, their reputations, and even their relationships with their loved ones.

Chapter 4 Quotes

A life had been ruined. What was it for: just some social media drama? I think our natural disposition as humans is to plod along until we get old and stop. But with social media, we've created a stage for constant artificial high drama. Every day a new person emerges as a magnificent hero or a sickening villain. It's all very sweeping, and not the way we actually are as people. What rush was overpowering us at times like this? What were we getting out of it?

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Justine Sacco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson reflects on Justine Sacco's brutal public shaming. This Twitter shaming strikes Ronson as unconscionably, needlessly inhumane. After Justine Sacco tweeted an ill-advised joke to her small group of followers in December 2013, the internet went to work to shame her for what they believed was a racist tweet. She was googled over a million times in just 10 days, and she lost her job as well as relationships with several family members. Her life was, in many ways, "ruined"—and the transgression for which she was shamed was so minor that there wasn't even any real reason for the internet to take her down so severely.

Here, Ronson criticizes the "sweeping" judgements people make on the internet, which he believes they're often making out of boredom or a thirst for "drama." The "rush" of participating in an online collective aimed at a singular goal is no doubt a compelling motivator. But Ronson is firm in his stance that a few seconds of fleeting satisfaction at the cost of a person's relationships and reputation is absolutely unacceptable. And in Sacco's case, the internet mob's behavior as they sought to destroy her was even more immoral than the offense she was perceived to have committed. Ronson believes that there was no ideological or moral justification for Sacco's shaming, and that her life was destroyed for nothing.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ All these people had [...] come together spontaneously, without leadership. I wasn't one of them. But I'd piled on plenty of people like Justine. I'd been beguiled by the new technology—a toddler crawling toward a gun. Just like with Dave Eshelman, it was the desire to do something good that had propelled me. Which was definitely a better thing to be propelled by than group madness. But my desire had taken a lot of scalps—I'd torn apart a *lot* of people I couldn't now remember—which made me suspect that it was coming from some very weird dark well, some place I really didn't want to think about.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Dave Eshelman, Justine Sacco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson interrogates the reasons people join in public shamings so readily—and why he himself, in the past, took such glee in piling on shamees.

Ronson ultimately asserts that "the desire to do something good" had motivated him to participate in the shamings of people who'd said stupid things on the internet or transgressed in some way. Ronson wanted to be seen as moral and just himself—and he wanted to feel the rush that accompanies being surrounded by like-minded people on the internet. But Ronson's good intents, he now sees, were meaningless—he was like "a toddler crawling toward a gun," unaware of the power of the tool he was approaching. The internet, then, and Twitter specifically, aren't harmless toys, and public shamings aren't forms of amusement. There is something undeniably "dark" about humanity's desire to publicly shame people for the most minor misbehaviors—and in this passage, Ronson confirms that he's no longer interested in ignoring the darkness of the impulse to join a pile-on.

This passage is significant because it shows that no matter one's intent in beginning or participating in a public shaming, the shaming itself is always brutal and inhumane. Often, the rancor of online shaming far exceeds the ugliness of the transgression being shamed. Ronson isn't able to tolerate that fact anymore—and moreover, he wants to actively work to identify and eradicate the impulse to shame others.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ It seemed to me that all the people involved in the Hank and Adria story thought they were doing something good. But they only revealed that our imagination is so limited, our arsenal of potential responses so narrow that the only thing anyone can think to do with an inappropriate shamer like Adria is to punish her with a shaming. All of the shamers had themselves come from a place of shame, and it really felt parochial and self-defeating to instinctively slap shame onto shame like a clumsy builder covering cracks.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Hank, Adria Richards

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ronson is parsing the dynamics that led to the shaming of Hank, who made lewd jokes at a tech conference, and then the shaming of Adria Richards, the person who had initially shamed Hank. He's trying to call attention to a strange aspect of online shamings: that people who were objecting to the shaming of Hank turned around and did the exact same thing by shaming Adria Richards. It seems that while these people understood that shaming Hank was excessive and wrong, they could come up with no other solution than shaming Adria Richards. This shows how shame becomes a vicious cycle that it's hard to escape, even if you're someone who objects to shamings.

Ronson essentially asserts that there is no way to do the right thing by shaming someone. Even when someone's intent is good—as Adria Richard's arguably was when she called out sexism in the tech world by tweeting about Hank and his friend's lewd jokes during a presentation at a conference—all shaming does is create a vicious cycle of shame, trauma, and virulence or violence. Adria Richards successfully shamed Hank: he lost his job and become infamous on the internet. But her good intentions didn't matter to most of the internet—and soon, men's rights activists shamed and threatened Richards, who lost her own job. "Shamers [...] come from a place of shame," Ronson says, suggesting that public shamings are never successful because shame is a vicious cycle. Piling "shame onto shame" never accomplishes any measure of good. There is no "covering [the] cracks" in the human impulse to shame others: shame only begets more shame, and shamings only reveal people's worst impulses when it comes to censorship, sexism, and puritanical contempt. In other words, Ronson doesn't believe that public shamings can ever truly be used

for good.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I received an interesting e-mail from Max Mosley. Like me, he'd been thinking a lot about what it was about him that had helped him to stave off even the most modest public shaming. And now, he wrote, he thought he had the answer. It was simply that he had refused to feel ashamed.

"As soon as the victim steps out of the pact by refusing to feel ashamed," he said, "the whole thing crumbles."

Related Characters: Jon Ronson, Max Mosley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jon Ronson converses with former shamee Max Mosley, whose 2008 sex scandal threatened to ruin his life—but ultimately fizzled out due to Mosley's "refusing to feel ashamed."

As Mosley recounts his experiences in 2008, he notes that his refusal to participate in his own humiliation was the reason he was able to "stave off" the full effects of a public shaming. Instead of surrendering to his shame, hiding from the public eye, and letting others spin a narrative about him, Mosley rejected the impulse to feel ashamed. He sued the paper that had reported on his sex life for libel (they claimed he attended a Nazi-themed orgy when it was not Nazi-themed), and he went on a press tour to denounce those who would seek to ruin someone's life over a sex scandal when sex is a natural part of life. This passage is significant because it shows that the infrastructure of contemporary public shamings is not as sound as it might seem. "The whole thing crumbles" as soon as a shamee refuses to feel shame or engage with any attempts to humiliate them. Thus, Ronson is implying that in order to bring the phenomenon of increasingly brutal public shamings via the internet to an end, people must learn to reject shame entirely.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Almost none of the murderous fantasies were dreamed up in response to actual danger—stalker ex-boyfriends, etc. They were all about the horror of humiliation. Brad Blanton was right. Shame internalized can lead to agony. It can lead to Jonah Lehrer. Whereas shame let out can lead to freedom, or at least to a funny story, which is a sort of freedom too.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Brad Blanton, Jonah Lehrer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jon Ronson describes the work of a Texas psychologist who asked 5,000 people whether they'd harbored fantasies of committing murder—and found that huge percentages of them had. These fantasies, it's significant to note, were essentially across the board aimed at those who'd caused the fantasizers shame or humiliation.

This passage shows that shame and trauma, when internalized and ignored, can often lead to violence—or at least to violent impulses and thoughts. Ronson wants to call attention to how "agon[izing]" it can be to hold onto shame. At this point in the book, he's hopeful that by interviewing former shamees and attending shame-eradication workshops, he can find out how people might be able to let go of their shame and live better, healthier lives. But this passage shows that the process of eradicating shame isn't just a fancy or a nice idea—it's something that's urgent to pursue in order to create a less violent, more cohesive society. Human beings can only find "freedom" through their refusal to feel shame—or their ability to accept shame as a natural part of life that doesn't have the power to destroy a person. People's shame can tear them apart from the inside out, causing extreme emotional distress—or, in the case of people like Jonah Lehrer, it can lead them to build walls and go numb. The only way to feel truly free is to take away shame's power by making it a necessary, ordinary, even silly part of existing in the world.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Inside Court One of the Biddeford District Courthouse half a dozen of the men from the Zumba list sat on the benches, staring grimly ahead while news crews pointed their cameras at them. We in the press area were allowed to stare at them and they weren't able to look away. It reminded me of how Nathaniel Hawthorne had described the pillory in *The Scarlet Letter*: "[An] instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to public gaze. The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron. There can be no outrage, methinks . . . more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame."

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179-180

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson compares watching a group of men's public shaming to watching someone endure punishment via the pillory, a device made of wood and iron that was used to hold people's heads up during the public shamings of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

This passage illustrates that across centuries and generations, public shamings have always been aimed at erasing the shamee's humanity and causing debilitating emotional and physical stress. While the men who Ronson observed awaiting their verdicts in the Kennebunk prostitution scandal weren't being physically tortured, they were in many ways still suffering the same fate: the men were being scrutinized, and their stories were being recorded by members of the press. They couldn't move, they couldn't defend themselves, and they couldn't hide their faces from view. Ronson is suggesting that even though the public shamings of the contemporary era don't involve corporal punishment, they are just as debilitating, humiliating, and viscerally brutal.

❝ As it happens, Max's and Andrew's sins would in Puritan times have been judged graver than Jonah's. Jonah, "guilty of lying or publishing false news," would have been "fined, placed in the stocks for a period not exceeding four hours, or publicly whipped with not more than forty stripes," according to Delaware law. Whereas Max and Andrew, having "defiled the marriage bed," would have been publicly whipped (no maximum number was specified), imprisoned with hard labor for at least a year, and on a second offense, imprisoned for life.

But the shifting sands of shameworthiness had shifted away from sex scandals—if you're a man—to work improprieties and perceived white privilege, and I suddenly understood the real reason why Max had survived his shaming. *Nobody cared*.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Max Mosley, Andrew Ferreira, Jonah Lehrer, Alexis Wright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson interrogates why it is that today's shamings largely ignore moral transgressions yet punish quite brutally many smaller wrongdoings.

The misbehaviors committed by Max Mosley and Andrew Ferreira—both of whom were entangled in sex scandals that threatened their reputations—were ultimately judged less harshly by the public shame machine than more minor misconduct committed by people like Jonah Lehrer and Justine Sacco. Ronson finds it remarkable that "nobody cared" about the stories of two white men embroiled in sex scandals—yet the internet rose up to decimate the lives of writers who plagiarized or embellished quotes and random women who tweeted ill-advised jokes. This is significant because it shows that the shaming machine isn't just extremely sexist—it's often petty and arbitrary.

Furthermore, Alexis Wright—the owner of the brothel that Ferreira and over 60 other residents of Kennebunk, Maine visited—was judged and shamed far more harshly than any of her male clients. After Alexis, the person most scrutinized throughout the entire scandal was Wright's lone female client. This shows that shamings are heavily gendered—and that even when men and women commit exactly the same transgression at the same time and in the same way, they're shamed in extremely different manners. By highlighting the sexism and indeed the randomness of public shaming, Ronson suggests that the only way to stave off the unpredictable nature of public shame is for people to retake control of their own narratives and decide for themselves what is shameworthy in their own lives and what is not.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ I think she still felt ashamed, but maybe not quite so much. Instead, she said, she felt humiliated.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Justine Sacco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson recalls meeting up with shamed PR executive Justine Sacco several months after the height of her public shaming. Here, he's highlighting the difference between the feelings of being ashamed and humiliated: being ashamed is a feeling one creates in oneself, while being humiliated is something another person does to you. The distinction between these two feelings is important, especially in discussing Justine Sacco's case, because as a woman she was more virulently attacked than she might

have been had she been a heterosexual white man. Sacco's shaming was heavily gendered—and she was actively attacked by millions of Twitter users for tweeting out a (badly worded and slightly offensive but ultimately innocuous) joke about white privilege. At the time of the shaming, Justine felt ashamed, implying that she herself believed what others were saying about her, which intensified her suffering . But months after her shaming, Sacco was able to recognize that she was no longer ashamed and instead "humiliated." This implies that she was at last able to recognize that she'd been made to feel low and demeaned by others. The feeling of humiliation, this passage implies, is something that's thrust upon someone—whereas the feeling of ashamedness is a feeling that comes from within.

Sacco's journey from ashamedness to humiliation shows that she was indeed able to reclaim some agency in her story. While millions of Twitter users sought to destroy her life by attacking her very sense of self, Sacco was able to rise above the noise and instead recognize that what had been done to her was egregious and unjust.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"Literally, overnight everything I knew and loved was gone," Lindsey said.

And that's when she fell into a depression, became an insomniac, and barely left home for a year.

Related Characters: Lindsey Stone, Jon Ronson (speaker), Justine Sacco

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson describes the practical and emotional consequences Lindsey Stone faced after being shamed online. Lindsey Stone's transgression was, like Justine Sacco's, rooted in a joke gone wrong—and, like Justine Sacco, Lindsey suddenly had to face millions of internet users seeking to destroy her life. After being photographed jokingly lifting her middle finger at a sign calling for "SILENCE AND RESPECT" at Arlington Cemetery, Lindsey's life was thrown into turmoil. A mild-mannered woman who worked as a caretaker at an adult daycare facility, Lindsey was suddenly the object of the internet's ire. She lost her job, news crews hounded her family, and she received violent threats online. But as this passage shows, Lindsey's shaming didn't end when the internet lost interest in her story.

This passage is significant because it shows that a public shaming can have devastating, long-lasting effects that impact a person's life. Because Lindsey was a woman, she was treated even more brutally throughout her shaming—and so the depression and paranoia she faced in the wake of her shaming, too, were more extreme. Ronson wants to highlight how shaming someone for a misstep or a silly, juvenile mistake online has real-world ramifications. He's suggesting that there's really no action at all that would justify the abuse and pain Lindsey and her family were forced to go through as she was publicly shamed.

The criminal justice system is supposed to repair harm, but most prisoners—young, black—have been incarcerated for acts far less emotionally damaging than the injuries we noncriminals perpetrate upon one another all the time—bad husbands, bad wives, ruthless bosses, bullies, bankers.

I thought about Justine Sacco. How many of the people piling on her had been emotionally damaged by what they had read? As far as I could tell, only one person was damaged in that pile-on.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Justine Sacco, Lindsey Stone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson continues to explore the moral uselessness of internet shamings by linking the ineffectiveness and brutality of the U.S. criminal justice system to the ineffectiveness and brutality of the "pile on[s]" that take place online.

This passage posits that online public shamings are grave, serious, extrajudicial proceedings that have the capacity to damage a person's life and well-being. Just as undeserving people are incarcerated every day for minor, nonviolent offenses, the internet seeks to defame those whose transgressions against the status quo might be as minor as a joke tweet. Ronson is implying that public shamings—if ever useful at all—would only be of use if they were truly employed to wright moral wrongs or emotional damages. But no one, Ronson is arguing, is truly emotionally damaged by an ill-advised tweet like Justine Sacco's or a joking

picture like Lindsey Stone's.

Ronson is also suggesting through this quotation that not only do public shamings fail to correct moral wrongs—they are actually immoral themselves because of the damage they do to shamees. Justine Sacco probably shouldn't have tweeted a joke about AIDS, and Lindsey Stone probably shouldn't have posted a picture mocking a military burial ground. But the pain and turmoil these women faced—losing their jobs, facing rifts with their friends and families—was far worse than their initial wrongdoings. Just as the criminal justice system often creates far more damage through needless incarceration than it could ever hope to heal, internet shamings as a whole do more harm than good.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"Universal among the violent criminals was the fact that they were keeping a secret," Gilligan wrote. "A central secret. And that secret was that they felt ashamed—deeply ashamed, chronically ashamed, acutely ashamed." It was shame, every time. "I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed or humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed."

Related Characters: James Gilligan, Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson quotes an interview with James Gilligan—a psychiatric expert who spent years working with incarcerated people in order to learn about the relationship between shame, trauma, and violence.

This passage shows, unequivocally, that feelings of shame and the trauma they create can inspire violent action. Feeling "disrespected" or "ridiculed," then, is an incredibly powerful motivator—and those who feel they've lost control of their reputations or senses of self due to being shamed might seek to regain that sense of control through violence. But there's another reason that so many people who've been shamed seek to retaliate: shaming and humiliation can create a feeling of numbness. Ronson saw that feeling in action when he spoke with Jonah Lehrer, a disgraced journalist whose detractors called him a "sociopath" for his seeming non-response to their criticisms, and when he talked to Max Mosley, a British socialite who wondered if he was sociopathic because he felt little in response to his own public shaming. Shame creates numbness and disassociation—and when people act out of a desire to feel something again or to break through that numbness, they can often choose violence. Gilligan and Ronson both suggest that cycles of shame, trauma, and abuse or violence must be cut off at the root—that is to say, society must develop a healthier relationship with shame, and stop seeking to shame others for the most innocuous acts.

"Normal prison is punishment in the worst sense," Jim told me. "It's like a soul-bleeding. Day in, day out, people find themselves doing virtually nothing in a very negative environment."

I thought of Lindsey Stone, just sitting at her kitchen table for almost a year, staring at the online shamings of people just like her.

"People move away from themselves," Jim said. "Inmates tell me time and again that they feel themselves shutting down, building a wall."

Related Characters: Jim McGreevey, Jon Ronson (speaker), Lindsey Stone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson again compares the struggles that incarcerated people face to the pain that victims of online public shaming deal with each day.

Ronson doesn't think it's radical to compare prisoners to shamees—rather, he thinks it's an important parallel to draw. Both inmates and shamees are often confined indoors with little to distract them from their situation. For shamees, the internet—which is omnipresent and always "on"—is a constant reminder of the shame, humiliation, and even threats of violence they've faced. Shamees might "shut down" and "build wall[s]" around themselves in order to cope, as Jonah Lehrer and Lindsey Stone did—in this way, they too are like prisoners who work to numb themselves in order to survive the criminal justice system. By making the controversial claim that being the victim of a public shaming is tantamount to the "negative environment" of prison, Ronson is calling for his readers to recognize the power and gravity of contemporary online shamings and stop participating in them entirely. Ronson doesn't believe that

anyone should be forced to "move away from themselves" in order to survive—but that's what unjust shamings, whether they're conducted via online mob or through the flawed U.S. justice system, can do to a person.

Six months later. Three people sat together in the council chamber at Newark City Hall: Jim, Raquel, and I.

Jim had intervened. The prosecutors were persuaded that Raquel was a victim of an "abuse cycle." And so instead of twenty years she served four more months and then they let her go.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Jim McGreevey, Raquel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson describes watching as a New Jersey inmate named Raquel was given a lesser sentence because of the "abuse cycle" that had defined her life and led to the violent acts for which she was imprisoned.

Raquel's case is of massive importance to Ronson's investigation into the phenomenon of shame. Raquel was abused verbally and sexually by family members from a young age. When she finally thought she'd escaped her traumatic past, though, she found herself enacting the abuse that had defined her childhood upon her own children—and after they were taken away from her, Raquel was arrested and sent to prison. But former governor of New Jersey Jim McGreevey intervened on Raquel's behalf and helped her obtain a lesser sentence. The argument that the cycle of abuse had defined Raquel's life, giving her a deep sense of shame that led her to violence, convinced prosecutors that Raquel deserved a chance to escape that vortex of shame.

This passage shows just how completely feelings of shame, humiliation, and worthlessness can define a person's life. Raquel worked hard to escape from the feelings of ashamedness and lowliness she no doubt felt after years of abuse during the most vulnerable time of her life, the time at which she most needed to be protected—but ending cycles of shame, trauma, and abuse is a hard process. Ronson's empathy for Raquel illustrates his disgust with the state of our contemporary culture of shame and all its victims.

Chapter 14 Quotes

But the Stasi didn't only inflict physical horror. Their main endeavor was to create the most elaborate surveillance network in world history. It didn't seem unreasonable to scrutinize this aspect of them in the hope it might teach us something about our own social media surveillance network.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson draws parallels between the Stasi—the infamous East German secret police agency—and the "social media surveillance network" that exists all over the world today.

When Ronson compares Twitter to the Stasi, he isn't being paranoid or extremist. He's seeking to draw his readers' attention to the fact that through social media, ordinary people are encouraged to scrutinize and call out one another for any transgression that jars the status quo. Someone like Justine Sacco, who made an innocuous joke to a group of less than 200 followers, was suddenly the number-one trending topic on Twitter and the subject of millions of people's hatred—all because one of her followers sent the offending tweet to someone in the media.

Ronson is clearly alarmed by the ways that social media encourages people to monitor one another, seeking out any transgression, offense, or wrongdoing that could be turned into an opportunity for a public shaming. Ronson's distaste for our current culture of virulent shamings and instantaneous cancellations is palpable—and he wants his readers to think for themselves about how insidious it is that social media has, in many ways, become a surveillance tool.

Social media gives a voice to voiceless people—its egalitarianism is its greatest quality. But I was struck by a report [...] that had been written by a Stasi psychologist tasked with trying to understand why they were attracting so many willing informants. His conclusion: "It was an impulse to make sure your neighbor was doing the right thing."

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson weighs the benefits and rewards of social media against the dark, insidious nature of its potential to be used as a method of surveillance.

Throughout the book, Ronson has championed the internet as a democratizing and "egalitarian" force. He believes that social media platforms can give "voiceless people" the opportunity to make themselves heard. And social media enables people to connect across borders with ease, whether they're sharing jokes or building networks in support of political or social justice initiatives. But in spite of the internet's potential to bring people together, it also has the power to create more social division than ever before.

The internet is a powerful tool—and if people start leveraging its power as a way to "make sure [others are] doing the right thing" without leaving room for the messiness of human communication and human error, the internet could quickly become a corrupt and malignant institution. If people start looking for ways to report on one another's misspeakings or minor transgressions, the internet could become a place where there's in fact no democracy, free speech, or equality. As citizens of the internet begin acting more and more like Stasi informers, Ronson and many other experts on both internet culture and the history of fascism are growing increasingly worried that the internet will become a site of repression and tyranny rather than openness and freedom of expression.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ We have always had some influence over the justice system, but for the first time in 180 years—since the stocks and the pillory were outlawed—we have the power to determine the severity of some punishments. And so we have to think about what level of mercilessness we feel comfortable with. I, personally, no longer take part in the ecstatic public condemnation of people unless they've committed a transgression that has an actual victim, and even then not as much as I probably should. I miss the fun a little. But it feels like when I became a vegetarian. I missed the steak, […] but I could no longer ignore the slaughterhouse.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jon Ronson reflects on the great responsibility that all contemporary internet users have to evaluate whether the target of a shaming is actually worthy of being shamed.

By referencing the differences between the brutal, corporal-punishment-based public shamings of yore and the internet-based public shamings of today, Ronson shows that everyday people—not judges—are now responsible for determining the fates of others. While it might seem like a relief to some that "the stocks and the pillory" are no longer threats people have to face, others—like Ronson—believe that the daily and relentless "ecstatic public condemnation[s]" of ordinary people are even more dangerous than whippings in the public square.

As the passage unfolds, Ronson declares his intent to divest from the public shame machine entirely. Earlier in the book, Ronson admitted that he'd gleefully participated in internet pile-one once upon a time, before he realized the serious, insidious nature of online public shamings. Ronson compares the internet to a "slaughterhouse," suggesting that it's a violent place that turns living things into fresh meat for consumption.

This passage is significant and groundbreaking because it calls for a radical reimagining of the internet as a dangerous place. It also suggests that people need to divest, on an individual basis, from the cycles of public shamings that the internet glorifies. With great power comes great responsibility—and internet users have a responsibility to recognize how chaotic and devoid of procedure internet justice has become.

❝ Feedback loops. You exhibit some type of behavior (you drive at twenty-seven miles per hour in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone). You get instant real-time feedback for it (the sign tells you you're driving at twenty-seven miles per hour). You change your behavior as a result of the feedback (you lower your speed to twenty-five miles per hour). You get instant feedback for that decision, too (the sign tells you you're driving at twenty-five miles per hour now. Some signs flash up a smiley-face emoticon to congratulate you).

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson introduces the term "feedback loop"—a psychological phenomenon in which an instantaneous positive (or negative) response to a certain behavior encourages a person to either continue that behavior or change it on the spot.

Here, Ronson seeks to explain how feedback loops have enormous power to encourage or discourage a certain behavior in real time—especially on the internet. When a group of people begin to pile on a shamee, they find themselves in a chorus of other likeminded individuals. Tweeting out a condemnation of the person being shamed will often result in that tweet garnering likes and retweets—and those actions reinforce that the opinion one is sharing is correct, good, and safe. The instant positive feedback means that people are more likely to engage further with the pile-on—and thus, shaming situations can quickly spin irretrievably out of control. Feedback loops, like social media itself, are extremely useful in situations where they're actually calling attention to a dangerous behavior and doing some social good. But both feedback loops and social media become extremely dangerous when they create unchecked, one-directional echo chambers.

> [Feedback loops are] turning social media into "a giant echo chamber where what we believe is constantly reinforced by people who believe the same thing."
>
> We express our opinion that Justine Sacco is a monster. We are instantly congratulated for this [...]. We make the on-the-spot decision to carry on believing it.
>
> "The tech-utopians [...] present this as a new kind of democracy," [my friend wrote]. "It isn't. It's the opposite. It locks people off in the world they started with and prevents them from finding out anything different."

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Justine Sacco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ronson explores how feedback loops flatten public discourse, remove nuance from important conversations, and encourage censorship of dissenting opinions.

Ronson feels that feedback loops that unfold on social media are dangerous mechanisms. When people's opinions are reinforced so quickly and so emphatically—often by hundreds, thousands, or even millions of likeminded users—they're encouraged to cling even more tightly to the ideas that garnered them positive feedback (often through likes and retweets) in the first place. This means that internet discourse can quickly become one-sided and monotonous—everyone espouses a certain opinion because it's popular, and because algorithms are spreading it like wildfire. But this is not a "new kind of democracy"—instead, these "echo chambers" represent a very direct threat to the concept of the internet as place where complex discourse is encouraged.

Ronson shares this quotation from a fellow journalist friend in order to highlight how important it is for the internet to remain a place where diverse opinions are encouraged and where humanity is recognized for its complexity and messiness. By sequestering people from one another and encouraging the spread of only dominant strains of a certain discourse, the internet is actually negatively impacting people's ability to speak their minds freely.

Afterword Quotes

> If anyone should change their behavior, I thought, it ought to be those doing the shaming. Justine's crime had been a badly worded joke mocking privilege. To see the catastrophe as her fault felt, to me, a little like "Don't wear short skirts." It felt like victim-blaming.
>
> "The essay might be a turning-point," wrote Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*. "Twitter-shaming allows people who complacently think of themselves as basically nice to indulge in the dark thrill of bullying—in a righteous cause. Perhaps Ronson's article will cause a questioning of Twitter's instant-Salem culture of shame."
>
> People were realizing [...] that what happened to Justine wasn't social justice. It was a "cathartic alternative."

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker), Justine Sacco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson highlights how the publication of his book brought attention to the sexist and reductive "instant-

Salem culture of shame" that defines life on the internet.

Ronson set out to write *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* in order to explore the roots of shame, to help people defeat their senses of shame, and to call attention to the internet's role in deepening and perpetuating Puritanical shame cycles throughout the U.S. and the U.K. In this passage, he's celebrating the fact that publishing the book made more people think about these important issues. But he's still suggesting that humanity has a long way to go when it comes to rejecting the impulse to engage with "cathartic alternative[s]" to meaningful social justice work online.

Twitter-shaming is, in Ronson's estimation, entirely too wrapped up in "victim-blaming" and "bullying." Twitter could be a platform for democratizing causes related to social justice, prison reform, and more—but instead, sexist pile-ons and vindictive, petty shamings now define the platform. Ronson's book is meant to call readers to action, encouraging them not to "complacently think of themselves as basically nice" but rather interrogate the fact that most of the time, intent doesn't matter when it comes to a public shaming. The shaming is almost always more brutal, inhumane, and even violent than the transgression being shamed—and when people's intentions behind starting these shamings are only focused on being seen as "good," a lot of terrible things can happen.

> Using social media to distribute [...] videos [of police brutality] was a world away from calling a woman who'd just been in a train crash a privileged bitch because she wanted her violin to be okay. One act was powerful and important—using social media to create a new civil rights battlefield. The other was a pointless and nasty cathartic alternative. Given that we are the ones with the power, it is incumbent upon us to recognize the difference.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson offers up one truly good use of social media: to call out large-scale injustices.

Social media is at a crossroads, in Ronson's estimation. Platforms like Twitter can either be fronts for citizen surveillance—as, he believes, they've already become—or they can become tools of the people. It is "powerful and important" to use the internet to shame those who truly deserve to be shamed, such as brutal police officers. But to use the internet to shame a fellow human being for a poorly worded tweet, a slightly offensive joke picture, or a misuse of privilege is to corrupt and derail the internet's potential.

At the end of the passage, Ronson declares that it is essentially up to internet users themselves to make sure that the internet isn't corrupted for ill or useless intents. It shouldn't be hard, he's implying, for people to recognize when a shaming is useful—for instance, when users share videos of police brutality in order to bring awareness to systemic racism and injustice—and when a shaming is needlessly cruel and "cathartic," as it was in the case of Justine Sacco. Unless people start using the internet and the power of public shamings discerningly, the internet may very well become a "pointless and nasty" place rather than the democratizing, egalitarian force it was meant to be.

> What's true about our fellow humans is that we are clever and stupid. We are gray areas.

And so, unpleasant as it will surely be for you, when you see an unfair or an ambiguous shaming unfold, speak up on behalf of the shamed person. A babble of opposing voices—that's democracy.

The great thing about social media was how it gave a voice to voiceless people. Let's not turn it into a world where the smartest way to survive is to go back to being voiceless.

Related Characters: Jon Ronson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ronson entreats his readers to consider the role the internet plays in flattening nuance, derailing public discourse, and reducing people to their simplest, basest parts.

Ronson believes that the internet—a place that's as variable, messy, and bizarre as the human condition itself—should celebrate the "gray areas" that define the experience of being alive. But instead, he asserts that as it is right now, the internet is threatening to take away people's voices. When someone tweets an opinion that others don't agree with or comes to the defense of someone the internet has decided it doesn't like, they're shamed and silenced. This discourages the sharing of messy, complex opinions and the creation of nuanced, thoughtful discourse about important

issues. The internet as it exists right now, Ronson fears, is encouraging people to become silent bystanders who don't use their voices for good.

Ronson suggests that by jumping to the defense of the "shamed person" in a public shaming, people can slowly reclaim the internet as a place where differing, imperfect opinions can thrive. In order to "survive" on the internet right now, people have to silence their most complicated and thought-provoking ideas. But this precedent cannot stand—otherwise the new and radical "democracy" the internet once promised will be threatened and perhaps erased forever.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: BRAVEHEART

In early January of 2012, British journalist Jon Ronson noticed that someone was impersonating him on **Twitter**. The user's handle was @Jon_Ronson, and they were using a picture of Ronson as their own. The tweets were nonsensical, but often profane and humiliating. The account only had 20 followers—but some were people Ronson knew in real life, and he was concerned that people would soon begin to think that the embarrassing tweets were his own.

Right away, it's clear that Jon Ronson is very invested in his internet presence—in the first few lines of the book, he introduces his favored social media platform and one of the book's central symbols: Twitter. Twitter will, over the course of the book, emerge as a symbol of how disjointed modern society is. Though people can reach out to one another faster than ever before, constantly being in touch isn't necessarily communicating productively. This passage shows that while the @Jon_Ronson account appeared to be contributing something to the internet, it was actually just nonsense. Right away, Ronson illustrates the bizarre and humiliating nature of life on the internet.

Ronson began doing some research on the internet. He found that a young man named Luke Robert Mason had commented on a short video Ronson had made about spambots. Mason claimed to have built Ronson his "very own infomorph," and he linked to the @Jon_Ronson handle. Ronson was relieved to know that the account was just a spambot, but he was still determined to get Mason to take the account down. When he tweeted at Mason and asked him to remove the spambot, though, Mason became defensive. Mason insisted that the infomorph wasn't taking Ronson's identity—it was just repurposing data. The spambot continued tweeting about 20 times a day and gaining followers. Ronson felt increasingly "powerless and sullied."

When Ronson realized that the @Jon_Ronson account was a spambot—a program that's written to recycle and reshuffle language from tweets or internet posts that already exist—his shame decreased slightly. He realized someone wasn't targeting him expressly in order to humiliate him—but that didn't lessen his desire to see the account taken down. This illustrates that the internet—a tool meant to empower people to gain access to information, form relationships, and define themselves in new ways—can often be a thing that strips people of their power and leaves them feeling embarrassed.

Ronson reached out to Mason once again, this time asking if they could meet in real life. He offered to film the encounter and put it on YouTube. Mason was excited to meet up and explain the "philosophy" behind the spambot. On the day of the meeting, in central London, Mason arrived with two other men—colleagues of his from Warwick University. All three men introduced themselves as credentialed internet researchers, technologists, and lecturers on social phenomena. As Ronson began talking with the men, they accused him of attempting to control them psychologically. Ronson suggested that they were the ones trying to control him for the purposes of an academic experiment.

This passage shows how a problem that started on the internet—a space that is sometimes regarded as existing somewhat outside of or parallel to reality—quickly became an intense, real-world issue for Ronson. While the researchers' adamantly believed that what they were doing was good and productive, Ronson felt violated and ashamed. This establishes a central dynamic of the book: many people online believe they're doing something good when in fact they're hurting another person, sometimes profoundly, without being able to see their suffering.

Ronson asked the men to take the spambot down, but they heckled him about his desperate attempts to maintain an online "brand" by sidelining their own experiment. The conversation continued in circles for over an hour. The researchers kept asking Ronson if he'd like the spambot to sound more or less like him, even as Ronson insisted that what he wanted was for it to stop existing entirely. The men accused Ronson of feeling threatened. Ronson accused them of being "troll[s]."

While the internet might seem like a diversion that doesn't matter in "real" life, it's in fact increasingly becoming intertwined with people's offline lives. The researchers' disdain for Ronson's attachment to how he appeared to others on the internet was palpable throughout their discussion—but Ronson took life on the internet seriously, and he used language that originated on the internet (such as "troll") to try to sway the researchers. It's also significant to note that the researchers believed their own intentions in creating the spambot to be good and worthy—but like so many well-intentioned internet endeavors, that goodness was entirely subjective.

The meeting ended without any clear resolution, but Ronson uploaded the video to YouTube anyway. Comments supporting Ronson immediately began pouring in. Commenters were excoriating the "manipulative assholes" behind the spambot and urging Ronson to "destroy them." Ronson began feeling happy and relieved—victorious, even. But as the comments on the video continued to escalate in terms of anger, vitriol, and threats against the internet researchers' lives, Ronson grew slightly worried.

This passage is important because it contains the book's first internet pile-on or social media shaming. This incident is the main inciting factor in Ronson's desire to examine why internet mobs use such hostile language and experience a thirst for destruction when they rally together to shame a person or change their behavior.

Within a few days, the academics took down the spambot—they had been "shamed into acquiescence." They wrote an online article detailing the purposes of their experiment—to highlight the oppressiveness of internet algorithms—and lamenting its premature end. But Ronson felt the story had a perfect ending: he'd won.

Here, a social media shaming has finally made the researchers stop their experiment, even though Jon Ronson having a personal, meeting with them didn't change their minds. In this case, a social media shaming was more effective than a face-to-face appeal to empathy, which speaks to the chilling power of social media mobs. This time, the shaming worked in Ronson's favor, but the incident also showed him how frightening it could be to end up on the wrong side of a social media shaming.

Ronson began to think about other recent social media shamings he'd seen online and even partaken in. When a columnist for the *Daily Mail* wrote a homophobic article about the death of a gay pop star, the internet rose up against her—and several major advertisers revoked their banners from the *Mail*'s website. Ronson recalls the incident as a good time for internet users. Through social media, people rallied against bigoted media personalities and crowdfunded in support of issues they cared about. Together, people on the internet brought down "giants" who transgressed against their values through a new kind of weapon: online shaming.

While social media shamings often use violent language and can cause great emotional harm, there is a precedent for social media shamings bringing some measure of justice into the world. When used for truly good intentions—that is, against people or institutions who are genuinely powerful and have done genuine wrong—social media shamings can bring real and important change. But also, Ronson is calling attention here to something crucial: that those who participate in shamings are not necessarily experiencing them as a somber and regrettable moment in which they have to cause someone pain for the greater good. Instead, they're often seeing shamings as a source of amusement and group bonding. Seeing shamings as a "good time" can reinforce the instinct to keep shaming, even in contexts when it's ethically dubious.

Ronson realized that he was living at the beginning of "a great renaissance of public shaming." Public punishments had been phased out of U.K. and U.S. societies in the mid-1830s—but now, they seemed to be back and more powerful than ever before. Ronson decided that the next time a great public shaming began to unfold, he'd put himself in the mix, investigate the shaming up close, and chronicle whether it was effective or not in terms of righting wrongs. Just 12 weeks later, Ronson would find the shaming he was looking for.

In this passage, Ronson clarifies his desire to study social media shamings in order to place them in the context of the larger history of public shamings. Ronson was curious about where, exactly, social media shamings had come from and why they were so powerful.

CHAPTER 2: I'M GLAD I'M NOT THAT

On July 4th, 2012, struggling freelance journalist Michael C. Moynihan was awake late at night on his sofa in Brooklyn. He was hopeful that an upcoming gig blogging for *The Washington Post* for ten days would help garner him enough attention to land a more permanent role somewhere—one that would help him better support his wife and young daughter. Hunting for story ideas, Moynihan downloaded the newest *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller, a book about the neurology of creativity entitled *Imagine: How Creativity Works* by a young, renowned writer named Jonah Lehrer who'd recently been embroiled in a scandal—there were claims that he'd been recycling some of his own, earlier writing in several pieces for *The New Yorker*.

This passage introduces two new characters who will soon find themselves at the center of a classic example of a contemporary public shaming. Jonah Lehrer had already found himself at the heart of a scandal—but his transgression hadn't yet made him the primary subject of the social media sphere's ire and disdain. Though Moynihan would later play a role in bringing the depths of Lehrer's journalistic misdeeds to light, this passage shows that there wasn't any ill intent behind his role in Lehrer's public takedown—he was just a fellow journalist doing his job.

The first chapter of Lehrer's book was centered around Bob Dylan, focusing on a period of creative stagnancy he experienced in 1965 just before he began writing some of the greatest songs of his career. As Moynihan read the chapter, something struck him as being off. Moynihan was a big Dylan fan himself, and the quotations he was reading in Lehrer's book seemed like things Dylan himself never would've said. So Moynihan began watching some old documentary footage of Dylan—and found that one of the quotations Lehrer used didn't match up with what Dylan had actually said. Lehrer claimed Dylan said, of articles about himself in the paper, "I'm glad I'm not *that*"—but documentary footage showed Dylan, on-camera, saying "God, I'm glad I'm not me."

While the discrepancies Moynihan discovered within Lehrer's book may seem small, they were significant to Moynihan and they do distort Dylan's meaning. A big part of Dylan's wit and mystique had to do with his tendency towards playful and mysterious statements like "I'm glad I'm not me," but Lehrer's version did not capture that aspect of Dylan. From Moynihan's perspective, this is something of a David-and-Goliath situation, where Moynihan—a small-time blogger—has discovered that a big-name journalist was misusing his privilege and power by putting lazy mistakes out into the world.

Moynihan emailed Lehrer to tell him that he wanted to clarify where Lehrer had gotten some of his quotes. Moynihan had found six quotes that were suspicious or incorrect. He told Lehrer that he was blogging for the *Post* for ten days. Lehrer emailed back the next day to explain that he was away on vacation—for eleven more days. He promised to go through his files at home as soon as he was back—but in the meantime, he told Moynihan that he'd gotten help from "one of Dylan's managers" who'd given him access to unreleased transcripts of Dylan interviews. Lehrer told Moynihan he could find some of these interviews in a rare anthology that wasn't readily available on the internet.

Lehrer seems to have been intentionally trying to keep Moynihan off of his case. By claiming he'd be unable to help Moynihan out until after Moynihan's blogging stint was already over—and by sending Moynihan on a wild goose chase in search of rare Dylan materials—Lehrer was, in Ronson's estimation, knowingly trying to protect himself. But Moynihan had the sense that what he was doing was good and righteous, so he stayed on the trail.

But Lehrer—whom Moynihan began to suspect was lying—underestimated Moynihan's research capabilities. Moynihan wasn't just a good journalist; he was a person who couldn't abide liars and cheats. So he tracked down an archive of Dylan interviews, essentially a digital version of the multivolume tome Lehrer had recommended. Moynihan scoured the document for Lehrer's quotations, but he couldn't find them. He knew Lehrer was lying.

Moynihan's motivations have moved beyond simply wanting to pursue a story that might earn him prestige. Here, he's described as being particularly incensed by Lehrer lying to him, and now he sees himself as seeking to right a wrong by exposing Lehrer's lies. It's important to see the complexity of his motivations, though. Moynihan is doing something that will cause Lehrer to suffer, and he's doing it partially to right a wrong and partially because he knows he'll be professionally rewarded for it. Throughout the book, Ronson suggests that internet mobs have similarly divided motivations: a genuine desire for a more just world, plus the sense of being publicly rewarded for sharing a popular opinion.

On July 11th, Moynihan received a call from Lehrer. The two of them had a pleasant talk about Dylan and journalism. Moynihan insisted he wasn't trying to take Lehrer down—he wasn't a vengeful blogger, just a journalist trying to feed his family. After the call, Lehrer emailed Moynihan to thank him for being "decent." Moynihan continued to dig around, though, and when he emailed Dylan's longtime manager, Jeff Rosen, to ask if Rosen had ever spoken with Lehrer, Rosen said he hadn't. Moynihan emailed Lehrer with more questions and said that he'd talked to Rosen. And then, in Moynihan's words, Lehrer "lost it."

While superficially pleasant, Moynihan's conversation with Lehrer shows their mutual awareness that the situation is a tinderbox: Moynihan clearly feels guilty about reporting an article that could damage Lehrer's reputation and career, and he justifies it by tying the article to his need to feed his family. Meanwhile, Lehrer may be manipulating Moynihan by calling him "decent," trying to get him not to publish the article by implying that it wouldn't be a kind thing to do. It's worth comparing the tone of this conversation—tense but pleasant—to the tone of the "conversations" that happen during public shamings online. Here, these are two human beings having a phone call about a difficult subject, and they're both being polite and humane. On Twitter, without the presumption of the other person's humanity, these kinds of conversations often devolve quickly into vitriol.


Lehrer began calling Moynihan repeatedly and begging him not to publish whatever he was working on. Moynihan would later tell Ronson that he felt like Lehrer was like a dying animal he'd hunted, twitching and ready to be put out of its misery—Moynihan didn't want to be the one to strike the final blow. Andrew Wylie, a well-known and powerful literary agent who represented Lehrer, called Moynihan and advised him not to "ruin a guy's life." Moynihan said he'd think hard about what to do next.

When Moynihan compares himself to a hunter and Lehrer to a dying animal, it's a rather extreme metaphor—all Moynihan has done, after all, is dig into some suspicious quotations in Lehrer's book and contemplate publicly accusing him of inaccuracy. But the dying animal metaphor shows how reputational battles on the internet can feel like life-or-death events to those involved. While Lehrer won't physically lose his life, he does stand to lose his livelihood and reputation, which is a significant loss. Moynihan is aware of this and it weighs heavily on him, which Ronson will later suggest is a good thing. Provoking an internet mob has severe consequences for the person being shamed, and a major argument of Ronson's book is that it shouldn't be done lightly.


Toward the end of July, Moynihan fielded a call from Lehrer. Finally, Lehrer agreed to make an on-the-record statement to Moynihan: he said, "I'm deeply sorry for lying." Moynihan hurried home and wrote the story he'd been working on for nearly a month in just 40 minutes. He knew he wouldn't make much from the small Jewish online magazine, *Tablet*, he'd pitched the story to—but that his words would forever affect the outcome of the rest of Lehrer's life. Moynihan grew anxious.

Here, Ronson captures the ethical and emotional complexity of public shaming. In deciding whether to forever damage Lehrer's professional prospects, Moynihan has to weigh many conflicting factors: the severity of Lehrer's transgression, the moral value of exposing his lies, the fact that he admitted to lying and apologized, and the paltry financial compensation that Moynihan will receive for doing something so grave. Moynihan's anxiety about whether he has made the right decision paints him as an ethical person who does not take lightly the suffering he is about to cause.

Lehrer, too, began exhibiting signs of extreme stress. He called Moynihan repeatedly during the next several days, making upwards of 20 calls at a time. Finally, Moynihan told Lehrer to stop harassing him. Lehrer begged Moynihan to kill the story. Moynihan began to realize that his article really could destroy Lehrer's life, just as Wylie had predicted. But Moynihan sent his draft to his editor, anyway.

Lehrer's behavior here makes the earlier analogy between him and a dying animal seem more apt. Clearly, Lehrer is unraveling because of the severe consequences that he knows he's about to face. Ronson does not weigh in about whether or not he believes that Lehrer's transgression merits the damage that this article will do. Instead, he focuses on the intense toll that the situation is taking on everyone involved, including Moynihan. It's worth comparing this to some of the book's later subjects who are fairly glib about the shamings they've incited. But here, Ronson asks readers to pay attention to the stakes; Lehrer is already suffering deeply, and he'll only suffer more once the article is published.

Moynihan knew about other journalists whose careers had blown up following accusations of falsified facts—Stephen Glass, who fabricated many details in a story about a 15-year-old hacker, was fired from his job after another journalist exposed his lies. But Glass had invented whole scenes and scenarios—Lehrer had only embellished a handful of quotes. Moynihan felt "trapped" in the situation he'd created—he knew that if he didn't expose Lehrer's falsifications, someone else would; indeed, Moynihan's own reputation as a journalist could suffer if his editors grew frustrated with him for failing to finish the piece.

Over and over again, Ronson returns to Moynihan's anguish. He's not doing this to frame Moynihan as a victim of this scenario (he's careful to acknowledge that Lehrer's suffering is much worse). Instead, by depicting Moynihan's wide-ranging anxieties (that Lehrer's misquoting didn't rise to the level of prior embellishment scandals) and motivations (his professional incentives to publish this first), Ronson is showing readers how serious it is—or, at least, should be—to decide to ruin someone's reputation.

A few hours before the story appeared online, Moynihan and Lehrer had one final phone call. Moynihan told Lehrer that he felt "like shit," and Lehrer responded icily that he didn't care how Moynihan felt. Moynihan barely slept that night—he wondered if the icy persona Lehrer had inhabited on the phone was the person he'd been all along, or whether Moynihan was demonizing Lehrer to make himself feel better.

Moynihan is exceptionally conscientious as he makes the decision to publish his article. Instead of justifying his own motivations to make himself feel better, he interrogates himself rather ruthlessly, wondering if he's being fair to Lehrer or whether he's imagining Lehrer to be someone worse than he is. Ronson takes these anxieties seriously, implicitly suggesting that a decision like this should *keep someone up at night because the stakes are so high. (This is not to say that, in the end, it wasn't the right thing to do—Ronson does not weigh in on that.)*

Ronson notes that in his own conversations with Moynihan, Moynihan often described himself as a "schlub" or a nobody—but this narrative, too, might have been one Moynihan constructed to reimagine himself as the David to Lehrer's Goliath. At the same time, Ronson recognized that Moynihan was "traumatized" by what he'd done to Lehrer—until he realized that Lehrer lived in a $2.25 million home in Los Angeles. Then, Moynihan felt, things became "a bit different."

Ronson suggests that, by describing himself as a nobody, Moynihan might actually have been trying to downplay his own power in the situation, thereby soothing his guilt about what happened to Lehrer. Essentially, this passage asks who was really the more powerful person: Moynihan, who had an explosive scoop and a platform where he could publish it, or Lehrer, the famous journalist whose wealth and connections couldn't stop his downfall. Ronson doesn't raise this question to suggest that Moynihan did the wrong thing, but instead to point out that what sometimes seems like a straightforward power imbalance is more complicated than it appears. This can be especially true in the context of internet mobs, where individual users often do not consider themselves to be powerful or believe that their online posts have consequences, but in the aggregate, a mob often has much more power than the person being shamed.

When Ronson, at a party, recounted the Moynihan and Lehrer story to a film director with whom he was making conversation, the director was spellbound by the story. Everyone, the director posited, was living in "terror of being found out." Everyone has a secret that they keep buried—everyone has something of which they are ashamed. Ronson himself began to wonder how many people he himself had shamed over the course of his career as a journalist.

When the film director observes that everyone has a shameful secret that they're terrified will be found out, he's getting at a core argument of Ronson's book: part of the power of public shamings comes from the near-universal terror they evoke. Since almost everyone has a secret that they're ashamed of, it's easy for people to imagine themselves as a victim of a shaming, which gives the threat of public shaming tremendous psychological power. As the book progresses, Ronson explores the possibility that one way to be liberated from the fear of public shamings is to figure out how people can eliminate their own shame.

CHAPTER 3: THE WILDERNESS

Ronson recalls going hiking in Runyon Canyon with Jonah Lehrer, who insisted that he did not belong in Ronson's book. Lehrer claimed that Americans only liked reading about tragedies with happy endings—and that his story was thus unfit for Ronson's book. In that moment, Ronson felt deeply for Lehrer—he could tell that Lehrer was suffering terribly. "The shaming process is fucking brutal," Lehrer had written in an email to Ronson prior to their hike. At only 31, Lehrer believed he was staring down a "lifetime of ruin." Ronson, however, still believed Lehrer could find a way back into the public's good graces.

Lehrer conceives of his own story as a tragedy, as he sees himself as a casualty of an inhumane public shaming. One thing that Ronson repeatedly points out in his book, though, is that women who are the victims of public shamings are often treated worse than men and often have fewer opportunities to publicly redeem themselves. Perhaps Ronson's confidence that Lehrer can work his way back into public favor has to do not only with his youth and talent, but also with his gender—as a man, he might be forgiven more easily.

A former Rhodes Scholar, Lehrer published his first book on neuroscience when he was still very young. He wrote books and essays, and he earned a lot of money as a popular public speaker. In 2012, he made a much-anticipated career move by joining the staff of *The New Yorker*. But weeks after taking the job, Moynihan's article broke—and Lehrer resigned. His publisher withdrew and destroyed every copy of *Imagine* still in circulation, offering refunds to readers. The internet was suddenly abuzz with commenters who excoriated Lehrer's work. Investigations into columns he'd written for magazines like *Wired* revealed ongoing instances of journalistic malfeasance. Moynihan was relieved to find that there was more corruption in Lehrer's career than even he had realized.

By showing how illustrious Jonah Lehrer's career was before his public shaming, the book calls attention to the devastation of Lehrer's fall from grace. But the book is not simply calling attention to the devastating effect that this shaming had on Lehrer's life—it's also taking seriously the transgression that earned the shaming. As it turns out, Moynihan's article was only the tip of the iceberg, as online sleuths found many more instances of plagiarism in his old articles. This makes Moynihan's shaming a grey area—his career wasn't ruined for a single tasteless joke or even a single instance of plagiarism, but rather for a pattern of professional malfeasance that affects a reader's ability to trust his writing, which arguably justifies his loss of a job.

Lehrer essentially disappeared after his shaming, abandoning his **Twitter** presence and ignoring interview requests. Ronson was surprised when Lehrer agreed to speak with him—and he was amused when the two selected a desert canyon as their interview site, since Lehrer's punishment was indeed "biblical." After their hike, on the way back to Ronson's hotel, Lehrer told Ronson that he was planning to make a public apology at a luncheon held by the Knight Foundation—a fund for young journalists. Lehrer asked Ronson to look over his statement, and Ronson agreed to do so.

By calling attention to the "biblical" nature of Lehrer's punishment—implicitly comparing Lehrer to the Israelites wandering the desert in exile in the Book of Exodus—Ronson suggests the intensity of Lehrer's suffering. But in this moment, Lehrer is already plotting his comeback, and breaking his exile to speak with Ronson is part of that. Ronson is doing a bit of a tightrope walk here as a journalist, since he wants to understand Lehrer's suffering, which requires speaking with Lehrer, but Lehrer has seemingly agreed to speak with Ronson in part to help rehabilitate his ruined image. So now Ronson is an inextricable part of the story.

On the plane home from Los Angeles, Ronson read the introduction to Lehrer's surprisingly stark and contrite speech. But he was surprised to find that the speech quickly pivoted away from shame as Lehrer compared himself to "imperfect" forensic scientists who find themselves swayed by confirmation bias—people who are "victims of their hidden brain[s]." Lehrer vowed that, should he return to journalism, he would hold himself to high standards and submit to rigorous fact-checking at every step of the writing process; he had laid out the "happy ending" he felt America wanted. Ronson, though, felt Lehrer's speech was evasive.

Even though Lehrer's speech revealed his desperation to rehabilitate his image and right his wrongs, Ronson also found that the speech sought to minimize and excuse his journalistic malfeasance. By claiming that he was merely an "imperfect" person or even a "victim," Lehrer was trying to imply that he wasn't deserving of the shaming he'd been through. Ronson is often sympathetic to that notion with other victims of public shamings, but it's more complicated with Lehrer whose malfeasance was a pattern of behavior across his whole career and whose transgression directly affected his ability to do his job (as he has lost the trust of readers). In this case, it's not clear that Lehrer is *a victim—perhaps the vitriolic nature of the public's reaction was excessively cruel, but the professional consequences he faced are arguably fair.*


Lehrer denied Ronson's request to accompany him to Miami to give the address at the luncheon, so Ronson watched a livestream. The Knight Foundation had placed a large screen behind Lehrer that displayed a live **Twitter** feed of users' real-time opinions of Lehrer's speech as they rolled in. For the first part of Lehrer's speech, the tweets coming in were supportive and encouraging—but as he turned to the forensic science metaphor, the tweets became angry and vitriolic. Many accused Lehrer of being a sociopath or a narcissist.

Lehrer's speech at the Knight foundation constituted yet another public shaming—and this time, everyone could watch in real time as the internet mob turned against Lehrer and began intensely shaming him yet again. Lehrer's speech was too transparently aimed at shifting blame away from him and rehabilitating his image—and the public did not respond kindly. Lehrer's real-time public shaming illustrates how swiftly and irrevocably the tide of public opinion can turn.

Lehrer "was perceived to have misused his privilege," and the internet was responding accordingly. Some tweets called for the internet to stop kicking Lehrer when he was down, but just as quickly, other tweets began to expose that Lehrer had been paid $20,000 to appear at the luncheon. Later that day, Lehrer would email Ronson to complain that he was filled with regret and that he felt nothing could turn his career around.

This is one of the first moments in the book in which Ronson makes the connection between public shamings and misusing privilege. Throughout the book, Ronson will continue to explore why privileged individuals who live life in the public eye are often so brutally, forcefully, and swiftly taken down through social media shamings—many people are ready to pounce when privileged people appear to misuse their privilege.

Moynihan, too, told Ronson he felt that Lehrer's apology was halfhearted, as if Lehrer were on "autopilot." But Ronson could sense some bitterness coming from Moynihan—he'd been paid very little for his exposé of Lehrer, and now, many other writers and journalists were a little bit afraid of him. He was seen as the head of a "pitchfork mob," even though he'd never intended to take Lehrer down. But the mob had taken up their weapons nonetheless—and now, in Ronson's view, everyone on the internet had cast themselves as a "hanging judge" in Lehrer's imaginary public trial.

This passage shows how the consequences of a public shaming are often not straightforward. Lehrer certainly suffered at the hands of the public, but Moynihan did too, as he was paid much less to expose Lehrer than Lehrer himself was paid to try to apologize and, besides, others assumed that Moynihan was cruel, which affected him personally and professionally. It seems that Moynihan has mixed feelings about exposing Lehrer, as he still finds Lehrer a bit insincere and seems perhaps jealous of Lehrer's financial success, which might make him grateful for Lehrer's shaming, but it seems that Moynihan also feels shame about provoking a mob. Moynihan's exposé spiraled out of control into an all-out assault on Lehrer's career and livelihood—and while Moynihan might not have been responsible for the brutality Lehrer endured, he did arm the public with the information they needed to become their own "judge[s]" in Lehrer's metaphorical extrajudicial "hanging."

Ronson traveled to Boston to visit the Massachusetts Archives and the Massachusetts Historical Society, hoping to explore the origins of public shamings in the U.S. and why they'd ended. As he combed through centuries-old documents, he found records of a woman who was to be whipped alongside her lover for having an extramarital affair. She petitioned the judge to carry out her punishment early in the morning, before her neighbors were awake. Ronson began to think more deeply about the contemporary "shaming process" versus the public punishments of yore.

When Lehrer previously used the word "process" to describe his public shaming, it triggered Ronson's curiosity, which led him to investigate how public shamings did in fact originate as legal processes. While contemporary public shamings do still follow certain patterns, Ronson had a feeling that the contemporary "process" (which is not a defined or orderly process at all) was very different from what it had once been.

Ronson found that public shaming used to be an intricate process, with particular punishments meted out for certain crimes. The details of these public punishments—whippings, hangings, and more—were often published in local newspapers in extreme detail. Ronson had assumed that public punishments fizzled out because, as more people moved to cities, there was more anonymity and less interest. Instead, he found that they'd stopped because they became "too brutal," and high-profile officials began calling for an end to public brutality.

While many people might like to think that human society has moved past the brutality of punishments that were doled out hundreds of years ago, Ronson is laying the groundwork to argue that, in fact, people recognized generations ago that public shaming was a particularly inhumane form of punishment and banned it as a result.

Realizing that Jonah Lehrer had been subjected to something that would've been considered "appalling" centuries ago, Ronson started to wonder whether Twitter had become a kind of "kangaroo court." But one of Ronson's followers pointed out that courts can impose sentences—Twitter can only offer commentary. Still, remotely-administered shamings seemed even more intense to Ronson—no one meting out the "commentary" considered how powerful the collective could be.

By showing that contemporary social media shamings are, in some ways, even more out of control, unpredictable, and destructive than the brutal and humiliating shamings of yore, Ronson reminds his readers that modern-day society is not necessarily more humane than the societies of days gone by. Social media shamings are even more inhumane than public whippings in some ways, because technology has made it possible for shamings to involve millions upon millions of rageful, highly focused individuals.

Ronson reached out to Lehrer again, and Lehrer consented to a lengthier interview. He admitted that it was a mistake to take the payment that the Knight Foundation offered him—but that having been unable to make any income as a journalist for months, he was growing desperate. Lehrer pointed out an article about him that had called him a "sociopath," and—knowing Ronson had written a book about psychopathy years ago—he asked Ronson if he fit the bill. But Ronson knew Lehrer wasn't one, and he suspected that Lehrer knew it, too, and was just fishing for pity.

Lehrer wasn't a sociopath—a fact that both he and Ronson already knew. After all, Lehrer seems acutely able to feel shame, which no psychopath would be capable of doing. But it's still notable that so many people online called him one, implying that he was devoid of the capacity to feel and express emotion. This begins to make a connection between the perception of being remorseless and the intensity of public shaming—people seem to want to shame someone more if they're not reacting to a shaming in the way that the mob desires.

Lehrer told Ronson he recalled shutting down emotionally as critical tweets began pouring in on the screens around him—and his flat affect only allowed the audience to see him even more as some kind of "monster immune to shame." Ronson admitted that what had happened to Lehrer was his own "worst nightmare."

The tweets critical of Lehrer's demeanor were mostly about the internet's perception that he wasn't adequately ashamed—or was perhaps even unable to feel shame at all. But Lehrer makes clear that actually what happened was the opposite; he was so ashamed when all the critical tweets started appearing, and this made him shut down emotionally in order to get through his speech. This created a horrible feedback loop whereby the less emotion Lehrer showed, the more he was shamed, and the less he was able to feel.

Four months later, Lehrer's agent Andrew Wylie began shopping a new book proposal of Lehrer's to publishers. Its title was *A Book About Love*—and, among other things, it discussed Lehrer's recent public shaming. But when the proposal leaked, journalists began fact-checking and proofreading it, and they found even more evidence of plagiarism, erroneous facts, and recycled language from other projects. Still, the book was picked up for publication.

Even though Ronson expresses a lot of sympathy for Lehrer throughout this chapter, this passage shows that Lehrer perhaps didn't really learn his lesson as a result of his repeated public shamings. So while public shamings do create emotional turmoil, numbness, and embarrassment, this passage suggests that they're not necessarily effective in terms of rectifying bad behavior. And if public shamings aren't doing much public good or righting wrongs—when that seems to be the reason they were designed in the first place, centuries ago—then it raises the question of why they keep happening.

CHAPTER 4: GOD THAT WAS AWESOME

In the months that followed, Ronson began noticing that more and more people were being shamed on the internet for tweeting badly worded jokes to a small number of followers. One of these people was Justine Sacco, a PR professional with only 170 followers on **Twitter**. As she prepared to board a flight from London to Cape Town, she crafted a tweet that she thought was a funny, self-aware mockery of American attitudes toward travel to Africa. She tweeted: "*Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding, I'm white!*" By the time Sacco's flight landed, the whole internet had seen her tweet.

By starting to tell Justine Sacco's story, Ronson calls attention to how, in just a short span of time, public shamings quickly became less about righting the wrongs of privileged people or people with power, and more about destroying anyone who was perceived to have transgressed against a social norm or status quo. Even though Justine Sacco's tweet was a joke—a joke aimed at exposing attitudes of American exceptionalism and white supremacy—the internet came after her for saying something that seemed offensive and jarring. This passage is also significant because it begins to introduce another new theme: the idea that women are disproportionately targeted and maligned when it comes to public shamings.

Weeks later, Ronson met with Sacco at a restaurant near her office—she'd been fired, and she was on her way to clean out her desk. Hours after her misguided tweet, Sacco had become the number one trending topic on **Twitter** worldwide. While she was still in the air, her tweet had spread across the internet like wildfire. The online mob called her tweet "racist" and "offensive," and they called Justine horrible, sexist names as they anticipated the moment her plane landed and she realized what was going on. Ronson had met with people whose reputations had been destroyed, but Sacco was the first person he'd met whose reputation had been destroyed by random people on the internet united against her.

Ronson singles out Sacco's case as unique because of her obscurity (compared to someone like Lehrer), the minor nature of her transgression (a poor joke made for a small group of followers), and her gender. The internet wanted to destroy Justine's life and tear her apart over a single tweet—and she wasn't even someone like Jonah Lehrer, who'd been in the public eye or who had a responsibility to a dedicated, widespread group of readers.

Sacco's name was googled over a million times in about ten days at the end of December 2013. Paparazzi awaited her at the Cape Town airport when she landed, and, when she arrived back in New York, they followed her around the streets of Manhattan. She was floored by the idea that anyone could have thought her tweet was literal—but it didn't matter that Justine was just trying to make fun of an American "bubble" of ignorance. The internet gleefully took her down. During their interview, Sacco told Ronson that if she were to die suddenly, the world would remember her for her viral tweet, and it would not remember her kindly.

This passage shows how contemporary social media shamings are, in many ways, even worse than corporal-punishment-based public shamings of yore. Sacco was living in relative obscurity—but the power of the internet mob turned her life upside down and compromised her career, her privacy, and her well-being both physically and mentally. And the punishment didn't end when a judge or some other arbiter decided it had been enough—the abuse just kept going on and on for as long as the mob on the internet thought it should.

Even journalists who should have reported her story with "fearlessness" toward the online mob called her tweet "vile" and "repugnant," trying to signal their aversion to Sacco's radioactive tweet. And even though Justine apologized publicly and cut her vacation short, vitriol and lies about her continued to spread. Her own extended family who lived in South Africa told Sacco she'd "tarnished" their reputations.

This passage shows how radioactive and repugnant the victims of social media shamings can quickly become—even to their loved ones. No one wants to be associated with someone who's become a pariah overnight, which can overwhelm an otherwise rational person's ability to assess the objective severity of the transgression. This adds to the collateral damage of public shamings, as a shaming targets a shamee's emotions and relationships, not just their jobs and reputations.

Ronson got in touch with Sam Biddle, a *Gawker* journalist who retweeted Sacco's tweet to his 15,000 followers—he is likely the person who began the firestorm surrounding the tweet. Biddle told Ronson that it was a "delicious" detail that Sacco worked in PR and that he'd gladly make the same choice to retweet Sacco again, if given the chance. Biddle felt that Sacco's destruction was justifiable because she tweeted something racist. But Ronson disagreed; Sacco wasn't a racist, so attacking her wasn't "punching up." And neither was attacking Jonah Lehrer in real time as he issued a public apology. Both lives had been ruined for the sake of "social media drama." Ronson began to wonder what "rush" took control of people in such circumstances, and what the internet was gaining through these public shamings.

This passage shows how little it can take for a public shaming to begin. Biddle wanted to right a perceived wrong—and he knew that he could use his power to gain immediate support across the internet for his own purposes. Ronson clearly dislikes Biddle's thirst for Sacco's destruction, which he sees as targeting someone who didn't have the power to defend herself. This furthers Ronson's argument that people need to be aware of how vicious and destructive social media shamings can be. The "rush" of power one might experience after kicking off a shaming is an unacceptable reason to start the shaming process.

Biddle told Ronson that the internet's attention span was short—users would move onto new fodder soon, and Sacco would be "fine." But when Ronson relayed this to Sacco, she insisted that she wasn't fine—she was suffering. She'd lost her job, she'd embarrassed her family, and now her story lived online for anyone who searched her name to see.

While the people who kick off social media shamings might think they're low-stakes and innocuous, their brutality can't be denied. Ronson implies that contemporary shamings are so terrible because while there might be a pattern, there's no process—so the shamings can go on for a very long time, destroying everything in their paths without regard to what is just or fair.

When Sacco asked who else Ronson was interviewing for his book, he told her about Jonah Lehrer and about how Lehrer's "broken[ness]" in the wake of his public shaming was often mistaken for shamelessness. Ronson was mystified by how people dehumanized those they hurt—and how the same thing that had happened to Lehrer was now happening to Sacco. Sacco told Ronson she didn't want to meet again for several months, and he began to see that she "wasn't thrilled" to be compared to Jonah Lehrer. He'd sullied his integrity—she'd just made a bad joke.

Even Justine Sacco could recognize that there was a marked difference between her own social media shaming (as a non-public figure who made a bad joke) and the shaming of someone who had made repeated professional transgressions that affected his ability to do his job with integrity. This passage implies that gender played a huge role in Sacco's shaming—she'd done something far less bad than Lehrer had, yet she was being punished much more severely than he ever was.

The day after meeting with Justine Sacco, Ronson traveled to D.C. to meet with Ted Poe, a Houston judge turned representative for Texas's Second Congressional District. As a judge, Poe gained infamy for his distinctive punishments. In 1996, Poe ordered a teenager who'd killed two people in a drunk driving accident to attend 110 days of boot camp rather than prison—and to carry a sign that read "I KILLED TWO PEOPLE WHILE DRIVING DRUNK" once a month for ten years in front of both high schools and bars. Poe also ordered the teen to commit to maintaining a memorial site for the victims for ten years, to keep their photographs in his wallet, to send ten dollars a week for ten years to a memorial fund in their name, and to observe the autopsy of another victim of a drunk-driving incident.

Ted Poe was notorious for giving people eccentric, shame-based punishments when he was a judge. Poe's methods might be described as draconian or vicious, but Poe recognized something key about justice and penance: shame can be a powerful way to change behavior and mindset. And the major difference between Poe's public shamings and the internet's is that Poe's punishments had a finite duration and a clear connection to the original transgression, whereas the internet's punishments can be endless and random and excessively punitive.

During his meeting with Poe, Poe gleefully told Ronson about some of his favorite shamings. Ronson asked Poe if he was turning the criminal justice system into a form of entertainment. Poe admitted that the public often "liked" his punishments—but that 85% those who were shamed publicly never entered the system again. Poe's argument, Ronson realized, was "annoyingly convincing." And when Ronson spoke with Mike Hubacek—the teenager who'd killed two people driving drunk—Hubacek claimed to be "forever grateful" to Poe for pulling him out of prison and turning his life around by giving him the opportunity to connect with people about the dangers of drunk driving.

While Ronson's book has so far been about the inhumanity of public shaming, speaking with Poe has thrown a wrench in Ronson's conviction that public shaming is categorically bad—in fact, shame-based punishments administered via a court of law reduced the number of people who re-offended, which is a major goal of any kind of punishment. Furthermore, Mike Hubacek did not feel that his public shaming was overly punitive or worse than being allowed to remain relatively private by going to jail; Hubacek actually thought his shaming was an opportunity for growth that he wouldn't have had with a more traditional punishment. So if public shaming can be productive in some circumstances, then the question becomes how to differentiate bad public shamings from good ones.

Ronson was even more confused when Poe told him that social media shamings were worse than the shamings he himself had devised for convicted criminals. Realizing that he was a part of that social media horde, Ronson began to understand how truly brutal the internet's anonymous public shamings could be. He'd watched in real time over the years as **Twitter** transformed from a "Garden of Eden" of ideas and jokes to a watchtower for transgressions and misspeakings. Ronson became part of the mob himself—and over the years there had been so many transgressors, so many shamings, that he couldn't remember most of them. Ronson concluded that Poe was right—the internet was more frightening than Poe was.

While Poe became famous for devising elaborate public shamings, he does not believe that internet shamings are helpful or fair. To him, it's far crueler to be a victim of an internet mob than to have a public shaming administered in court. Of course, this could be self-serving logic (Poe justifying his punishments to himself), but based on Mike Hubacek's reaction to Poe's punishment versus the horrific humiliation felt by victims of online shaming, Poe's opinion seems credible.

CHAPTER 5: MAN DESCENDS SEVERAL RUNGS IN THE LADDER OF CIVILIZATION

Ronson began to wonder if group madness was the explanation for the steadily escalating desire to see flawed individuals publicly shamed. Ronson reflects on the 2011 London riots, which began after police shot and killed a man named Mark Duggan. Five days of protests, riots, and looting took hold of the city and even came near to Ronson's own home. Sociologists and epidemiologists claimed that "emotional contagion" had kept the riots going for so long—and even though they fizzled out, the concept of group madness stuck with people like Ronson for a long time.

Here, Ronson tries to understand why vitriol, anger, and the desire for punishment can spread so quickly on social media—and why people become so eager to participate in the destruction of others. Regardless of what the original intent behind a social media shaming (or any public shaming) might be, this passage implies that intent can quickly become lost in the shuffle, and he wants to understand why.

Gustave LeBon, a 19th-century French doctor, pioneered the concept of group madness—he cemented his ideas while watching riots seize Paris throughout the mid-to-late 1800s. LeBon set out to prove scientifically that mass revolutionary movements were nothing more than "madness"—he believed that drawing such a conclusion would allow him entry into the upper echelons of Parisian society. LeBon's work took him into the field of eugenics, and an 1879 paper he wrote suggesting that women and Black people's brains were inferior to those of white men was a "disaster."

While Ronson was initially interested in the idea that internet mobs might be caused by group madness, he found some troubling things when he dug further into the idea. The person who pioneered the notion of group madness was merely trying to undermine revolutionary movements in order to ingratiate himself with elites, and he also was strikingly racist and misogynistic, which all casts doubt on the validity of "group madness" as an idea. But the mere fact that Gustave LeBon was, hundreds of years ago, trying to account for the mysteries of group behavior shows how pervasive and persistent this problem has been—obviously, crowds behave very differently than individuals do, but it's difficult to figure out exactly why.

LeBon continued to travel the world and write racist, eugenics-infused screeds—and in 1895, he published *The Crowd*, a book whose thesis was that communism, feminism, and other collective movements were nothing more than madness. It was a success—and, in Ronson's estimation, it proved only that "we tend to love nothing more than to declare other people insane."

Ronson is deeply suspicious of LeBon's work because it seems so self-serving and infected by reprehensible and debunked ideas, but he does admit how seductive it is to people to dismiss the behavior of others by calling them insane.

Another example of humanity's willingness to declare others "insane" is the Stanford Prison Experiment, which took place in 1971 under the supervision of psychologist Philip Zimbardo. Zimbardo seized on crowd theory (or deindividuation, a proposed phenomenon in which uninhibited behavior becomes more common in an excitable crowd setting) and set up a 2-week experiment to prove his point. He set up a mock prison in a windowless basement, complete with constructed cells and solitary confinement rooms. He hired male college students, categorized them as either guards or prisoners, and let them loose. Zimbardo ended the experiment after six days, claiming it had turned violent and spiraled out of control. But Ronson wanted to find out what had really unfolded in the basement.

By contrasting LeBon's older research on crowds and madness against Zimbardo's more recent attempts to uncover the relationship between group settings and loss of the self, Ronson shows that there is a pervasive need throughout human society to understand how the self is impacted by the presence of a cacophony of voices. The internet is now the space where large groups of people rally around a single cause—but these real-world experiments, while perhaps not entirely accurate in their findings, set the stage for inquiries into how decreased inhibition enables internet pile-ons.

Ronson tracked down one of the men who'd been involved in the experiment as a guard. The man's name was John Mark, and he confided in Ronson that the experiment was, in fact, uneventful. Only one of the guards, Dave Eshelman, had seemed to truly go off the rails. So Ronson contacted Eshelman—who then bragged to him about what a good acting job he'd done throughout the experiment. He deliberately imitated the film *Cool Hand Luke*, believing that he was "doing something good" at the time. When Ronson brought Eshelman's statement to a pair of psychologists, they found it interesting that he claimed to be doing something good.

It's not clear what actually happened during the Stanford Prison Experiment, as the researcher's observation about the behavior of the guards isn't corroborated by the participants themselves, while the guards' accounts of their own behavior might simply be self-serving attempts to clear their names. But Ronson does fixate on the supposedly brutal guard's explanation that he thought he was doing something good by being brutal to others. This shows that the impulse to do something good—whether that thing is objectively good or simply perceived as good because it's what someone wants—can be the driving force behind a lot of violent, unacceptable human behavior.

Ronson concluded that the people who'd piled on Justine Sacco weren't "infected with evil," but rather perceived themselves as arbiters of what was good and what was not. There are patterns and anomalies even within violent crowds—so "contagion" isn't the answer to the question of why people come together on their own and act as one.

Here, Ronson theorizes that it's not "contagion" or "infect[ion]" or even a loss of identity that creates such virulent internet mobs—it's the (sometimes false) belief that one's thoughts and actions are morally right. That belief in one's own righteousness can lead someone to see themselves as an arbiter, or judge, of other people's actions and behavior.

Zimbardo's assistant refused to schedule an appointment for Ronson to speak with him, but Ronson did receive an email from Zimbardo himself, in which Zimbardo insisted that Eshelman didn't do anything good. In fact, Zimbardo asserted, Eshelman singlehandedly created an "evil environment." Ronson did even more research and concluded that many psychologists had already written about how Zimbardo's participation in the experiment as the "warden" greatly impacted how subjects behaved. Young men assigned to roles as guards assumed that they needed to behave a certain way. Prison guards had a reputation for being violent and gruff, so the boys acted like their concepts of guards to fit what they assumed the researcher's expectation was.

This passage shows that when people change their behavior to fit with what they believe is expected or desired of them, bad things can happen. Ronson uses this passage to imply that when people join a social media pile-on, they're doing what they believe the originator of the mob and all those who have joined the fray since want them to—but this isn't necessarily good or moral behavior, and in fact it can spiral out of control.

To Ronson, **Twitter** isn't really a crowd—it's a group of individual voices. Some called for violence against Sacco, others sought to redirect the internet's attention to good causes like AIDS charities, while others tried to profit off of her suffering by hawking in-flight WiFi. But, without leadership, they'd all come together spontaneously around one central issue. Ronson knew that he'd played a role in piling on people like Sacco in the past, and he wanted to figure out from what "weird dark well" that impulse came.

Even though he'd figured out that "mob mentality" or the "madness" of a crowd might not be the right way to describe social media shamings, Ronson was still disturbed by how quickly and how fiercely these attacks went off the rails. Ronson's disturbance—and his need to know more—reveals the complex psychological roots of our contemporary public shamings.

CHAPTER 6: DOING SOMETHING GOOD

Ronson recalls virtually interviewing a man who called himself "Hank," though that wasn't his real name. In March of 2013, Hank was in the audience at a tech conference in California, making jokes with a friend about a large "dongle"—a hardware device used to connect a computer port to a port on another, smaller device, such as a phone or mp3 player. Earlier, they'd been making even more suggestive jokes using obscure tech lingo.

As Ronson introduces the story of a new shamee, Hank, he describes Hank's impish but relatively innocuous behavior at a tech conference. Hank's actions weren't evil or ill-intended—but he'd still be forced to suffer for a perceived transgression. The fact that Hank wants to use a pseudonym to be interviewed hints at how traumatic this incident will become for him.

Hank noticed the woman sitting in front of him turn around and use her phone to take a picture of the audience. He didn't think anything of it, but minutes after the picture was taken, a conference organizer approached Hank and his friend and pulled them out of the room to tell them there'd been a complaint about their sexual comments. Hank insisted the two of them hadn't been targeting anyone and had just been joking around, which seemed to resolve the situation.

Hank was bewildered by the idea that he'd been acting lewdly or provocatively—he and his friend were just passing the time between themselves, but their actions had ramifications that neither of them could have predicted. Someone had perceived their comments as a transgression—and even as a threat. This passage also shows how untethered social media shamings are from traditional avenues of punishment. A conference organizer, when alerted to the men's behavior, pulled them out and decided that they didn't need to face severe consequences for their actions—just a reprimand. But the social media mob that would soon pile on would be much less judicious, as there was no authority figure or grievance process that could determine when enough is enough.

But when Hank and his friend looked at **Twitter** later that afternoon, they saw that the woman sitting in front of them had taken a picture of them, uploaded it to her feed, and called them out for making lewd jokes right behind her. The tweet didn't get much traction, though, so Hank put it out of his mind. The next day, the tweeter—a Black Jewish woman named Adria Richards—published a blog post detailing how, in the presence of a large crowd, the men felt anonymous and free to make lewd jokes. She referred to the theory of "de-individuation." That afternoon, Hank's boss called him into his office—Hank was fired.

Adria Richards sought to call out Hank and his friend for a transgression: making inappropriate jokes in a public space, without much thought to the feelings of anyone who was sitting around them. It's certainly a valid critique, as the men clearly made her feel uncomfortable. But the consequences for Hank and his friend's behavior at the conference (a simple reprimand) escalated when he quickly lost his job, seemingly because Adria Richards had continued to push the issue in a public way, which made Hank a liability to the company. This raises the question of whether the punishment for someone's transgression should be tied to how public that transgression becomes. When this was a relatively private matter, a simple reprimand sufficed, but as soon as it became more public, Hank's head had to roll. The difference was not the transgression itself, but the amount of attention it attracted.

That night, Hank posted a short apology online. He said that while he was sorry for making Richards uncomfortable, her posts had cost him his job—and now, he had to find a new way of supporting his three children. Richards called Hank's former company and pressured them to make Hank remove that portion of his statement.

Hank wanted to offer a genuine apology—but he also wanted the internet to consider whether the consequences for his behavior outweighed the severity of his transgression. However, Richards seemed to consider that part of his statement inappropriate or unfair, which put Hank into a bind. It wouldn't be good for him to continue to anger Richards, but he also wanted to be able to defend himself.

Ronson reached out to Richards for an interview, and she reluctantly agreed to meet with him. She told him that Hank and his friend's jokes had made her feel that she was in danger. While Ronson pushed back against the idea that Adria felt she was in danger in the middle of a large conference, Richards insisted that men—especially white men—can't presume to know what women of color feel is safe or unsafe. She admitted to having little empathy for Hank having lost his job, and she said that she knew what she was doing by tweeting about him.

While Ronson pushes back against Richards's sensitivity to Hank's comments, Richards has a point: as someone who has been marginalized due to her intersecting identities as a Black Jewish woman, Richards experienced the situation differently than a white man likely would have. At the same time, Richards's utter confidence in the fact that it was morally correct for her to involve the internet in judging Hank's actions is, in Ronson's clear estimation, problematic—Hank is a human being, too, even if he was acting in a rude or threatening manner at the conference.

Shortly after Hank posted his statement, he began receiving messages of solidarity online from men's-rights bloggers who also leveled horrible threats of rape, violence, and murder against Adria Richards. Online trolls crashed her company's website and servers, calling for her firing. Hours later, she was fired—and she told Ronson that she felt "ashamed" and alone in the wake of their decision.

This passage shows how quickly the tide of a public shaming can turn. Though Richards sought to call out Hank for his behavior, once he suffered certain consequences, another corner of the internet rose up in his defense—and they, too, launched an all-out offensive in the opposite direction. These men's rights activists successfully shamed Richards—just as she had successfully shamed Hank. This passage introduces how shamings can lead to repetitive, never-ending cycles of shame and violence.

Before meeting with Richards, Ronson posted a message on the website where the vitriol toward her had spun out of control—4chan—asking if anyone involved in her destruction would speak with him. A 21-year-old woman named Mercedes Haefer reached out to him. Mercedes was currently was being sued for her involvement in taking down PayPal as vengeance for their refusal to accept donations to WikiLeaks. Ronson found Haefer to be a "jubilant" troll who loved digital chaos, but after getting to know her better throughout months of emailing back and forth, he began to learn more about her and the online community of which she was a part.

This passage introduces 4chan, a social platform where free speech (and hate speech) reigns supreme. Throughout the book, Ronson interrogates how the social dynamics of the internet are chilling people's ability to speak freely, although he does not position the culture on 4chan as a good alternative. On places like 4chan, users find amusement and even joy in the most crass or violent forms of free speech—including harassment.

On the internet, Haefer told Ronson, the powerless become powerful. But recent crackdowns on spaces like 4chan had begun to feel like New York's stop-and-frisk program. Stop-and-frisk was a program that was meant to reduce street crime in the city, but with nearly 1,800 stops each day, and with nine out of ten people stopped found completely innocent, the program quickly drew many critics. The program "degraded and humiliated" people in public, and racial profiling meant that it was overwhelmingly Black and Latino youths who were singled out by the police. And data revealed that violent crime had already been dropping for five years before stop-and-frisk was implemented.

By comparing crackdowns on free speech on the internet to violent stop-and-frisk programs in New York City and beyond, Mercedes Haefer is suggesting that there is an inherent violence to taking away an individual's right to speak their mind without facing dire social or reputational consequences. Crackdowns, this passage is implying, only hurt—they hardly ever produce any measurable good.

Haefer thought that because public spaces in New York and other parts of the country were becoming unsafe for people who were the targets of programs like stop-and-frisk, people now loitered on the internet. The internet, she suggested, had become the home of the "little guy." And when people like Hank whom they identified with came under fire, the internet rose up to protect them. As for people like Justine Sacco, Haefer cryptically stated, "some sorts of crimes can only be handled by [...] shaming. It's a different kind of court."

By suggesting that there are certain internet-related "crimes" that require a "different kind of court," Mercedes Haefer is acknowledging the outsized power of large groups of people who conduct public shamings on the internet. In the real world, she's implying, it's harder for there to be consequences for transgressions large and small—but the internet allows for transgressions to be punished in unique ways that she feels are perfectly fair and appropriate.

Ronson asked Haefer why online shamings were so often misogynistic and violent. Mercedes claimed that places like 4chan aimed to "degrade the target," and for women the highest degradation was rape (which attacked their femininity), whereas for men, the highest degradation was having their ability to support their families taken away (which attacked their masculinity).

This passage illustrates how heavily gendered public shamings are. Depending on the gender of the shamee, the attacks they'll face are vastly different—and women often face more violence than men do.

While Hank told Ronson that he felt nobody deserved to go through what Adria Richards went through, Richards told Ronson that she believed Hank's complaint about losing his job was what fired up the hate groups that came after her, and that his actions alone resulted in his getting fired in the first place. Ronson asked Hank how his life had changed since the incident, and he said that he'd begun to distance himself from female developers. Richards, meanwhile, still hadn't found a new job.

The fact that Hank was able to find a new job so quickly after his public shaming (while Richards still struggled to secure employment a long time after her own) is emblematic of the unequal consequences that men and women face after being shamed. It also seems that this shaming had an unintended effect on Hank: rather than making him more empathetic to the experiences of women in a male-dominated field, he began to avoid women altogether, presumably to prevent another incident like the one that got him shamed. This shows how public shamings have unpredictable and sometimes negative results—they're not turning people into virtuous, empathetic citizens, but rather they're whipping up shame and resentment and creating perverse behavioral incentives like avoiding women.

Ronson himself had shamed a lot of people on the internet, but now he couldn't remember most of them. He did remember being the first person to alert the **Twitterverse** to a column written by A.A. Gill about shooting a baboon on safari to "get a sense of what it might be like to kill someone." Ronson now admits that he was keeping a careful eye on Gill's writing because Gill always gave Ronson's television documentaries bad reviews. Within minutes, Ronson was able to turn the internet against Gill. People accused him of being a bully, but Ronson writes that he himself was bullied horribly in school, and that he is always conscious of how terrible it is to be tormented.

Here, Ronson explores his own motives for participating in a public shaming. For him, this actually wasn't driven by a desire to be or seem virtuous, even if he genuinely felt the column was offensive. Instead, Ronson led a shaming because he had a personal grudge against the person he shamed, and he was watching carefully for that person to misstep so he could punish him for giving Ronson's work bad reviews. So the shaming had nothing to do with morality or proper behavior; it was a personal grudge disguised as moral outrage, a petty attempt to punish someone for their criticism of Ronson. At the time, Ronson told himself that he wasn't being a bully, but he seems to be reconsidering this assessment now. In his own way, Ronson was caught in a cycle of needing to shame others as a result of his own shame, as he was presumably embarrassed by the bad reviews.

Everyone in the Hank and Adria Richards story, Ronson realized, thought they were doing something good. But in today's world, shaming is punished with more shaming. And all shamers themselves are always operating from a place of shame. Ronson realized that he had a new directive: to write a book that could help people find a way out of their shame.

This passage, once again, highlights how dangerous cycles of shame and trauma can be. Ronson began to understand that the only way to deal with the out-of-control nature of contemporary public shamings was to break the cycle at the root by rejecting shame entirely.

CHAPTER 7: JOURNEY TO A SHAME-FREE PARADISE

In 2008, *News of the World* exposed Formula One motor racing chief Max Mosley—the son of the reviled British wartime fascist leader Oswald Mosley—for attending a "NAZI-STYLE orgy." The outlandish article featured lurid details of Mosley's romp with a group of sex workers and even published photos of the encounter. When Ronson met with Mosley, he wanted to interview him about how "immaculately" he'd endured his public shaming: Mosley had emerged intact. But when Ronson asked Mosley how he'd managed to emerge as a figurehead for humanity's right to feel unashamed, Mosley struggled to find the words. At last, he ventured that his unusual upbringing might have prepared him to weather the storms of public shaming.

This passage introduces Max Mosley—a unique person who was able to escape the brutal depths of a public shaming. Ronson wants to know how he did it in order to see if there's a template for how a person can emerge from a public shaming intact. Max's story illustrates that even when a shaming is aimed at destroying a person based on deeply personal information, the shamee does indeed have some element of agency in how the shaming process unfolds.

Mosley's father had founded, in 1932, the British Union of Fascists. His wife was obsessed with Hitler, and their wedding even took place at Joseph Goebbels's house. Mosley's first memories are of visiting his parents in prison in the early 1940s, where they'd been incarcerated for the duration of the war. As an adult, Mosley saw his parents' deep-rooted fascist ideology as a "nuisance." But in the motor-racing world, no one cared about Mosley's past. When Mosley began visiting sex clubs that specialized in kink and S&M, he tried to be careful. In the 1990s, opponents of American politician Ralph Nader's push to make seatbelt laws mandatory sent sex workers to lure him into compromising situations in hopes of attaining material that could be used as blackmail.

Because of his parents' reprehensible and taboo beliefs, Mosley's own reputation was publicly tarnished from a very young age, which made him acutely aware of how other people wanted to make him feel shame. This background may have uniquely prepared Mosley for his own encounter with a massive public shaming. Mosley knew that given his background, he was a target no matter what he did—and if he was going to engage in behaviors that many people still consider shameful, he had to tread carefully to avoid further entrapping himself in a cycle of shame and trauma.

In 2008, when Mosley heard that pictures of him at an orgy had been published in the news, he went on the offensive. He gave interviews on the radio and in print admitting that while his sex life was strange, sex itself was strange, and only an "idiot" would try to shame him for it. Mosley sued *News of the World* for claiming that the orgy was Nazi-themed; while it was German-themed, there were no Nazi scenarios being played out. The *News of the World*'s case all but crumbled, and Mosley won over 60,000 British pounds in damages. Within three years, the paper folded amid another scandal. The paper had a legacy of shaming people so intensely that they killed themselves.

This passage shows that by taking an active role in refuting his shaming, Mosley was able to reclaim his own narrative and stave off the full brutality of the public shaming process. This passage is significant because it suggests that shamees don't always have to be silent victims—if their shaming is rooted in a desire for vengeance rather than justice, there is a chance that they can push back against the shame machine's power and call attention to the inhumanity of public shamings in general. By rejecting shame, they can break the cycle.

Ronson was determined to get Mosley to identify how his behavior throughout his public shaming had in fact made him immune to the process. Mosley suggested that perhaps he was a sociopath, and that because he'd felt no shame, he had an advantage. But Ronson knew that wasn't the answer. Ronson left the interview disappointed, but Mosley promised to think hard and get back to him. In the meantime, he urged Ronson to have a ball at an American sex club, Kink, to which Ronson had been invited as part of his research.

Like Lehrer, Mosley wondered whether there was a part of him that was deficient or sociopathic because of his experience with shame. This illustrates that public shamings are so debilitating as to disconnect a shamee from their emotions and senses of self. Mosley's inability to identify what it was that allowed him to survive his shaming intact is noteworthy, too, as it suggests that there is something psychologically murky on both ends of a shaming—it's hard to know why people shame others, and it's hard to know why people who are shamed behave the way they do.

One of Ronson's **Twitter** followers, Conner Habib—an adult performer—asked if Ronson was planning to research people who derive pleasure from being publicly shamed in preparation for his book. Ronson realized he should take Habib up on his offer to put Ronson in touch with Princess Donna Dolore of Kink.com studios, a famous porn impresario who'd turned an intense struggle with shame throughout her childhood into her own liberation. By being open about what embarrassed her, she set herself free. Donna missed her initial interview with Ronson, but she invited him to a public disgrace-themed porn shoot the following night.

In his interactions with Habib and Donna Dolore, Ronson was seeking to further complicate his own concept of shame and liberation. The secret to living without shame seemed partly rooted in a rejection of shame—and here, Ronson embarks on a new journey to discover what happens when people don't just reject shame but actively celebrate it in order to break cycles of shame and trauma.

At the shoot, Ronson mingled with adult performers and listened to Donna describe the rules for the shoot, during which porn actor Jodi Taylor would be spanked, spit on, and shocked with electrodes. Taylor would later write in an email to Ronson that the shoot, and others like it, are "pure fantasy" realms in which all taboos are off, so there's no shame involved. Ronson was amazed to find that the environment at the shoot was even more respectful and welcoming than a standard office environment. Donna's mission, she told Ronson afterward, was to help people feel "less freakish and alone because of what they like."

By turning shame into "pure fantasy" and admitting that shame can be a counterintuitively pleasurable thing in certain consensual scenarios, Donna and her team of actors and producers were rejecting old, destructive narratives about shame. They, too, were able to help cut cycles of shame short by actively choosing to reject shame's negative connotations and effects.

Weeks after the shoot, Ronson received an email from Max Mosley. Mosley said that what helped him to weather a public shaming was simple: it was his refusal to feel shame. Ronson began to wonder if unashamedness was something that people could be taught and how many lives it would change if it could be.

Ronson's research showed him definitively that there were alternate paths through our contemporary culture of public shamings. Now, he just had to pursue more knowledge of how people could more actively reject their senses of shame.

CHAPTER 8: THE SHAME-ERADICATION WORKSHOP

Jon Ronson joined 12 Americans—strangers—in a circle in a conference room at a Chicago Marriott. In the middle of the circle sat Brad Blanton, the leader of a shame-eradication workshop. He invited the members of the group, one by one, to share something they didn't want the others to know. As a psychotherapist, Blanton was dismayed by how many lived their lives afraid of what others thought of them, and he'd pioneered a technique called "Radical Honesty" to help people be more honest with one another and feel less shame about their innermost thoughts. When people internalize shame, Blanton reasoned, it only grows and festers.

Brad Blanton's shame eradication workshop—which encouraged participants to reject shame entirely and focus only on being unapologetically honest about their most embarrassing thoughts and feelings—was aimed at breaking cycles of shame and silence, training people not to feel shame about what others might think. By instead being radically vulnerable with one another and choosing to remove shame from the equation, Blanton's workshop participants could learn to stop the cyclical nature of shame and trauma.

As people shared their secrets, one woman confessed to selling drugs on the sly, a man confessed to using lucid dreams to rape women, and another woman admitted to a toxic relationship with her partner. Blanton put people, one by one, in the Hot Seat—an empty chair—and interrogated them about what they'd say and do if they were being totally honest about solving the problems in their lives, then urged each of them to hold themselves accountable to making big changes and eradicating shame. Blanton told Ronson during a break in the session that he wanted his workshop members to confront the uncomfortable, air their resentments, and be honest in every part of their lives.

This passage continues to show that no matter how shameful the workshop participants' secrets were, they were encouraged to share them and own them no matter the feedback they'd face from the rest of the group. The workshop, then, wasn't just about getting people to admit shameful things. It was about getting them to work at ignoring the consequences of shameful thoughts or actions entirely. This is no doubt a radical approach and one that raises major questions about shame's somewhat productive role in disincentivizing evil, immoral, or dangerous behavior.

Throughout the first day of the workshop, Ronson was harboring a shameful secret of his own. After agreeing to disguise himself as a woman and walk around in public for a day for an article, he'd chickened out—and the incident was creating conflict with his editor, who insisted he go out on a limb for the "fun" feature. Up in his hotel room, Ronson realized he'd let his "terror of humiliation" close a door for him.

Simply observing the workshop forced Ronson to reckon with his own humiliating secrets, and to question why he felt shame about various things in his life. By reorganizing people's ideas about the usefulness of shame, the workshop was forcing its participants to reconsider their relationships to the feeling of humiliation.

Ronson reflected on the work of a Texas-based professor of evolutionary psychology, David Buss, who was shaken by an intense fight between two of his married friends at a party and inspired to ask a sample size of 5,000 people if they'd ever fantasized about killing someone. 91% of men and 84% of women admitted that they had experienced at least one vivid fantasy of murdering another person—often in very violent ways. All of the murderous fantasies, Buss found, were rooted in the desire to eradicate shame. His experiment showed him that the fear of humiliation—or the festering of an internalized shame—can lead to agony and even violence. Thinking about this study, Ronson resolved to go downstairs the next day and be radically honest.

This passage illustrates another way in which shame is harmful: it can lead to cruel and violent retaliation. When people feel humiliated, they can sometimes scramble to erase that feeling—and sometimes, that can involve fantasizing about erasing the person or thing that caused them their humiliation. This is dangerous, and so Blanton's workshop suddenly seems all the more radical in its approach to exterminating shame and all of the potentially violent outcomes that come with it.

But the next day, when Blanton asked Ronson to get in the Hot Seat, Ronson suddenly declared that he didn't feel he needed to speak about his shame. The other radically honest members of the group excoriated him for refusing, calling him names and talking about the resentment his decision inspired. Ronson began feeling rageful and resentful, and Blanton told him that he deserved to. After lunch, Ronson returned to the workshop but still didn't take the hot seat. He kept in touch with the members of his workshop via email for a time, and he enjoyed reading their tales of practicing Radical Honesty in real life. Though Radical Honesty hadn't been a successful tack for Ronson to take, he was amazed to see how it had worked for others.

Ronson's quick pivot from a passionate rejection of shame back to his old ways of hiding anything shameful is used to humorous effect here. But it also illustrates how pervasive shame is, and how difficult it is to unlearn. Radical Honesty is just one way of rejecting learned responses to feelings of shame—but since this one didn't work for him, Ronson knew that there had to be other ways that people sought to mitigate the effects of shame and humiliation on their day-to-day lives.

CHAPTER 9: A TOWN ABUZZ OVER PROSTITUTION AND A CLIENT LIST

Ronson drove to Kennebunk, Maine, an idyllic coastal town overrun with anxiety in the wake of a sex scandal: local Zumba instructor Alexis Wright was found to have been running a brothel out of her exercise studio. She videotaped every encounter, and prominent people were rumored to be on her list of clients. The media was abuzz—many prominent politicians, such as the Bush family, owned residences just miles from Kennebunk. A defense attorney's motion to keep the names on the list private was struck down, and a list of 68 men and one woman was made public. This "mass disgrace" event was, in Ronson's experiences with the world of public shamings, entirely unprecedented. Ronson was eager to get to Kennebunk and see how these dozens of shamed people would react.

After immersing himself in several environments where people were working to actively reject shame, Ronson suddenly found himself in a place where shame was threatening to rule the lives of a significant portion of a community. By zeroing in on a real-world "mass disgrace" incident, Ronson could study how shame worked when it's not just one person being shamed, but an enormous group of people.

In the press area of the local courthouse, Ronson observed a handful of men sitting silently as cameras filmed them. He was reminded of the pillory from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a shaming instrument used to hold a guilty person's head up and forbid them from hiding their face in shame. Soon, the judge entered and the court proceedings began. Each man pled guilty and paid a fine—but then, court was over, and the men left.

In this passage, Ronson invokes one of the most iconic works of literature on the subject of public shaming—Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, in which a woman in a Puritan village is made to wear a letter that marks her as an adulterer for all to see. Again, Ronson is drawing connections between the cruel, punitive, but protocoled public shamings of yore and the out-of-control public shamings of the contemporary world. He's also drawing a link between the protagonist of The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne, and the disgraced Zumba instructor who was shamed disproportionately because she was a woman.

One of the men Ronson approached for an interview offered to give him lurid details about Alexis for money. But Ronson, legally and ethically, couldn't pay him. He headed back to New York and emailed everyone on the list to request interviews. A few days later, a former church pastor who'd been on the list, Andrew Ferreira, emailed Ronson and agreed to an interview.

Ronson was surprised to find that some people, like the man who approached him at court, were willing to exploit their own shame for something in return. This speaks to the normalization of shame in contemporary society—some people choose to lean into it rather than pretend it doesn't exist.

Ronson interviewed Ferreira, who'd found Alexis on Backpage.com and visited her three times. He stopped seeing her when he grew emotionally attached. When the list came out, his wife left him and he lost his position at the church. Ferreira asked if Ronson thought he would be able to write a faith-based memoir and find his way into leadership at a new church. Ronson said he wasn't sure, but he asked Ferreira to keep him apprised of what happened next—to him, and to the others on the list, in terms of public shaming.

Ferreira, like the man at court, had a desire to exploit his own shame by writing a memoir, perhaps as a way of exorcising or eradicating that shame—or, perhaps, finding a way to make some practical use of a terrible incident.

But Ronson never heard from Ferreira. Months later, Ronson called him again and Ferreira revealed that there'd been no public shaming. In fact, his relationship with his daughters was stronger than ever and he was happy. Ronson was stunned; Justine Sacco and Jonah Lehrer had been annihilated, but for some reason, Ferreira's transgression had made those around him see him as more human. It turns out that no one on the list had experienced public shamings except the lone woman whose name appeared.

This passage shows that public shamings are largely unrelated to the nature of the transgression for which someone is being shamed. A moral transgression like Ferreira's was judged less harshly than a simple misuse of words or an exploitation of privilege on social media. This shows that people who lead public shamings aren't always looking to right a wrong—sometimes they're just looking to feel powerful and bring down those who are getting attention.

In Puritan times and at the height of early public shamings, Ferreira's sins would've been graver than Sacco's or Lehrer's, but contemporary public shamings seem to sort of ignore sex scandals involving white men and consensual sex. Finally, Ronson understood how Max Mosley had evaded shaming.

Again, this passage shows that people who act as ring-leaders in contemporary public shamings aren't solely interested in punishing moral transgressions—they often pick and choose their victims based on more complicated criteria like privilege, gender, and even race. Perhaps Max Mosley couldn't understand how he'd survived his shaming because the answer didn't really lie within him—perhaps the public was less bloodthirsty with him because, in the end, his transgression was consensual sex and he himself is a white man.

In fact, news outlets, judges and justices, and ordinary people were increasingly anxious about contemporary society being an "amoral" and "shameless" one. But Ronson believes now that shame hasn't died; instead, the people who decide what is shame-worthy and what is not have shifted. Judges and magistrates no longer decide who will be shamed: the internet does. Ronson felt his journey to find a "shame-free paradise" had failed. The closest he'd come was the Public Disgrace shoot for Kink.com.

Even though Ronson wanted to find a place that was free from the burdens that come with shame (and especially with public shamings), he'd instead uncovered an uncomfortable truth. Contemporary society, it seemed to Ronson, wasn't tilting toward an eradication of shame—but rather toward constantly finding new things about which to shame people.

Looking back wistfully on his experiences at the shame-free porn shoot, Ronson recalled something Donna had said that night: she'd felt sad and humiliated after a post on TMZ, a notoriously brutal gossip website, mentioned Donna in the context of a project she was working on with actor James Franco, a film called "Kink." Seeing herself described in language that wasn't as accepting as the language those in her everyday life used was painful, and she cried over the relatively innocuous gossip item.

This passage shows that even those who dedicate their lives to trying to understand, process, and eradicate shame are still vulnerable to the remote, cyclical nature of internet shamings. Ronson is showing his readers how powerful and destructive social media shamings—no matter how small or large in scope—can be, especially for women and people of color.

Ronson began wondering if there were people who were incapable of feeling pain. He'd come across the name Mike Daisey, and he was determined to meet the man behind the name: a man who'd survived a public shaming with seemingly zero effort.

Ronson continues struggling to understand why some people's lives are derailed by shamings, and why others seem virtually untouched even after a scathing public call-out.

CHAPTER 10: THE NEAR DROWNING OF MIKE DAISEY

Ronson met Mike Daisey at a restaurant in Brooklyn. Daisey was telling Ronson that no one wanted a true apology from him, because a true apology was a kind of "communion"—a group effort to come together. What people truly wanted, Daisey believed, was his destruction.

Here, Mike Daisey touches on something profound about public shamings: they're not necessarily about righting wrongs, restoring justice, or building stronger communities. Instead, they are often about punitive cruelty and consolidation of power. Indeed, online mobs often react with disappointment or increased vitriol when the person being shamed tries to express genuine remorse.

Daisey's transgression was similar to Jonah Lehrer's: he had been caught lying about a trip to Shenzen, China, during which he met factory workers who made Apple products. But some of those meetings, it was revealed, never actually happened. A flamboyant member of the New York theater scene, Daisey performed a theatrical monologue about his experiences to great acclaim—but when he appeared on NPR's *This American Life* to face claims of exaggeration, his story fell apart. Initially, after the radio appearance, Daisey wanted to kill himself, but instead, he turned his voice against the angry online mob that had come after him, and he defended himself until his critics deemed their own vitriol "useless."

By drawing a connection between Mike Daisey's shaming and Jonah Lehrer's, Ronson is showing how the internet seeks to punish people who are seen as misusing their privilege—or who mislead the those who consume the content they create. The public perceived both Daisey and Lehrer as having a responsibility to tell the truth, even if Daisey's medium was theater (an art form in which invention is often fundamental). Perceiving Lehrer and Daisey to have mishandled that responsibility, the public revolted. But Daisey handled things differently than Lehrer—he went on the offensive, as Mosley had, and defended his perspective.

At their meeting, Daisey began opening up to Ronson about a devastation from his youth. When he was 21 and living in northern Maine, he found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. But Daisey was unprepared for fatherhood, and he fell apart. Each night, he went swimming in a nearby lake—he'd swim far out into the middle and attempt to drown himself. But each night, he swam back to shore. Eventually, he left Maine and went to Seattle, where he became a celebrated theatrical monologist.

This passage shows that Daisey had already known what it felt like to be depressed, ashamed, and isolated. This suggests that he was better equipped to respond to his public shaming because he'd already been, on some level, at rock bottom. The internet's vitriol couldn't wound him so deeply because he'd already experienced real devastation in his life.

In 2010, Daisey's one-man show *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*—the story of his trip to China and the beleaguered, exploited Apple factory workers he'd met there—was a runaway success. But a lot of the painful imagery of maimed workers poisoned forever by screen cleaners and other toxic chemicals he shared was false. It was only when Daisey appeared on NPR and Ira Glass, the creator of *This American Life*, began fact-checking his story that the seams began to show.

Unlike Lehrer, who embellished Bob Dylan quotations for aesthetic purposes (or altered them to support his own ideas), Daisey embellished his experiences in China to expose some very real abuses that were taking place. But Daisey had still misused his privilege and his platform, and he'd still deceived audiences by claiming to have had experiences he never actually had. Trust was still breached, and Daisey was still punished in spite of his good intentions.

The Shanghai correspondent for another radio show began doing some digging on Daisey's story—many of his details didn't line up. He tracked down Daisey's translator, who revealed that Daisey had only visited three Apple plants in China, not ten, and that he'd never met many of the sickened workers he claimed to have met and learned from. In March of 2012, Ira Glass brought Daisey back into the studio and confronted him on-air about the fabrications in his monologue. Glass admitted to feeling both terrible for and betrayed by Daisey—and Daisey apologized.

Daisey did visit some of the factories that he claimed he had—but experts couldn't ignore the fact that he'd greatly embellished his experiences in order to make his one-man show more compelling and advance his own popularity. But when Daisey was confronted with the facts, he owned up to them immediately—and he apologized genuinely and with vulnerability rather than making excuses for himself.

Daisey admitted to Ronson during his meeting that, following his public shaming, he'd turned again to thoughts of suicide—but his wife made sure that he wasn't alone. When Daisey decided to go on NPR once again, he did so knowing that if he tried to bury the truth, he'd lose control of the narrative—and, perhaps, his original intent of shining a light on worker abuses in China would be obscured completely. Ronson was shocked that Daisey had created a narrative in which he "valiantly" destroyed himself for the greater good. But Daisey explained that sometimes, to survive, one has to write their own story and react to the narrative that's been forced on them in a way that "disrespect[s]" that narrative.

Here, Ronson shows that Daisey took a novel approach to speaking up about being shamed. Rather than defend himself or try to minimize his actions, he simply reminded people of his original intentions, which were good. He decided not to make the entire shaming process about his own humiliation, but rather about the stories of the people he'd originally felt moved to share. In a sense, this is another example of how people—including internet mobs—often do bad things while telling themselves it's for a good reason, so this shows that Daisey and his tormentors have something in common. Apparently it's pretty easy to convince oneself that you're doing something good, while it's much harder to objectively evaluate the morality of your actions.

For people like Jonah Lehrer and Justine Sacco, though, there was no alternative narrative to fall back on. Their flaws were essentially public domain, up on the internet for all to see. While in New York to interview Daisey, Ronson met with Sacco once again. Sacco had traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for a time to do some volunteer work—but after just a month, she returned to New York, where things were still mostly the same for her. Sacco admitted that she was still suffering, even though the worst of her shaming was over.

This passage highlights the differences between three of the major shamings Ronson has looked at so far. Justine Sacco attempted to do some damage control by volunteering her time in Ethiopia, hoping to show the world that she was sorry for the unintended effects of her joke tweet. But both she and Lehrer struggled to craft compelling narratives about their shamings—instead, they'd let the public determine the narrative for them.

That week, the European Court of Justice passed the Right to Be Forgotten ruling. It stated that if an article about an individual had become "irrelevant or no longer relevant," then Google was bound to de-index it from its European sites if petitioned to do so. Many thousands of people applied, and Google honored every request. When Ronson asked Sacco how she felt about the ruling, she admitted to having conflicted feelings—she felt like it gave her hope, but that applying to be forgotten would be a "disaster," potentially stirring up the online mob all over again. At the same time, Sacco longed for the day when her Google search results would change.

By introducing the Right to Be Forgotten ruling, Ronson begins to explore the idea that there is hope for those who have been publicly shamed. Even if people can't spin the narratives of their shamings or reject shame entirely, there might still be a way for victims of unnecessary, overblown, or heavily gendered public shamings to redeem their own stories and disrupt the shaming cycle. However, it's important that Justine Sacco, a paradigmatic shaming victim, doesn't find this compelling, as she seems to believe that even her desire to be forgotten might be enough to stir up another mob, who would presumably see her desire to be forgotten as a lack of contrition or a misuse of privilege.

CHAPTER 11: THE MAN WHO CAN CHANGE THE GOOGLE SEARCH RESULTS

In October of 2012, Lindsey Stone—a caregiver at a center for adults with learning difficulties—chaperoned a fun, educational trip to Washington, D.C. But something happened during the trip that would change Lindsey's life forever. Off-duty, Lindsey and Jamie, another caregiver, had a running joke of taking silly photographs together. They'd do things like smoke in front of a NO SMOKING sign or mimic a statue's pose. At Arlington cemetery, the two noticed a sign urging "SILENCE AND RESPECT." Lindsey crouched down near the sign and mimed screaming loudly while giving a nearby grave the middle finger. Jamie uploaded the picture to Facebook (with Lindsey's consent) and while a few of their friends commented that the picture was "kind of offensive," nothing much happened.

Ronson has already shown how a badly worded joke tweet, in today's contemporary shaming climate, can derail a person's life. As he introduces Lindsey Stone's story, there's a tragic undercurrent. It's clear that her and her friend's silly inside joke is about to be the cause of Lindsey's own encounter with the brutal, cyclical public shaming process. Lindsey didn't take the photo with any ill intent—but to the internet, intent is often irrelevant.

Jamie asked Lindsey if they should take the picture down, but Stone insisted things were fine. Little did she know, Jamie's mobile uploads album wasn't private—and a month after returning from D.C., the picture became public (and went viral). The internet was full of violent, misogynistic death threats aimed at Lindsey. People created "Fire Lindsey Stone" Facebook pages that attracted thousands of followers, and Lindsey obsessively read everything she could find about herself. The next day, there were news crews in front of her home. Lindsey was fired from her job. She fell into a depression and essentially stayed inside for a year.

Lindsey's public shaming, like Justine Sacco's, jumped the gap from the internet to the real world seemingly overnight. Like Justine, Lindsey didn't just have to contend with online trolls—she and her family were harassed by the media, and Lindsey's career, too, was derailed as a result of her seemingly innocuous actions. Like Sacco, this passage suggests, Lindsey experienced an unfair and outsized amount of public scrutiny because she was a woman who made a tasteless joke.

Lindsey eventually found a new job caring for children with autism, but the fear that her new employers would unearth the old story about her followed her every day. She'd considered telling them the truth in her interview, but she didn't feel the moment was right. During her conversation with Ronson, Stone had been working at the new center for four months without incident. But she felt she couldn't come clean now and she couldn't ask whether her employers had uncovered the truth on their own, and she was stuck.

This passage shows that Lindsey's initial public shaming created a cycle of shame within her personal and professional lives. She lived in constant fear of her old shame being dredged up and renewed—and this greatly impacted her day-to-day emotional and mental state.

Lindsey's life was about to change again. Ronson had met two men: Graeme Wood and Phineas Upham, former Harvard classmates. Over a decade after graduating from Harvard, Upham and his mother were arrested on tax evasion charges. The matter was resolved quickly, but the Google results for his name told the whole story. When Wood would search his former classmate's name, he'd find lots of articles and blog posts about Upham being a philanthropist, a successful writer, and a magazine editor, but the webpages were "flimsy and temporary." Upham was using fake websites to push results relating to the tax scandal further down. Wood discovered that a man named Bryce Tom, the head of Metal Rabbit Media, was behind the fake sites.

This introduces another tactic for dealing with internet shamings: trying to alter one's google results so that content related to the shaming is unlikely to be the first thing associated with someone. Whether these individuals are doing so for selfish reasons or philanthropic ones, they're subverting the algorithms that can contribute to an individual's lifelong struggle to escape evidence of a past shaming. This offers hope for Lindsey Stone.

Ronson couldn't get Tom to talk to him—but he did successfully get in touch with another person from the "reputation-management world" named Michael Fertik. Fertik revealed that many of the people in this sector were nasty or corrupt, and some had been accused of heinous crimes—but they'd been able to scrub all of the bad information about themselves from the internet. Fertik's company, Reputation.com, helps people restore their reputations, but Fertik has a code of ethics. He doesn't honor requests from pedophiles and neo-Nazis, and he doesn't put fake information out into the world—only the truth.

While there are people out there who want to help shaming victims put their lives back together, the reputation management industry is a bit chaotic. Some people operate ethically, while others might be willing to help people whose actions and beliefs are truly immoral or dangerous. It's important to note that some people's beliefs and opinions are indeed shame-worthy—there's a distinction between someone who tweets a bad joke and someone who preys on children.

To show Ronson how his business worked, Fertik offered to let him observe the reputation cleanup of the leader of a religious group who'd been accused of murdering his brother. But after the religious leader, "Gregory," initiated communications with Ronson and tried to get Ronson to sign a contract stating he'd only write about Gregory in a positive light, things went south, and Gregory refused Fertik's offer of pro-bono services. Ronson suggested Justine Sacco take Gregory's place, but Fertik's team didn't want to take her case. So Ronson suggested Lindsey Stone instead, and even though Fertik predicted it would take "at least a hundred grand" to successfully complete Lindsey's case, he agreed to take her on.

This passage shows how massive an undertaking it is to scrub someone's history from the internet—to remove the evidence of one single Facebook photo, it would cost around a hundred thousand dollars. Fertik's firm was prepared to invest a huge amount of time and money in the rehabilitation of Lindsey Stone's reputation—but when it came to someone like Justine Sacco who'd gone so viral so quickly, they admitted that there was little that they could do. Again, this illustrates how painful it is when a public shaming causes much more damage to a person's life than that individual ever deserved to face.

Fertik couldn't start working on Lindsey's case for a few months, so in the meantime, Ronson accepted an invitation from Richard Branson's sister Vanessa to a salon at her Marrakech home. Artists, entrepreneurs, lawyers, and other notable people would be at the salon, and Ronson was eager to be in the mix. When Clive Stafford Smith, a prominent English society man turned death-row lawyer in Mississippi, arrived, Ronson was excited to speak with him. Smith spoke of his desire to abolish prisons, because the criminal justice system incarcerated people who didn't deserve their punishments.

Ronson's conversation at the Branson salon shows that the internet's tendency to punish those who don't deserve to be inhumanely castigated in public has a real-world parallel. Criminal justice systems the world over erroneously punish innocent people, derailing or destroying lives as innocent people or people accused of non-violent crimes suffer unjustly for decades.

The two of them continued speaking about incarceration, public shaming, and citizen justice; Smith admitted that shame is an important tool in trials, because shaming someone on the witness stand can turn a case on its head. Shame was a front-line tactic in court, and it was on its way to becoming one on the internet, too. Ronson worried what such a premium on shame would "do to the participants" of public shamings.

Shame is a kind of currency in the modern world—it's an effective motivator, and it's increasingly rarely deployed for righteous reasons. Shame can be used to destroy lives both on the internet and in the real world, as Ronson will soon investigate.

CHAPTER 12: THE TERROR

At a hotel in Manchester, Ronson sat with a group of men and women who were training to become expert witnesses, hoping to make some extra money. They were taking a courtroom familiarization course, and Ronson had joined them out of his curiosity about whether shaming was a significant enough part of the courtroom process to earn a mention. And, it turned out, it did: right away, the experts began warning the potential witnesses that lawyers for both the defense and the prosecution would attempt to mercilessly shame them. The rest of the day, it turned out, was entirely about shame-avoidance techniques. As Ronson participated in the exercises, he found himself judging his fellow participants by how they reacted in the face of even a mock shaming.

This passage shows how lawyers and prosecutors use shame in the courtroom in order to turn the tides of a case, sway the opinions of the jury, and potentially destroy lives in the process. By shaming a witness on the stand, a lawyer can undermine credibility and completely change the outcome of a trial. This passage confirms that shame is an immensely powerful tool—and that when it's used for the wrong purposes by the wrong people, it can be incredibly destructive.

Ronson began corresponding with a Scottish woman named Linda Armstrong whose 16-year-old daughter Lindsay had been raped on her way home from the bowling alley one night. Linda sent Ronson a copy of the court transcript from her daughter's case. Ronson read it, horrified to find that Lindsay's rapist's defense lawyer had attempted to shame her for the provocative underwear she was wearing at the time of the attack. The lawyer forced Lindsay to hold the underwear up in front of the court—he attempted to use shame to win his case.

This passage shows how abominable it is that a 16-year-old rape victim was shamed on the witness stand in her own case. The defense lawyer knew just how powerful a tool shame was, and they leveraged it to their advantage—perhaps without fully understanding what the potential consequences could be.

While Lindsay's rapist was found guilty, he only served two years in a young offenders' institution. Just three weeks after the cross-examination, Lindsay committed suicide. Ronson wonders what a world in which we refused to shame our fellow humans might look like, and whether there was a corner of the justice system that was trying to create such a world.

Lindsay's case was a classic example of shame being leveraged against a woman in order to destroy her credibility. Lindsay took her own life as a result of her shame, illustrating how shame can lead to trauma, violence, and even death.

CHAPTER 13: RAQUEL IN A POST-SHAMING WORLD

In New York's Meatpacking District, Ronson met up with Jim McGreevey, the former governor of New Jersey who was notorious for "never pardon[ing] anyone." Years ago, McGreevey was a family man and an astute politician who was backed by Bill and Hillary Clinton during his 2001 run for governor. He prided himself on Machiavellian policies, and he enjoyed his new place in New Jersey's elite. But all the while, McGreevey was hiding a secret—he was gay. On a campaign trip to Israel in the mid-2000s, he began an affair with an Israeli man named Golan, and he brought Golan back to America, giving him a trumped-up job title and an opulent office.

This passage introduces Jim McGreevey—a man who was, for a long time, living with a crushing amount of shame in his everyday life. By relaying McGreevey's journey through his struggle with shame in a time before social media's mainstream dominance, Ronson pivots to an exploration of how real-world cycles of shame can define a person's life.

The media and those close to McGreevey became suspicious of Golan's role in the administration. So McGreevey began distancing himself from Golan, and within weeks, he received a letter from Golan's lawyer, threatening to sue McGreevey for sexual assault. McGreevey held a press conference in which he came out, admitted to his affair with Golan, resigned the governorship, and retreated to an Arizona clinic to undergo treatment for PTSD.

Golan publicly shamed McGreevey after McGreevey, it seems, didn't preserve the terms of their relationship once they were both stateside. The fact that McGreevey had to be treated for a psychological affliction following his public shaming shows, once again, just how powerful a force shame truly is.

McGreevey told Ronson that he was excited to hear that Ronson had interviewed famed psychiatrist and expert on shaming James Gilligan. In the 1970s, Gilligan began working with prisoners and mental patients throughout Massachusetts. There were many suicides, homicides, riots, and other violent incidents taking place in these facilities, and Gilligan initially assumed that the perpetrators were psychopaths. But upon arriving in the prison system and getting to know some of the prisoners, he realized that many of them "felt dead inside" due to traumas they'd experienced earlier in life. They were committing violent acts just to feel something.

Ronson continues exploring the real-world ramifications of shame, honing in on the effects shame can have on a person's personality and psychology. The numbness and disassociation that shame creates can make it possible for people to do terrible things. It can also inspire them to seek retaliation for earlier shamings or humiliations. Shame, once again, proves to be a powerful force that can completely alter a person's existence.


These violent criminals, Gilligan found, were united by a common thread: they were all overwhelmed by shame. Every act of violence, Gilligan asserted, was a response to feelings of shame, humiliation, or disrespect. The childhood traumas that many of these men had endured were so shameful to them in adulthood that violence became their only way of replacing shame with self-esteem. Inspiring fear in others earned these men respect. In prison, the respect they'd gained through violent offenses was stripped away, and the officers in charge humiliated them—their renewed feelings of shame, then, inspired new and different violent tendencies. It's no wonder, Gilligan told Ronson, that "mortification"—a word whose Latin root means "death"—is a word commonly used to express shame.

Gilligan's research led him to believe that shame can be equivalent to emotional death—so much so that one word for shame, "mortification," also literally means death. According to Gilligan, shame can completely erase everything a person was and replace their personality and psychology with new, disturbing facets. Once again, Ronson is reminding his readers that shame has the power to completely overturn and corrupt a person's existence, leading to more cycles of shame and violence.


Thinking about Gilligan's words, Ronson found himself looking at Jonah Lehrer's story through new eyes. He recalled Lehrer's discomfort with displaying emotions, and how that discomfort had led the online mob to label him a "sociopath." But now, Ronson was imagining the need to "turn off some emotional switch" that Lehrer described in the wake of his shaming.

Ronson recalls having a major realization in the wake of his conversation with Gilligan; he realized that shame can turn pain to numbness. This numb feeling that many shamees experienced explains why Jonah Lehrer and Max Mosley wondered if they might be "sociopaths" in the wake of their respective public shamings. Actually, it seems that their responses were quite normal, and that response is reflective of the tremendous psychological weight of shame.

Throughout the 1980s, Gilligan devoted his life to running experimental therapeutic communities inside Massachusetts prisons. These communities were all about establishing a space in which prisoners felt safe and respected. Gilligan also helped get some prison guards into treatment—these men had often suffered traumas, as well—and violence in the prisons began to drop. Gilligan tried to pioneer an education program run by Harvard lecturers within the prisons, but the governor, William Weld, decimated the program because he didn't believe criminals should receive "free college education."

Gilligan embarked on a mission to try to mitigate prisoners' shame and humiliation by treating them with dignity, giving them some power over their lives, and helping to bolster their self-esteem. But this passage shows that the state actually doubled down on trying to increase prisoners' general sense of shame by denying them the rights to education, to rehabilitation, to empathy, and to community.

Ronson visited the Hudson Country Correctional Center in Kearny, New Jersey, whose therapeutic community was quietly run by McGreevey. McGreevey accompanied Ronson on his tour, and as the two of them walked through the halls, McGreevey described how negative time in prison could be, but he said that care and attention could stop prisoners from building walls around themselves or resorting to violent behavior. McGreevey wanted to help people find forgiveness and a way out of their shame.

When people responded to shame or trauma by committing violent or illegal acts—either to regain a sense of control or due to a sense of emotional numbness—the state shamed them further by confining them to prison and taking away their humanity. McGreevey sought to carry on Gilligan's legacy of treating prisoners humanely in order to counteract the inhumane treatment that had, in many cases, landed them in prison in the first place.

Inside of the therapeutic unit, 40 women were living, working, and taking workshops on sexual abuse, domestic violence, and anger management. The women could check books out of a library and read to their children over video calls. As Ronson joined McGreevey and a number of the women in a circle for a group meeting, he jotted down some notes—he wasn't allowed to bring a recording device into the room—and noticed that the women in the circle kept making reference to what one inmate, Raquel, had done to land herself in prison.

The unit that McGreevey was running was attempting to restore humanity and agency to the lives of the prisoners within it. By doing so, he hoped, the program could actually end the cycles of shame that many of these prisoners had found themselves entrapped within for years.

When the meeting was over, Raquel herself ran up to Ronson and began telling him her story. He wrote it down as quickly as he could. Raquel was sexually abused as a child. She was constantly told that she was worthless. She got married at just 16, and she and her husband would hang around bars and mug drunk people in order to make money. After her son was born, she tried to turn her life around by moving her family to Florida—but the cycle of abuse continued, and Raquel often hit her son and daughter. Eventually, her son accused her of child abuse, and Raquel was arrested. Raquel had thrown a knife at her son during an argument, and she was being charged with attempted murder in the first degree.

Raquel responded to the shame and abuse she endured as a child by falling, consciously or unconsciously, into repeated patterns of shame and abuse. By abusing her son, she was bringing more shame into her own life—and causing shame within his, too. This illustrates how cycles of shame, trauma, and violence spin out of control from generation to generation.

Six months later, Ronson accompanied Raquel and McGreevey to a meeting at Newark City Hall, where Raquel's legal team successfully convinced prosecutors that Raquel was the victim of a cycle of abuse. She was told that she'd serve four more months and then be released. The shaming cycles that happen in prisons, McGreevey asserted, don't rehabilitate or change people—and most people aren't violent, unrepentant criminals who need to be locked away forever.

By positioning Raquel's actions in the context of a cycle of abuse—and the shame and violence that accompany abuse—her lawyers were able to help humanize her in the eyes of the court. This passage is significant because it shows that while shame has the power to derail a person's life, what shamed individuals need is a fresh start—not to become further entrenched in an inescapable cycle of shame and dehumanization.

Raquel's story convinced Ronson even more deeply that "vengeance and anger" in response to human wrongdoing was the incorrect position to take. Once Raquel was released to a halfway house, she was able to find resources that would help her move past her shame and begin life anew. And Raquel had committed a far more serious offense than Justine Sacco or Lindsay Stone—yet the public still refused Sacco and Stone forgiveness for reasons Ronson could no longer understand.

Raquel had done many shameful things in her life—but she'd finally managed to find a way to stop the cycles of shame and abuse that had defined her existence and begin anew. Ronson found it peculiar—and distressing—that people who'd been publicly shamed on social media for silly online antics couldn't reach the same point in their journeys through shame.

CHAPTER 14: CATS AND ICE CREAM AND MUSIC

Jon Ronson was on a conference call with Lindsay Stone and Farukh Rashid—one of Michael Fertik's employees. Rashid was asking Lindsay about her hobbies in order to help her clean up her internet presence. By creating WordPress blogs, Tumblr and LinkedIn pages, and other sites saturated with friendly pictures of and innocuous information about Lindsey, Rashid would be able to push the photo of Lindsey at Arlington further down in the search results. In the 1990s, search rankings were based on how many times a keyword appeared on a webpage. But now, websites are ranked by popularity, so Rashid needed to create webpages for Lindsey that would take hits away from the many articles about her. By creating a strategic schedule to confuse Google's algorithm by releasing innocuous content, firms like Fertik's can control what results people see.

This passage shows what an involved process it is to simply alter the results that come up when a person's name gets searched on a search engine like Google. Again, this illustrates how powerful contemporary public shamings are and how far-reaching and long-lasting their aftereffects can be. Ronson is encouraging his readers to see that public shamings don't just last a few hours or a few days—they can alter the courses of people's lives forever, allowing one misguided moment to define their identity to themselves, their community, and even total strangers.

During a meeting with Fertik, Fertik compared the life changes and PTSD that an online public shaming can create for a person to the kinds of things the Stasi—the East Germans' secret police force during the Cold War—put people through in the mid-to-late 20th century. The Stasi used both physical and psychological tactics to create one of the most elaborate surveillance networks in the history of the world. By intercepting private communications, the Stasi were able to make sure that no one ever really felt safe or secure, and they did it all through an informant network of volunteers who wanted attention, validation, and the feeling of doing something righteous.

While it might seem overly dramatic to compare the contemporary social media shame machine to the infamous Stasi, Ronson and Fertik assert that it's a more apt comparison than it might initially appear to be. Both systems have been shown to reward those who play a role in the exposition of someone's secrets or shame. By rewarding the process of public shaming with political immunity, social clout, or simply positive real-time feedback on the internet, both the Stasi and social media create an environment in which public shamings are actively encouraged.

In October of 2014, Ronson visited Lindsey Stone again. Fertik's firm had been busy populating the internet with blog posts they'd written about the music Lindsey was listening to and the vacations she was taking. Ronson watched as Lindsey googled herself for the first time in 11 months, and she realized that while there were still scattered instances of her infamous Arlington photo on the internet, they were interspersed with more recent photos—and even photos of other Lindsey Stones. The gambit had worked.

Fertik's firm was able to transform Lindsey Stone's life and restore some dignity to her public image. While Lindsey's story is still out there on the internet—and, now, in Ronson's own book—this passage illustrates the power of social media to dictate how a person is perceived. By reclaiming her internet presence, Stone was able to reclaim part of her story.

CHAPTER 15: YOUR SPEED

For the first time in 180 years, the general public has a say in what punishments are meted out during public shamings. Ronson himself has vowed to stay out of the "ecstatic" public shamings that still take place on the internet. While he misses some of the "fun," he compares the change to becoming a vegetarian years earlier: he still missed steak, but not enough to ignore what he knew about slaughterhouses.

By highlighting how the ruckus surrounding an online public shaming can appear (or feel) joyous and hedonistic for those participating in the pile-on, Ronson is suggesting that public shamings, at this point, are more for the benefit of the shamers than for the greater public good. His divestment from public shamings shows that his research changed his point of view on the topic entirely. His comparison of the social media machine to a "slaughterhouse" illustrates his contempt for the brutality and inhumanity of many corners of the internet.

The internet, Micahel Fertik asserted in an earlier conversation with Ronson, is controlled by companies, so Google makes money off of popular searches. During Justine Sacco's public shaming, Ronson was able to calculate, Google likely made somewhere between $120,000 and $450,000 dollars off of her name, which was suddenly a "high-yield" search term. And those who did the annihilating and the compulsive searching were essentially "unpaid interns," helping Google profit off one woman's suffering.

This anecdote further strengthens Ronson's argument that people should divest entirely from the public shaming machine. By participating in pile-ons, ordinary people are just making money for big corporations—and often destroying lives in the process—for a few minutes of a feeling of participating in a group event.

After years of research, Ronson now believes that online shaming is so merciless because of a psychological phenomenon known as feedback loops. This phenomenon was measured during an experiment using YourSpeed signs in a traffic-calming scheme in California in the early 2000s. These signs, posted under speed limit markers, showed drivers the speed at which they were traveling—and by getting instant real-time feedback for a behavior, drivers altered their actions and reduced their speed. A feedback loop happens in the blink of an eye.

By exploring how feedback loops instantaneously discourage (or reinforce) certain behaviors, Ronson shows how the rapid pace of the internet almost algorithmically rewards certain kinds of responses to certain kinds of issues. Joining a Twitter pile-on in which one's opinion aligns with the opinions of others is an example of a feedback loop: an opinion that gels with the status quo is rewarded, so more people join in, and soon, the system is out of control.

The monumental power of a feedback loop can be used for good, as with YourSpeed signs, or for ill purposes, as with the "giant echo chambers" of vitriol and violent rhetoric that emerge on social media channels. Being congratulated for opinions that reflect those of the crowd is a kind of emotional reward, and people repeat that behavior ad infinitum. People can get trapped in these feedback loops, ultimately defining what's normal by tearing apart anyone who exists beyond the boundaries of acceptable or good behavior.

When everyone has the same opinion—and when feedback loops just proliferate and perpetuate that opinion—the internet is empty of nuance or real debate. People might be more hesitant to offer opinions that differ from the mainstream for fear of being shamed, ridiculed, or excluded. And so through the process of feedback loops, social media flattens nuanced discourse and chills people's desire to voice their thoughts and opinions.

AFTERWORD

In an afterword written for the paperback edition of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, Jon Ronson revisits the initial hardback release of the book in March of 2015. In December of 2014, Ronson's publisher urged him to strap in for a bumpy year. In January, the *New York Times Magazine* offered to run an excerpt from the book focusing on Justine Sacco's story—but when Ronson reached out to Sacco again, she admitted that she regretted speaking to him in the first place because of the renewed publicity her story would earn as a result of the book's publication. But at the same time, Sacco had found a new perspective: she no longer felt she had anything to prove.

Even though Justine Sacco feared being trapped in a cycle of never-ending public shame, she'd begun to realize that her story could potentially be used to create real change both online and in the real world. Sacco wasn't going to let her public shaming define her any longer: she wanted to reclaim the narrative and call attention to the inhumanity of online public shamings.

After the excerpt came out, Sacco got in touch with Ronson to let him know she'd received many letters and emails expressing support and commending her for how she handled her public shaming. She thanked Ronson for telling her story, but she asked him to get the *Times* to revise the headline "How One Tweet Destroyed Justine Sacco's Life." Sacco insisted her life hadn't been destroyed. Ronson pushed for a change, and the headline was revised to "How One Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life."

Sacco's response to Ronson here is significant; it shows that she was finally learning to take control of her own narrative and push back against the shame machine. Rather than standing silently by while a major media outlet claimed her life had been destroyed, Sacco stood up for her own resilience in the face of an online mob. While her shaming did define her life for a long time, her response to the article showed that she was ready to lead a new era in the pushback to public shamings.

Ronson's excerpt helped begin a new conversation about **Twitter**-shaming; many journalists referred to the article as a turning point in the conversation about contemporary public shamings. Others, however, suggested that many people—especially women of color in less advantageous positions than Sacco—had suffered worse than she had. But Ronson picked Sacco's story because it was mainstream; the online mob tearing her apart consisted of people who considered themselves righteous, and many of them were members of the mainstream media. Ronson was frustrated that many readers still couldn't understand the gravity of Sacco's shaming.

Even though Ronson wrote an article that appeared in a mainstream media outlet—and was in fact directed at many members of the mainstream media—people still had trouble recognizing the fact that when it came to public shamings, intent didn't matter—the ruthlessness of the shaming rarely matched the severity of the transgression being shamed. People's unwillingness to understand this core fact shows that many still underestimate the impact a public shaming can have on a person's life. It also suggests that may people are not willing to look the truth in the face, because it would mean they'd have to reimagine how they use the internet and why.

As the *Times* excerpt spread and found more readership, Ronson received supportive messages and reviews, but he also had many people "divebomb" him on the internet, accusing him of being a racist and an advocate of internet censorship. Ronson decided to stay out of the discourse and not make any kind of tweet or public statement about the intentions behind the book. But Ronson's silence led people to claim that he was a misogynist for failing to respond to his female followers' messages.

This passage shows that even when Ronson stepped away from the internet discourse surrounding his writing, he was still shamed. This strengthens Ronson's argument that remaining silent to avoid being shamed is a useless and harmful tactic: if the internet machine wants to shame someone, they're going to do it no matter what and use anything they can in service of that shaming.

When a train crashed in Philadelphia in early 2014, killing eight people and injuring more than 200, a survivor who tweeted about wanting to recover her violin from one of the cars became the target of an internet mob. She was shamed, Ronson asserts, because she was perceived to have misused her privilege as a survivor. But at the same time, others who hadn't been in her situation were now judging her.

This passage illustrates that the internet is increasingly unable to distinguish between insensitive remarks and serious transgressions. It also shows that women, especially, are victims of public shamings that are far harsher and more punitive than their perceived transgressions deserve.

Over the course of the next several months, Ronson noticed that **Twitter** shamings became more prevalent rather than less common. From scientists who were shamed for wearing clothing that was perceived to have misogynistic imagery on it to a Minnesota dentist who killed Cecil, a lion living on a protected preserve in Zimbabwe, for sport, to an ESPN reporter who excoriated a parking garage attendant for calling for her car to be towed, these shamings became the default response to any behavior people didn't like. Ronson figured he'd soon get his own shaming.

With so many public shamings proliferating across the internet—some, in Ronson's opinion, more justified than others—he began to believe that statistically it was only a matter of time before he was a casualty. This shows that Ronson has become in many ways desensitized to the process of social media shaming. He knew that with so many shame cycles starting up each day, it would be difficult to do much to stop them—the internet seemed unilaterally focused on destroying anyone whose behavior jarred against the status quo.

Ronson looked back on his discussion in 2014 with Mercedes Haefer from 4chan, and he found it affecting. When he wrote about that conversation in an early draft of the book, he made a coy joke about his own privilege: he wrote that he couldn't imagine many things that were worse than being fired. In August of 2014, when advance uncorrected copies of the book went out into the world for industry professionals' perusal, Ronson's British editor forwarded him an early review that criticized the line. She urged him to cut it, and he did.

This passage shows that Ronson had to really watch his words as he wrote about sensitive issues concerning shame, gender, and violence. His humorous writing style was, in some places, detracting from the intense seriousness surrounding issues of shame, gender, and violence on social media. He wanted to do these sensitive topics justice, so he tried to decenter himself and focus on the message at hand.

In March 2015, Ronson's book tour began—some of the Q&A events were intense, and he dealt with a number of hecklers and trolls in the audiences of his readings. Many people felt Ronson's book focused too much on **Twitter**, which they dismissed as a "toy"—but Ronson hadn't set out to tell a story about Twitter. He wanted to talk about the intersection of media, public opinion, and the impulse to shame.

Many of Ronson's readers weren't able to see his evaluation of online public shamings as rigorous. Even after reading the book, they still didn't understand how serious the internet's public shaming cycles were. By flattening any chance for a nuanced discourse around Twitter and other social media platforms' destructive potential, Ronson's readers were missing the point of all his research.

Just before a radio appearance in Madison, Wisconsin, Ronson checked Twitter briefly, and he saw that a freelance journalist had posted the line he'd cut from an earlier draft of the book. People—women, especially—were beginning to dogpile on Ronson. Ronson tweeted back that the line was from an uncorrected copy not meant to be quoted, and soon the mob turned against the journalist. Ronson tweeted about how his "mini-shaming" had impacted his mood and mental health, hoping to draw attention to the very topic discussed in his book, but people tweeted at him to "stop whining."

Even though Ronson had taken a slightly confusing and potentially offensive line out of the published version of his book, the shame machine was still seeking to punish him for having once expressed—and then cut out—an opinion that ran counter to the status quo. The failure of Ronson's attempt to point out the fact that the internet had proven one of his book's major theses for him shows that social media shamings are inherently unnuanced, and that oftentimes the people behind them are resistant to reflection or self-evaluation.

Weeks after Ronson's mini-shaming, an Israeli government clerk was accused of anti-Black racism, and his story went viral online. He wrote a suicide note, posted it to Facebook, and shot himself. The woman who had complained online about the clerk issued a statement saying that she wished she'd kept silent. The internet turned against her nonetheless.

This passage shows that the shame cycle isn't just humiliating—it's violent, and its consequences are life-threatening. The person who takes up the cause of a public shaming might find themselves at the center of one the next day—and so Ronson suggests through this anecdote that people need to deeply consider the consequences of public shamings before deciding to begin them.

Ronson became unable to hold back from leaping into the fray during public shamings on the internet. In June of 2015, Rachel Dolezal, a white woman, was exposed for having faked a Black identity and risen to power in academia and her local NAACP chapter. Disgusted by the immediate, violent vitriol emerging against Dolezal, Ronson tweeted that he felt sorry for her and that the world was judging her without knowing anything about her. When he checked his account hours later, *he* was being shamed and threatened. Ronson quit **Twitter** for a little while—but soon, he migrated back.

This passage shows how Ronson's years of research into the phenomenon of public shamings led him to feel a lot of sympathy for those who were subjected to public shamings—no matter their transgression. Ronson came to believe that the public shaming process was inhumane, and that no one should be subjected to such hatred—but implying that someone didn't deserve to be shamed ended up trapping Ronson himself inside a cycle of shame and vitriol. This shows that the internet's thirst for shame is, perhaps, beyond repair—when a mob of millions gets involved, there's no way to look carefully and critically at a nuanced situation.

One of Ronson's acquaintances told him he should have included, in the original draft of the book, a set of rules about which shamings were okay and which weren't. Now, Ronson writes that there is one positive way social media has been used to shame people: as videos of police brutality across the U.S. began to emerge in 2014 and 2015, Ronson felt, people were using social media to contribute to a new civil rights battleground. Still, Ronson fears most people would prefer to defend ideology over human beings—and that this has created a dual-poled judgement system in which people are either villains or heroes.

Ronson uses this passage to clarify that there are certain individuals and institutions that need to be shamed. Shame is a powerful agent of change, Ronson's research has shown—and it can be used to positive effect. But in order for public shamings to become useful, everyone needs to reframe how public shamings are used so that they're actually effective in calling out wrongs.

Someone who lives a good and ethical life, Ronson asserts, can still be taken down for wording a tweet the wrong way. Human beings exist in gray areas—areas that the internet doesn't have the nuance to process. Ronson urges his readers to stick up for those who are being shamed. Social media has given a voice to the voiceless, and if voicelessness once more becomes the only way to survive, the world is going to become a very dark place.

In the final lines of the book, Ronson offers up his biggest takeaway from his journey into the heart of public shamings. He believes that shame does indeed have the power to dictate how people express themselves and interact with others—and that humanity as a whole must learn to reject shame. Otherwise, the "voicelessness" of those who trod on eggshells in their public and private lives will set a dangerous new precedent in terms of access to free speech, open public discourse, and individual privacy.

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