

JON RONSON

LOST AT SEA

The Jon Ronson Mysteries

PICADOR

Thinking Inside the Box

A young man called Bill stands in the shadows behind a curtain at a converted paintworks factory in Bristol, now a TV studio.

‘To be honest,’ Bill says, ‘I’m a little bit shell-shocked.’

‘This is it!’ yells a man called Jim. ‘Concentrate, Bill! Hit it! Hit it! Hit it! Let’s do it, mate! Come on! Come on!’

‘I’m bricking it,’ says Bill.

‘Go out there!’ Jim says. ‘Fierce! Do it! Be affirmative, man! Win some money! Do it! Positive! This is your moment! This is your chance! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!’

And at that, Bill steps out from the shadows to rapturous applause, and he proceeds randomly to open the first of twenty-two boxes.

Nine months ago I was on a treadmill at the gym. A Channel 4 afternoon game show called *Deal or No Deal* was on the TV. I’d never seen it before so it took me a minute to understand what was going on.

Twenty-two contestants stood behind twenty-two boxes. One of them, Fin, was selected to be that day’s player. There was a cash prize inside each box, from 1p to £250,000. Each time a box was opened, whatever cash prize was in there was discounted. Fin would win whatever money was left in the last box he opened. From time to time a telephone rang and

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a mysterious person on the other end, the Banker, tried to tempt Fin to stop opening the boxes by offering him a cash settlement. And that was it. That was the game.

At first, Fin looked pretty ordinary. But then he produced a scrap of paper from his pocket and showed it to presenter Noel Edmonds.

‘It contains distilled wisdom from Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*,’ he said.

‘I like the sound of this, Fin,’ Noel replied. ‘You’ve got a sensitive, almost spiritual side.’

How does Fin think distilled wisdom from Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* will help him choose the right boxes? I thought as I jogged. It’s all luck. And when did Noel Edmonds suddenly get so mystical?

There was a close-up of the scrap of paper, upon which Fin had scribbled ‘Listen to your heart.’

Suddenly a trancelike state overwhelmed Fin as he scanned the boxes.

‘What’s going through your mind?’ Noel asked.

‘I’m trying to just let the numbers come to me,’ Fin said.

‘For a big guy you’re looking incredibly serene,’ said Noel.

‘I’m listening to my heart,’ Fin said. ‘Box number sixteen, please.’

It was opened. £5 was in there. The audience cheered. Now, Fin wouldn’t go home with the paltry sum of £5.

And so it continued. Fin’s psychic trance state turned out to be an astonishing triumph. He opened the £1 box, the 50p box and the 10p box. Noel and the audience and I watched awed, as if witnessing a miracle.

‘The way you’re playing the game is actually more powerful than luck itself!’ Noel said.

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It was turning into one of the most exciting television viewing experiences I'd ever had. Each time a box was opened the tension was so agonizing I was practically running a four-minute mile on the treadmill. Although this was quarter past four in the afternoon, four million viewers – nearly half of everyone watching TV at that moment – were watching Fin.

Then the banker phoned and offered Fin a huge cash settlement of £44,000. The audience gasped. A mystical look crossed Fin's face.

'No deal!' he said. There was cheering.

And then disaster struck. Fin opened the £100,000 box, followed, devastatingly, by the £250,000 box. He ended up walking away with a relatively crappy £10,000.

Everybody in the audience – including Noel – went quiet and looked embarrassed and even a little ashamed. The mood was what I imagined it must feel like when somebody turns on all the lights at an orgy. The fact is, Fin should have accepted the £44,000. Listening to his heart and making decisions based on psychic impulses cost him £34,000. It was a victory for vaguely negative thinking.

My God, I thought, as I finally climbed off the treadmill, exhausted.

And so I phoned Endemol, the show's producers. I asked if I could be a fly on their wall. The show is filmed in Bristol, they said. The first anniversary show would be filmed in early October. I was welcome to come along.

And so now it is early October, in Bristol, and despite all the backstage motivating by Jim the Contestant Carer, Bill is having a terrible game. He's randomly opening all the wrong boxes. They film three shows a day here, and this is the last.

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It is especially awful to watch because this morning another contestant, Dan, won £70,000.

I'm sitting in the green room next to Pete the coach driver. Pete ferries the contestants between the hotel and the studio. His contact with them is minimal. This morning Pete announced to the coach that he'd be grateful if people stopped calling him Driver.

'I hate that,' Pete said. 'My name is Pete.'

Now, as we watch Bill's painful show unfold on the monitor screen, I can hear Pete whisper to himself. I listen closer. He's murmuring, 'Come on, Bill. Believe. Keep the dream alive.'

But it doesn't work out. Bill opens the wrong boxes to the end and walks away with a devastating £750. He emerges from the studio drained of colour. We climb onto the coach. Pete drives us back to the hotel in silence.

Deal or No Deal was invented within Endemol's Dutch headquarters. It has sold to forty-five countries, from Albania to Vietnam. In other countries, such as the USA, the people standing behind the boxes, the box-openers, are professional models, former *Playboy* centrefolds, etc. They all wear identical showgirl costumes. UK Endemol's brilliant idea was to make the box-openers fellow contestants – players-to-be. This means they're all sequestered away together at a hotel in Bristol, sometimes for weeks on end, away from the anchor of their homes, while they await their chance to get out from behind the boxes and become the main player. Consequently, an intense group bond forms. Late at night in the hotel tiny things become huge things. Emotions are heightened. And in the morning, when filming begins, you can feel the drama in the wincing and the

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cheers and the looks of love and hate that pass between the contestants.

According to the Cult Information Centre's pamphlet *Cults: A Practical Guide*, cult leaders routinely employ twenty-six techniques to keep their followers under their spell. One of the main ones is 'Isolation: inducing loss of reality by physical separation from family, friends, society and rational references.' Endemol – who make *Big Brother* as well as *Deal or No Deal* – realize that isolation doesn't only produce good cults, it also produces good television.

Now, as the coach trundles miserably back to the hotel, I realize this is the first time that the mood has been at anything less than a fever pitch of positivity. Jim the Contestant Carer is forever giving the contestants motivational talks. We're getting about four every day.

'Group cheer!' Jim constantly yells, his eyes aflame.

I wonder if this is in any way because of Noel Edmonds' famous antipathy towards negativity. In fact Noel writes in his recently published self-help book, *Positively Happy*, that he can't abide negativity in the workplace. Noel hates negativity. In fact he hates negativity so much, I would suggest his antipathy towards it borders on the negative. He even advises readers, on page 88, to dump their sexual partners if they are too negative. I can't help thinking that if I were Noel Edmonds' lover, he would dump me.

'But surely a bit of negativity makes you – you know – interestingly spiky and sassy,' I suggested to Noel earlier during a break from filming.

'I simply will not now get involved with people who are negative,' Noel replied. 'I won't tolerate people in the

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workplace who are negative. I like realistic people, but negative people? No. Just get rid of them.'

'I have a habit of being a bit negative sometimes,' I said. 'I'd hate my wife to read *Positively Happy* and leave me as a result.'

'Then be careful,' Noel said, looking me in the eye, 'because she might.' There was a silence.

It is 10pm, back in the hotel. I'm drinking with contestant Tony from the West Midlands. Earlier, during recording, Tony was standing behind box 8 and Noel mentioned that he thought he looked like a funeral director. It got a laugh: Tony does look slightly undertakerish, with white hair, a white moustache and a long, thin face. Now, unbeknownst to everyone else, Tony is desperately worried about it.

'I'm semi-retired,' he explains. 'Everything in my life revolves around quarter past four. I do the washing, the cleaning and I sit down. *Deal or No Deal* is an addiction for me. So to actually get through the auditions and on to the show! I'm dreaming! Apparently the chances of becoming a contestant are seventy thousand to one. And I make it through all that, and Noel calls me a funeral director.' Tony pauses. 'If only he could see the real me. Maybe I should have laughed or something. But to stand there and laugh at nothing? It's hard. And I didn't sleep well last night. There were police cars going up and down all night. Was Noel aware of that?'

Suddenly, Tony stops and glances at my notepad. 'Where's this information going?' he asks. 'Is it going to the Banker?'

There's a lot of paranoia amongst the contestants that things they say and do in the hotel might be relayed to the Banker – the mysterious figure on the other end of the phone

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who is never seen or heard. They fear that when it's their turn to play, the Banker might give them low cash offers if they've been deemed to have behaved desperately or cowardly or negatively back at the hotel.

'It isn't going to the Banker,' I say.

Tony pauses.

'Are you giving it to someone who'll give it to the Banker?' he asks.

'No,' I say.

At this, Tony relaxes. And it is true: Noel hasn't seen the real him. He's a warm, lovely man. As we drink he keeps asking me, 'What can I do to make Noel realize that I'm nothing like a funeral director?'

Every night after dinner there's a contestants' meeting. It is a chance for the three main players of the day to dissect their games. Bill – the £750 winner – takes the floor.

'I just want to say,' he says, 'that the Banker was a twat and a dickhead and thank God he wasn't standing in front of me.'

Bill sits down again.

'You stood strong, Bill,' says a contestant called Edward. 'That's what matters. You stood strong.'

I glance over at Dan, today's £70,000 winner. Ironically, Dan is probably the most rational person here. He's always laughing to me about his fellow contestants' crazy systems. And then he went and won £70,000. There's a big smile on Dan's face now. His beautiful girlfriend is draped over him. They spent the afternoon shopping for designer clothes. Then I glance back at Bill, looking hunched and lonely. I resist the temptation to think that this was somehow predestined by fate, that Dan looks a winner, and always did,

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and Bill looks a loser. But I don't think that, because it is an entirely irrational thing to think.

Then I am asked to take the floor to introduce myself.

'Some people apparently believe that I'm not really from the *Guardian*,' I say, 'but am in fact the Banker's spy! Well, I just want to say, I might be!'

I pause to receive laughter, but there isn't any.

'We're serious,' a few people say. 'Are you or aren't you working for the Banker?'

'I'm not,' I say.

They give me three cheers.

Some contestants get drunk. The drinkers are, I've noticed, the secular ones who realize like I do that the box opening is all about luck and not at all spiritual. Maybe the weight of that knowledge is enough to drive you to the bottle. Other contestants sit quietly and concentrate on their systems.

Ned from Liverpool has a system. He shows it to me. It is a series of boxes and Xs, like some weird periodic table, printed on a neatly folded piece of A4 paper.

'What I did,' Ned explains, 'was discard the seventeen numbers that make up my name: NEIL THOMAS CULSHAW. So, for instance, the number 1 has gone because it corresponds with the letter A. So I'm left with five numbers, and I've put them in the order of which boxes contained the highest amounts during last week's shows. But I've reversed the order, based on the assumption that if they contained the highest amounts last week, they'll contain the lowest amounts for me. So bearing all that in mind, the five numbers I'm leaving to the end are 16, 17, 10, 22 and 18.'

'So you believe you've calculated that when you're the

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main player, box 18 will be the box most likely to contain £250,000?' I ask.

'Yes,' says Ned, confidently.

'Complex,' I say.

'Not really,' says Ned.

I'm surprised that so many contestants still put such stock in their systems. If the show has taught us anything over the past twelve months, it has taught us that systems don't work and people aren't telepathic. Contestant Steve has a lucky number but he won't tell me what it is in case sharing the information inadvertently robs the number of its power.

One day last week, John – who claimed to be both telepathic and have a foolproof system – had his chance as the main player. John, a retired bank manager, had assiduously analysed a hundred and five shows. At night in the hotel he sat apart from the others, studying sheaves of spreadsheets. He concluded that boxes 1, 2, 5, 6, 18 and 19 were the luckiest. John's telepathy manifested itself in a tingle in his fingers. If he laid his fingers on a box, and his fingers tingled, he knew the box contained a high amount. John was convinced that his telepathy, coupled with his system, would make him unbeatable.

In the end, John walked away with £1.

Nonetheless, the contestants tonight are undaunted.

'John wasn't telepathic,' says contestant Nalini. 'But I've always been telepathic. One night I jumped out of bed. I said to my husband, "Something bad has happened." He said, "Don't be ridiculous." I said, "I mean it. I can't go to work because I know something terrible has happened." And later I discovered that this was the exact moment that my oldest

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son died. It was in the Maldives. That's the other side of the world. The exact moment. That was ten years ago.'

Still, Nalini says she doesn't want her turn as the main player to come just yet because that means she'd have to leave the bubble and go home.

'I love being here,' she says. 'My husband is a driver for Iceland, and on Saturdays he drinks.' Nalini shrugs. 'So I prefer being here in the hotel. This is a holiday.'

Then Nalini pauses and moves closer to me. 'Some people think too much,' she says. 'They go mad in the hotel.'

But for Bill, who just walked away with a terrible £750, there is no talk of systems or psychic powers any more.

'I'm not worried any more that I lost,' he tells me. 'I'm worried about coming over as a twat on TV.'

'You didn't,' I say.

'If people say, "There's that twat," it'll make the rest of my life very hard,' Bill says.

I go to bed. In the middle of the night the fire alarm goes off twice. I have to traipse down nine flights of stairs to the car park.

The next morning, everyone is exhausted. I visit Noel in his Winnebago. It is parked up deep within the Endemol complex, near a dried-up river. Inside, it is very luxurious, all cream leather seats. Les Dennis's far smaller and less deluxe Winnebago is parked up next to it. Les Dennis is filming a Channel 5 game show called *Speculation* in another studio here.

'Les Dennis can have the big Winnebago when he gets the ratings we get,' says Noel.

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I stealthily glance around the Winnebago for little clues that might reveal the dark secrets of Noel's personal life. Noel's love life has been of interest ever since he made it known earlier this year that he asked the Cosmos to provide him with a woman.

Noel believes that if you order wishes from the Cosmos, the Cosmos will oblige, just as long as you follow the correct ordering protocols. You must write your wish down on a piece of paper. You absolutely have to be positive. The Cosmos will not accept negative wishes. You must keep your wish general. The Cosmos won't, for some reason, grant over-specific wishes.

As Noel explains the ins and outs of Cosmic Ordering to me I involuntarily look dubious. Immediately, Noel changes tack to insist he hasn't gone 'off with the fairies'.

'Yes, the word Cosmos might sound off-putting,' he says, 'but you don't have to call it Cosmos. Cosmos is just a word. You can call it anything you like. You can call it Argos or MFI.'

It strikes me that Noel Edmonds is probably the only modern-day spiritualist guru who would even consider Argos or MFI as alternative names for the Cosmos. That's the odd thing about hanging around here. The mystical people are not at all New Agey. They are retired bank managers. They work in betting shops. They are Noel Edmonds. The last time I saw Noel was ten years ago. He barged past me in some country house hotel towards his helicopter – the epitome of the no-nonsense Conservative businessman and celebrity, off to do some deal. He was nothing like the vulnerable, spiritual Noel sitting in front of me now.

'I wrote to the Cosmos that I would like to meet a woman who'll make me laugh and make me happy,' Noel tells me. 'I

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wrote that I'd like a relationship that's not too heavy with an attractive lady, and I'd like her to walk into my life by the end of September 2005. And she did!

There is a short silence. 'She wasn't the person who sold her story to the *Sunday People* back in July, was she?' I ask.

There's another silence.

'Yes,' says Noel.

He was a very tender and lovely kisser. When I woke up with him the following morning I felt completely at ease and his first words were, 'Cup of tea, darling?' He was a very giving man in all aspects and satisfied me in every way. Noel had his own special song for us. It was 'You're Beautiful' by James Blunt. But once he was back at the top he didn't need me any more. I felt he just discarded me. He was a hypocrite who used me to make himself feel more positive about himself.

– Marjan Simmons,
the *Sunday People*, August 2006

'So that turned out to be not so good,' I say. 'Maybe if you'd written down, "I want to meet somebody by the end of September and I don't want her selling her story to the *Sunday People*—"'

'No, you can't do that,' Noel interrupts, 'because that's a negative. The Cosmos only accepts positive orders. The word I probably missed out was "trustworthy".'

I continue to peer surreptitiously around to see if I can spot anything weird or secret in the Winnebago. Noel almost immediately notices what I'm doing.

'Go and have a look in the bedroom,' he says. 'Go on.'

I look doubtfully at him. 'Are you sure?' I ask.

'Have a look in the bedroom,' he says.

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I shoot Noel a slightly suspicious glance and then I wander into his bedroom. I have a good poke around. I find nothing incriminating. Still, it was nice of him to offer.

I tell Noel that I can't understand why he doesn't give up the mysticism. I've spent three days here, watching three shows a day, and I've seen so many disappointments, so many broken dreams, so many systems – telepathic or otherwise – that didn't pan out. And Noel has presented three hundred shows. By now he must know that life is just random.

Well, first, Noel replies, it was the Cosmos that gave him *Deal or No Deal*. The BBC had unceremoniously dumped him in 1999 after twenty years as a star presenter. It looked like he'd never be on TV again. He was a workaholic without work. So he spent five fallow years throwing himself into various businesses and charities – the British Horse Society, some anti-windfarm lobby group called the Renewable Energy Foundation, etc. But he asked the Cosmos for a new work challenge, and the Cosmos gave him *Deal or No Deal*. It was a huge and instant success, nominated for a BAFTA, and winning a Royal Television Society Award and a Rose d'Or, all within a few months.

'Have you looked *Deal or No Deal* up on the Internet?' Noel asks. 'It can do your head in. Did you know that someone's compiling a dictionary of my phrases?'

This is true. A large Wikipedia entry is dedicated to Noel's oft-repeated expressions ('Some people call it an entertainment drama, some the Red Box Club . . . Welcome to Planet Tension!' 'It's not how you start, it's how you finish.' And so on.)

'Somebody else,' says Noel, 'is tracking the repetition of my shoes, trousers and shirts.' Noel is thrilled: 'I'm delighted

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people are reading so much into it. I want to be popular. I want people to like me. Not long ago I talked to someone in the audience and she went to pieces. Just because I was talking to her! It is really important I keep my feet on the ground here.'

I don't think Noel should be thanking the Cosmos for the success of *Deal or No Deal*. I think it takes a rare presenting talent to make the opening of twenty-two boxes so gripping.

But then Noel says there's something else. There's another reason why he still believes. He says that after three hundred shows he now knows – practically every time – how someone's going to do before they've opened a single box.

'How?' I ask.

Noel pauses. 'How deep can I go here?' he says.

Then he says, 'Take Edward. Edward, I'm really not sure about. I've got a funny feeling it may go horribly wrong for Edward.'

Noel says he knows this just by the way Edward walks, his aura. You can tell winners by the way they walk. And Edward doesn't walk that way. Yesterday, one contestant, Mark, told me that Edward needed a big win more than anyone here: 'Edward's got nothing,' Mark said. 'Literally nothing. He's completely skint.'

I know something Edward doesn't know. I've seen the call sheet. Edward's game is going to start in a couple of hours.

Just before I leave the Winnebago, I spot a typed sheet of paper lying on the kitchenette. I look closer. It contains notes about what the contestants got up to in the hotel last night.

'It started because of ill health,' Noel explains. 'Everyone was getting colds. I needed to know what was happening.'

But once the colds cleared up, the daily reports to Noel continued. For example, Noel says, if a pair of amorous

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contestants are seen leaving the bar together, a production assistant will write the news down and Noel will read about it at breakfast. He probably won't refer to it during the show, he says, but it is important for him to know what's going on. Today's sheet reads, 'Tony is very sensitive about your funeral-director comment.'

I leave Noel and wander back to the contestants. They're in make-up. Jim is giving them a motivational talk.

'The sun's out!' he says. 'It's a brand-new day! Let's really lift ourselves! Are we going to stick it right down the Banker's throat? Yeah? Yeah! Momentum! Get momentum! GROUP CHEER!'

Everyone cheers.

Tony is still worried about Noel's funeral-director aside. He says he telephoned his wife last night in a terrible flap about it.

'I said to her, "Rita? Am I miserable?" She said, "You're not." I said, "I love you forever." Tony pauses. 'But, Jon, you know what? I have a plan.'

He hands me a brown envelope. I open it to find a photograph of Tony's father standing next to Lester Piggott.

'Noel is President of the British Horse Society,' Tony explains. 'If I can get him to see this photograph . . . Noel will know that a horse-lover can't be miserable.'

Inside the make-up room, a contestant called Madeline is talking about last night's fire alarms.

'I had to walk down ten flights of stairs in my nightie,' she tells the make-up lady. Then she spots Jim the Contestant Carer.

'But you have to laugh, though, because it was really funny,' she quickly adds.

We walk into the studio. It is time for the contestants to

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choose their box numbers. This is done randomly: they reach in and grab ping-pong balls from a bag.

Contestant Nalini, who claims to be telepathic, turns to Contestant David and says, 'You're going to pick number seven.'

David reaches into the bag and pulls out ping-pong ball number 7. Nalini smiles. Everyone goes quiet.

Noel emerges from the wings and wanders up the line, saying hello to the contestants. He reaches Tony.

'How are you?' he says.

'Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!' says Tony, throwing his head back and letting out a huge, Santa Claus-type laugh. Then Tony spots me. He winks, as if to say, 'I did it!'

I give him a surreptitious thumbs-up.

And then the recording begins, and – as I knew he would be – Edward is picked. This is Edward who is penniless, Edward who needs it more than anyone, Edward who – Noel has psychically predicted – will have a terrible game, because he doesn't have the aura of a winner.

Two hours later, and the contestants are crying. Nalini blames it on the fire alarms.

'We're all so tired,' she says. 'If we haven't got the energy, how can we give off positive vibes? That's why Edward opened all the wrong boxes.'

Whatever: Noel was right. Edward walks away with just £1.