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## Addition: Toni Jordan and the special needs genre.

*Addition* belongs to the growing genre of fiction in Australia that is increasingly turning to behavioural disorders for inspiration. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*, narrated by an autistic boy, won a slew of awards and, in its wake, encouraged copycat writers to find a 'fashionable' dysfunction on which to hang their narrative. Jordan's debut novel does just that. It takes obsessive compulsive disorder and attempts to illustrate how 'OCD' can be a unique blessing, rather than seriously debilitating.

*Text* publishing sold the rights to *Addition* to North America, the UK, Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Israel and the Czech Republic and it has been named the *Women's Weekly's Great Read* for February this year, and selected as *The Courier-Mail's Big Book Club* book for April. Both the *Women's Weekly* and the *Courier-Mail* can be compared to America's *Oprah's Bookclub* which chooses books for widespread appeal. And perhaps for this reason alone it may reach a wide readership as it is, for the most part, well written and certainly very easy to read.

Grace Vandenburg, the protagonist, has an obsession with numbers. She cannot stop counting. She counts seconds, minutes, the number of letters in her name, toothbrush bristles and steps. In fact steps are significant in this book as not only does Grace count each step that she takes to and from her local café and her local supermarket, it is intimated that it is a tragedy involving the back steps at her family home that triggered Grace's obsessions. In addition to this, she is trying to make the steps necessary to keep her new boyfriend Seamus; she is trying to "build a staircase to a healthier future", her psychiatrist tells her. Unfortunately, in what should be a climactic moment where she reveals to Seamus that she was responsible as a child for their puppy falling down the stairs, this tale and subsequent revelation about this event fail to make an impact. This is because Grace is a feisty and witty character and this childhood tragedy does not add to who and why Grace is the way she is. In fact, it simplifies her disorder.

And surely we are all guilty of obsessively counting. Perhaps it is the number of days until a much anticipated event, the number of words in our assignments, the number of hairs we lose in middle age, the number of points our favourite football team won their match by or even the number of text messages we receive on any given day. For this reason, Grace, at the beginning of the novel is not unlike many of us. Her OCD is quirky and at times endearing rather than irritating or alienating and yet she has lost her job as a teacher for not teaching her students 'properly'; for focusing on numbers rather than the syllabus. Even here, the suggestion is that as a teacher she was perhaps teaching the children something valuable about tolerance and difference that could not be written into any syllabus. In fact, many teachers today, it could be argued are obsessed with figures, their students final grades, their tertiary entrance rank.

A humorous love story, this novel has some charming moments. First, Grace frequents the same café in Melbourne's Glen Iris every day and orders the same items off the menu at the same table. This may not seem bizarre, however, it is her counting of the number of poppy seeds in her slice of orange cake that illustrates Grace's need for control. Once she has counted the poppy seeds she must eat the cake

with the same number of bites as poppy seeds. Thus, some days when there are few poppy seeds she must eat large bites of the cake, the more comical scenes come from the times there are hundreds of poppy seeds and she must divide her cake into crumbs before she eats it. This, of course, happens the day her life changes. She goes to her local café only to find that her table is taken and her orange cake is not on the menu. The only constant in this equation is that the man she met in the supermarket is there and asks her to share his table with him.

Their initial meeting in the supermarket is perhaps the most comical and evocative in the entire novel. Grace counts the number of groceries she puts in her trolley. She must have a certain number of bottles of water, a certain number of toothbrushes, chicken fillets, vegetables and, of course, the ubiquitous ten bananas:

What? □ □ Count again. □ □ How the fuck did I get 9 bananas in my trolley? □ □ This is impossible. I look behind the eggs, behind the bag of beans. This is not possible. □ □ The drug-addled multilevel marketer is standing behind the counter, smiling. Those teeth are money well spent. He's got a smile like a Scientologist's. Well, I'm going back. I can't buy 9 bananas. He can wait while I go back to aisle 12 and get another. □ □ Just as I am about to excuse myself, someone comes to a stop behind me with a basket hanging over his arm; now I'll lose my spot. And I was here first. What kind of a Nigel No-friends is at the supermarket this early on a Saturday anyway? Must have had a big Friday night with 'Inspector Morse' on DVD and a cup of hot cocoa. The Scientologist drug dealer is standing there. His smile is fading. He folds his arms.

And so Grace actually steals this man's banana to satisfy her need for numerical balance in her trolley and to restore harmony. The man's name is Seamus and he is immediately intrigued by this fruit stealer, who seems, from the contents of her trolley, to buy in bulk. It is interesting that the piece of fruit she steals is a banana as not only is it a phallic symbol, prefiguring the sex she has with Seamus in her kitchen, it is also a slang term for insanity; 'to go bananas'. Jordan has been praised for her erotic sex scenes, however, the sex on the kitchen floor is more in the style of *Mills and Boon* than realistic first time sex between two consenting adults. Grace does masturbate a number of times in the book and these scenes are more realistic but sit a little uncomfortably in a narrative that aims for light-heartedness over seriousness.

Prior to her encounter with Seamus, Grace's fixation has been on Nikola Tesla, a nineteenth inventor who pioneered electricity. He is Grace's inspiration as he, too, had an obsession with numbers, specifically the number three. Jordan said the inclusion of Tesla in her book was "completely accidental" after she discovered during her research that the inventor suffered from an obsessive compulsive numerical disorder. He is an interesting figure, and having his picture beside Grace's bed drives her fantasies. In the end, her obsession with Tesla comes to nothing and his emphasis at the beginning of the novel is then questionable. Some of the lengthier sections outlining Tesla's biography do not sit so well within the parameters of the narrative. It is Grace's discussions with her niece Hilary (Larry) that bring Tesla to life and fuel both their imaginations. Tesla and Grace are bound together by their eccentricities and as Tesla was such a great man, the narrative sets up the expectation of more than just domesticity and a handsome boyfriend for Grace. When Tesla is abandoned, so, in many ways, is Grace's exuberance and promise.

Seamus is the catalyst for Grace's foray into another bout of group therapy and prescription drugs to try and cure her counting. When she is with him, she stops counting, "the numbers scattered from my fingertips and ran across the floor. I was pinned under him and could not chase them" and it is wonderful. In this moment she decides she wants "to be like everyone else." Sustaining a relationship when one of the partners suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder would be difficult and complicated but Seamus and Grace make it look effortless. Their banter is particularly clever and they are clearly soul mates. They do break up at one point but it is never a believable nor a permanent split.

Similarly, the group therapy sessions in the novel, though very amusing, do not allow for the possibility that this kind of therapy is valuable. Grace is the sanest one in the group and the other patients are parodies of other disorders like the 'germaphobes'. The drugs, which make Grace numb and dampen her sex drive provide the opportunity for her to live a more ordinary life. Again, it is Hilary who mourns her aunty's 'descent' into normality. The drugs give Grace the sensation that her brain has split in two and for some time her 'two brains' bicker, have conversations and take control of Grace. Numbers used to hold the world together for Grace but now the artificial world of drugs rules her life and relationship. This is supposed to lead to the moral of the story. And it is a pretty heavy-handed moral that required more subtlety to be effective. Jordan, in her tale of OCD, questions whether Shakespeare's statement, "To thine own self be true" is still relevant. Is Grace happier counting than trying to be normal? What is normal anyway? It is a social construct. Grace sums this up herself when she states, "Individuality is a blessing, not a curse". *Addition* is more upbeat than poignant, more comical than serious but it is a book about tolerance and daring to be different. If only Grace was substantially different, rather than appealingly quirky, it would have driven the point home more powerfully.