

*How to be*  
**‘Normal’**

*Notes on the Eccentricities  
of Modern Life*

This ebook edition published in 2020 by

Quercus Editions Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 52941 020 4  
Ebook ISBN 978 1 52941 021 1

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Author photo taken by Jérôme Tabet  
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Text designed and typeset by CC Book Production

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# Contents

[\*How to be 'Normal'\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

[\*Other Titles in the series\*](#)

[\*Title\*](#)

[\*Copyright\*](#)

[\*Epigraph\*](#)

[Introduction](#)

[A nightclub](#)

The tattooist

Small talk

Ugly vegetables

Letters

Lost property

The anti-age cream user

Joggers

Going up

Selfies

Electioneering

The lottery

# Introduction

Normal *adjective* /'nɔ:məl/ – typical, usual or ordinary; what you would expect

As a child, I spent many years learning how to be ‘normal’. That is to say, how to fit in, how not to stand out, how to conform to the many social conventions I failed to grasp intuitively, the way other children did. Born on the autistic spectrum, I perceived the world around me in ways that set me apart: words had textures and colours; people resembled numbers; pi was like an epic poem.

So, I was a born outsider and, growing up, I spent many happy hours in dictionaries rather than parties. I identified with words and objects more easily than with people: I read cowboy stories not for the characters’ derring-do but for the word ‘saddle’ with its poise and shimmer. Imagining life from a horse chestnut’s, or a teacup’s, or a candle flame’s point of view came naturally enough to me. My classmates hardly knew what to make of me; I quickly got a name for thinking my own way, for oddness.

But like any child, I wanted to belong, and doggedly pursued ‘normality’ as though I were on a full-time apprenticeship.

Today, a writer and poet in my forties, I’ve long since come around to cherishing my difference. All those years of close and passionate observation help me now discern the glorious strangeness, often unnoticed and unsuspected, of modern life.

From tattoos and lotteries to jogging and micro-blogging, the dozen lightly humorous essays that follow are as many invitations to see our ‘everyday’ with new eyes. And a reminder – a lesson I long ago learned – that normality is always relative; that one person’s ‘normal’ will be another’s wondrous.

## A nightclub

What chess club would be a chess club without its rooks and its bishops, its greybeards and its black-and-white boards? A book club, surely, is only ever as good as the books discussed. And if there's one valid reason to steer clear of gentlemen's clubs, it is that the members all think – so highly! – of themselves as 'gentlemen'.

How, then, to understand nightclubs? Nightclub in name only, of course. There is no night, for the bouncer won't admit the palest beam of moonlight. Nor the smallest snatch of owl song. A nocturnal chill might try to creep inside, but clubgoers have other ideas; they hurry in from the night and vanish behind the doors. They have had all evening to decide on what to wear. The 'dress to impress' code excludes dressing gowns. And stripy pyjamas – however stripy. The young women arrive not in slippers but stilettos; the heels destined to return home hours later – courtesy of a taxi – in their hands instead of on their feet.

So, a nightclub without the night: yet clubbers pay decent money to keep it out. They pay to barricade themselves inside, in entrance fees, overpriced beer and tips. It is easy to escape daylight: think shutters or dark glasses. The night, though, is harder. You have to make a team effort: the company of many strangers to overwhelm solitude; disco balls that strew bright discs of sparkle against the dark; a DJ to break the peace of the smallest hours. Soon enough, the dance floor fills. Strobe lights fall heavy on twitching eyelids. The music thuds and thumps. The music is time counting aloud every second, like a young child rehearsing his numbers.

It is not unknown for clubbers to make up the moves as they dance. They make motions of high energy, point at random things, at the ceiling, the fire extinguisher tucked away in a corner, at the bobbing sea of faces. Some wonder how to move to be attractive, to be cool; they are terrified of being mistaken for boring. Others think of nothing, intent on the music. Many feel free now of any need to ration their perspiration. The DJ