

positive psychology and psychiatry, multiple intelligences, and developmental psychology. In a central chapter, Dr. Fung takes a deep dive into the brain wiring associated with various capacities and intelligences. This could be helpful for educating courts as to the bases for differences, supplementing clinical information and psychometrics. Taking its cue from Dr. Grandin's "thinking in pictures," the book includes seven color plates depicting brain functioning, nonlinear thinking, executive functioning, and related concepts. Other chapters contain practical information about strengths-based constructions of conditions such as savantism, autism, ADHD, and dyslexia.

*Neurodiversity* is neither about legal matters nor aimed at forensic professionals. Yet, in an introductory chapter, Drs. Fung and Doyle cite research showing barriers to inclusion of neurodiverse citizens leading to increased rates of incarceration, unemployment, and underachievement. They regard the conditions discussed as "invisible" to implementation of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, since the differences requiring accommodations are harder to grasp than, say, the need for a wheelchair ramp or screen reader. Following a chapter on neurobiology, subsequent discussions explore education, employment, and assistive technologies. All chapters contain exceptional references, suggested readings, and learning aids.

The subject of neurodiversity, as it interfaces with matters of civil law (discrimination, entitlement) and criminal law (from diminished capacity to mitigation), will likely increase in prominence. As Drs. Fung and Doyle observe in the first chapter, however, there is a potential metaphysical matter: whether the neurodiverse conditions describe medical illnesses, products of social construction (disability), or simply a natural distribution of attributes. My own work has included evaluations of students and employees, on the civil side, and autistic individuals seeking sentencing departures, on the criminal. Employing respectful and persuasive language is a challenge. As the book contributors observe, the language and labeling to describe such individuals is a work in progress. Some affected persons prefer "first-person" descriptors such as "person with autism" versus "identity-first" labels such as "autistic" or "dyslexic." Forensic professionals should be sensitive to the individual's preferences, especially when there is resistance to a medical model explanation for accommodations or behavior. Beyond that, the language

employed in reports must reflect statutory or regulatory wording and not be so abstract as to hinder legal arguments. *Neurodiversity* supplies needed ingredients for describing conditions and prescribing plans for individuals who might otherwise go unnoticed amid typical disability claims and parlance.

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

## ***Femme-Fatale Frauds: A Review of Inventing Anna and the Dropout***

*Inventing Anna*. Netflix; 2022. Frenkel, D, Verica, T, von Scherler Mayer, D, Kuras, E, Stewart, N, directors. Rhimes, S, creator and producer.

*The Dropout*. Hulu; 2022. Showalter, M, Gregorini, F, Watson, E, directors. Meriwether, E, creator.

Reviewed by Karen B. Rosenbaum, MD, and Susan Hatters Friedman, MD

DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.220054-22

**Key words:** fraud; forensic psychiatry; film; suicide; female psychopathy

Anna Sorokin's story is cleverly told through Shonda Rhimes' *Inventing Anna* on Netflix beginning with, "This whole story, the one you're about to sit on your fat ass and watch like a big lump of nothing is about me." Each episode has the qualifier, "This whole story is completely true. Except for all the parts that are totally made up." The series is based on the article by the reporter Jessica Pressler who interviewed Ms. Sorokin in Rikers as she was awaiting trial, as well as some of her friends and victims.<sup>1</sup> The Anna Sorokin character comes to life through actress Julia Garner of Netflix's *Ozark* fame, with an endearing enigmatic accent that has Russian undertones. The reporter character, Vivian Kent, is based on Jessica Pressler and is played by Anna Chlumsky of *Veep* and the unforgettable 1991 film *My Girl*. In the series, Vivian Kent is pregnant and attempting to regain her reputation after a career difficulty; she sees Anna Sorokin's story as a way for her own career to be revived. She is sympathetic to the protagonist Anna, who has a way of seeing into people that helps

her to charm and defraud them. As forensic psychiatrists, we are often similarly empathic toward the people we are interviewing who are in bad situations of their own making.

In *The Dropout*, the protagonist had been told by a female Stanford professor that her idea would not work, as it was not based on science. She wanted to invent a skin patch that would both detect infectious disease and administer appropriate antibiotics. Her company, Theranos, was a combination of two words, “Therapy” and “Diagnosis.” Eventually, she dropped the patch idea and established her company to develop a small machine that would be able to run hundreds of diagnostic tests from a single drop of blood from a finger. She would not listen to anyone who tried to tell her that this was physically impossible. When it began to come to light that her machine (dubbed the Edison) did not work, she would retort that people who doubted her and her technology were trying to keep powerful women from advancing. In the Hulu Series, Amanda Seyfried, who played Lilly Kane in *Veronica Mars* and played Karen in the film *Mean Girls*, does an excellent job of embodying the wide-eyed Elizabeth Holmes, who for years allegedly artificially deepened her voice and wore all black to imitate her idol, Steve Jobs of Apple.

When Ms. Holmes’s character first runs into trouble with her powerful board, she brings in Sonny Balwani, an experienced businessman in the tech world to become COO of Theranos. Mr. Balwani, played in the Hulu Series by Naveen Andrews of the popular television series *Lost*, changes the culture and feel of Theranos and, like Elizabeth Holmes, seems more interested in the bottom line and selling ideas than in actually implementing a working device that could help patients. They developed an intimate relationship that was a secret, which became controversial and, in the end, contentious. In later legal proceedings, they chose to be tried separately. In the real world, Elizabeth Holmes claimed that she was unduly influenced and psychologically abused by Mr. Balwani, who was eighteen years her senior and who she had met when she was eighteen. Mr. Balwani’s real-world trial began while *The Dropout* was airing, causing several potential jurors to be dismissed.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Dropout* series, when people in the company who realized that an unreliable, inaccurate machine could harm patients attempted to speak to Mr. Balwani or Ms. Holmes regarding their concerns, they

were met with anger and dismissal and were forced to sign nondisclosure agreements. Despite these agreements, a few brave people, including the grandson of famous board member and supporter of Elizabeth Holmes, George Shultz (played by Sam Waterston, perhaps best known for his 16 seasons as Jack McCoy on *Law and Order*) spoke up and became sources for the reporter character John Carryrou. In the series, employees were threatened and stalked in attempts to intimidate them. Ian Gibbons (played by Stephen Fry), the former lab director of Theranos, committed suicide before he was to testify at a deposition involving a patent lawsuit against the company. In the real world, Carryrou wrote the Wall Street Journal article that first broke the Theranos scandal.<sup>3</sup> He also wrote the novel *Bad Blood* and created the podcast of the same name as the series.

In these two recent miniseries, the protagonists Anna Sorokin, a self-proclaimed German heiress living in posh New York City hotels, and Elizabeth Holmes, founder and CEO of Theranos, are both strong, compelling, motivated young white women characters. Both series depict how these women were able to fool powerful people into investing money and time in them through their artful capacity to convincingly sell others on their own stories of future success as if they were already successful. While many young, accomplished women struggle with “Imposter Syndrome,” Ms. Sorokin and Ms. Holmes seemed to have the opposite problem, abundant confidence with no credentials to support it. Ms. Holmes dropped out of Stanford after her freshman year, and Anna Sorokin (who also went by Anna Delvey) was not the heiress she claimed to be but hailed from Russia and later Germany where she and her family lacked means, and she was teased mercilessly by her peers. Ms. Holmes’s story, as told through *The Dropout*, also portrays early childhood teasing and a history of a sexual assault at Stanford.

Both the portrayals of the protagonists in *Inventing Anna* and *The Dropout* share similar traits with young women seen in fiction who have psychopathic traits as described by Cerny *et al.*<sup>4</sup> In shows like *Pretty Little Liars* and *Gossip Girl*, girls portray characteristics such as lying and bullying to get ahead while often remaining charming to the outside world. They and other such characters served to normalize “bad behavior in young women” (Ref. 4, p 233). Both the Anna and Elizabeth characters have an idea that they

believe in, and they will stop at nothing to realize it even when there is no substance behind it.

Both miniseries' protagonists, Anna Sorokin and Elizabeth Holmes, pleaded Not Guilty and went to trial for several counts of fraud. In *Inventing Anna*, Anna Sorokin insisted that her lawyer not proceed with his recommended defense that Ms. Sorokin was "not close" to defrauding investors (an attempt to disprove an element of the crime required by the prosecution to make its case) because she was actually proud of how close she came to realizing her dream of creating a Soho House-type clubhouse for artists. In the real world, Elizabeth Holmes testified in her recent trial.

Femme Fatale was a film trope that was notably used in the forties and fifties in movies such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In this paradigm, a woman uses her seduction abilities to get what she needs from society by using a man to get it for her. Abbey Bender in her *New York Times Magazine* article<sup>5</sup> explains that in the eighties and nineties, the erotic thrillers such as *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction* made explicit the way in which a woman can use her sexuality to get what she wants. Bender explains how the femme fatale never apologizes, unlike many other portrayals of women who say "I'm sorry" even when the situation has nothing to do with them, let alone being their fault. In this way, these series' protagonists are almost enviable as they fight until the end without admission or arguably even a full understanding of the harm that they caused. In the case of Theranos, it was reported in *The Dropout* podcast<sup>6</sup> (on which the series was based) and other sources that many people were misdiagnosed, at least one case each of erroneous HIV and cancer diagnoses, with numerous other erroneous results given to individuals who were tested using this technology in Walgreens stores in California and Arizona. The *New York Magazine* article that *Inventing Anna* was based on ends with a quotation from the real Anna Delvey to Ms. Pressler that well summarizes her belief in herself, "Money, like there's an unlimited amount of capital in the world, you know? . . . But there's limited amounts of people who are talented" (Ref. 1, p 115).

In these series, there appears to be a difference in how these female protagonists (Anna Sorokin and Elizabeth Holmes) were regarded by investors compared with their male counterparts depicted in recent

television series, such as the CEO/founders of Uber and WeWork. Joseph Gordon-Levitt depicts a care-free, crass, misogynistic protagonist Travis Kalanick, founder and CEO of Uber in Showtime's *Super Pumped*, while Jared Ledo transforms himself into a charismatic character, Adam Neumann in the Apple TV series *WeCrashed*. Neither male protagonist seems to conform himself to anyone's expectations to please his board, even when it would serve him well. The Elizabeth Holmes character, however, transforms herself into a more male prototype of a CEO, modeling herself through her voice and her dress code after Steve Jobs. Anna Sorokin in *Inventing Anna* changes her character and her backstory for whomever she is speaking to at the time.

Both *Inventing Anna* and *The Dropout* are entertaining limited series depicting young ambitious women in male-dominated fields, who were tried and convicted for fraud charges. Both series will be interesting viewing for forensic psychiatrists to better consider the mindset of women getting ahead in society who may or may not have mental illness, but who have unusual thought processes and perhaps psychopathic traits, in a compelling and complex package.

## References

1. Pressler J. Maybe She Had So Much Money She Just Lost Track of It. *New York Magazine*; 2018 May. Available from: [https://www.thecut.com/article/how-anna-delvey-tricked-new-york.html#\\_ga=2.115835270.1888140252.1659530569-534897532.1659530568](https://www.thecut.com/article/how-anna-delvey-tricked-new-york.html#_ga=2.115835270.1888140252.1659530569-534897532.1659530568). Accessed August 3, 2022
2. Pulliam-Moore C. Sunny Balwani's Theranos Trial has been Complicated by the Dropout. *The Verge*; 2022 Mar 16. Available from: <https://www.theverge.com/2022/3/16/22980890/sunny-balwani-theranos-trial-the-dropout-hulu>. Accessed August 3, 2022
3. Carreyrou J. Hot Startup Theranos has Struggled with its Blood-test Technology. *The Wall Street Journal*; 2015 Oct 16. Available from: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/theranos-has-struggled-with-blood-tests-1444881901>. Accessed August 3, 2022
4. Cerny C, Friedman SH, Smith D. Television's "crazy lady" trope: female psychopathic traits, teaching, and influence of popular culture. *Acad Psychiatry*. 2014; 38(2):233–41
5. Bender A. Why I love Erotic Thrillers. *The New York Times Magazine*; 2022 Mar 29. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/29/magazine/erotic-thrillers-recommendation.html>. Accessed August 3, 2022
6. Jarvis R. *The Dropout*. ABCaudio; 2019-2022. Available from: <https://abcaudio.com/podcasts/the-dropout/>. Accessed April 9, 2022

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.