



Codependent Forevermore: The Invention of Self in a Twelve Step Group

Leslie Irvine

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In the same week that his father died, Alex came home to find his live-in fiancée in bed with another man. Paul is a divorced single parent who was recently forced to go on disability. Liz left an abusive husband and then found herself involved with yet another controlling man. These three, along with many others, have found a kind of salvation in Codependents Anonymous. Is this self-indulgent psychobabble or legitimate therapy? Are Twelve Step groups helpful communities or disguised addictions? And what exactly *is* codependency, the psychological condition that has apparently swept the United States? Leslie Irvine went inside "CoDA" to find out.

Codependent Forevermore is thus an insider's look at the world of people "in recovery" and the society that produced them. Through extensive interviews with CoDA members, case studies, and the meetings she attended regularly, Irvine develops a galvanizing perspective on contemporary Americans' sense of self. She explores the idea that selfhood is a narrative accomplishment, achieved by people telling stories to themselves and about themselves. She shows how Alex, Paul, Liz, and many others create a sense of self by combining elements of autobiography, culture, and social structure all within the adopted language of psycho-spirituality.

By following the progress and tribulations of CoDA members, Irvine gets to the heart of widespread American conceptions of relationships, selfhood, and community. Amidst the increasingly shrill criticism of the Twelve Step ethos, her reasoned and considered analysis of these groups reveals the sources of both their power and their popularity.

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