motif. Davis is a professor at the University of Illinois in the departments of English, Medical Education, and Disability and Human Development, and has an interesting broad perspective. He insists that to treat an illness effectively, we must understand its history and evolution in a cultural context. Obsession has evolved from being subjacent to demonic possession into something to be almost proud of, to want even. Obsession is the hallmark of genius, of industry and perhaps of modern life, such as our need to regularly check e-mail.

Davis argues for the provision of a narrative framework to medicine, to understand both the disease entity itself and the illness that results from it. This raises the interesting question of whether we need a new type of clinician to help a patient understand their disease through such a narrative.

Davis also asks us to agree with a reclassification of obsession and thereby most, if not all, mental illness. But it is not clear into what. He asks us to assume that science and medical knowledge are responsible for the creation of obsessive culture because of their reductionist approach that observes too strictly the one gene, one disease schema. By this logic, it follows that scientists and physicians are themselves obsessive and unable to render any judgement. He addresses them in his introduction: "some clinicians and researchers who have miraculously persisted in reading my introduction up to this point will all the while have been shaking their heads at the ignorant insouciance of my project." Unfortunately, he is right. His elegant approach to reclassifying obsession, and by extension obsessive–compulsive disorders, is clouded by a post-modernist demonization of science.

Many facts and statements in the book are misleading. For example, "We are in the very early days of understanding the neurochemical and electrical activity of the brain," says Davis. But our current understanding of human physiology and disease follows centuries of study and analysis. The diagnoses we render now are based on an infinitely larger body of knowledge than those of our forebears who prescribed a good bleeding when one was feeling melancholic; hardly early days.

Davis gives us a witty and interesting historical tour of a fascinating subject. However, by presenting science as excessively reductionist and as responsible for the mis- or over-diagnosis of obsession, his arguments for reclassifying the disease remain incomplete and lack scientific rigour. ■

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Q&A: Chemistry in the kitchen

Voted the world's best restaurant, Spain's elBulli near Barcelona offers an unusual culinary experience, from hot velvet-crab aspic with mini-corncob couscous to ice-cold liquorice nitro-dragon dessert. Innovative head chef **Ferran Adrià** explains how science and haute cuisine can work together.


ELBULLI

What will a guest find at elBulli?
It's not just about the food, it's an experience in itself. Cooking is a language. I'm expressing myself and everyone perceives it in a different way, like a piece of theatre. Each person takes away something new. In most human activities it would be normal to find humour, irony and deception. The one place this isn't expected is in the kitchen.

What are you doing now?
At the moment my team and I are working with a very strange ingredient, veal cartilage. We're also designing a new version of the Chinese 'thousand-year-old egg' [traditionally an egg preserved in clay, salt, ash, tea and lime]. I spend half the year composing at my workshop in Barcelona, and the other half interpreting in the kitchen at elBulli.

How hard is it to develop new dishes?
Last year we ran 4,000 tests and only about 300 of them panned out. Everyone learns from their mistakes — it's a necessary consequence of being creative. The important thing is to have lots of ideas simmering. Some of these ideas will work, and from these we build our new dishes.

Do you ever seek advice?
As with any other art, when my creative team needs something specific we go to an expert such as a scientist or historian. But when it comes to everyday ingredients, we don't usually consult researchers. Our work is systematic: you have to be very organized to achieve a sense of anarchism. It's not possible to grasp our work without seeing it for yourself — it would be like trying to describe eating an Amazonian fruit you've never tried.

Where do you find new ingredients?
I recently went to the Amazon, which has incredible fruits, some of them unknown to science. Under jungle conditions, many fruits ferment naturally. I also studied them in museums, in markets and with biologists.

Has your work raised any scientific questions?
It is having an influence in the world of science. I visited the physics department at Harvard University last month to talk about this. The dialogue between science and cooking is not new. Bread making has been considered a chemical process for hundreds of years, and the food industry has relied on chemists for almost a century. But only recently has there been a dialogue between science and haute cuisine. ■

Interview by **Jascha Hoffman**, a writer based in New York.

A Day At elBulli
by Ferran Adrià, Albert Adrià and Juli Soler
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F. GUILLAMET

Ferran Adrià's 'Folie' salad combines tuna-oil foam, air-bag dough and yoghurt nodules.

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