

Speaking to his anguish

A Plainview native plumbs the depths of fear and anxiety in his frank memoir

MONKEY MIND: A Memoir of Anxiety, by Daniel Smith. Simon & Schuster, 212 pp., \$25.

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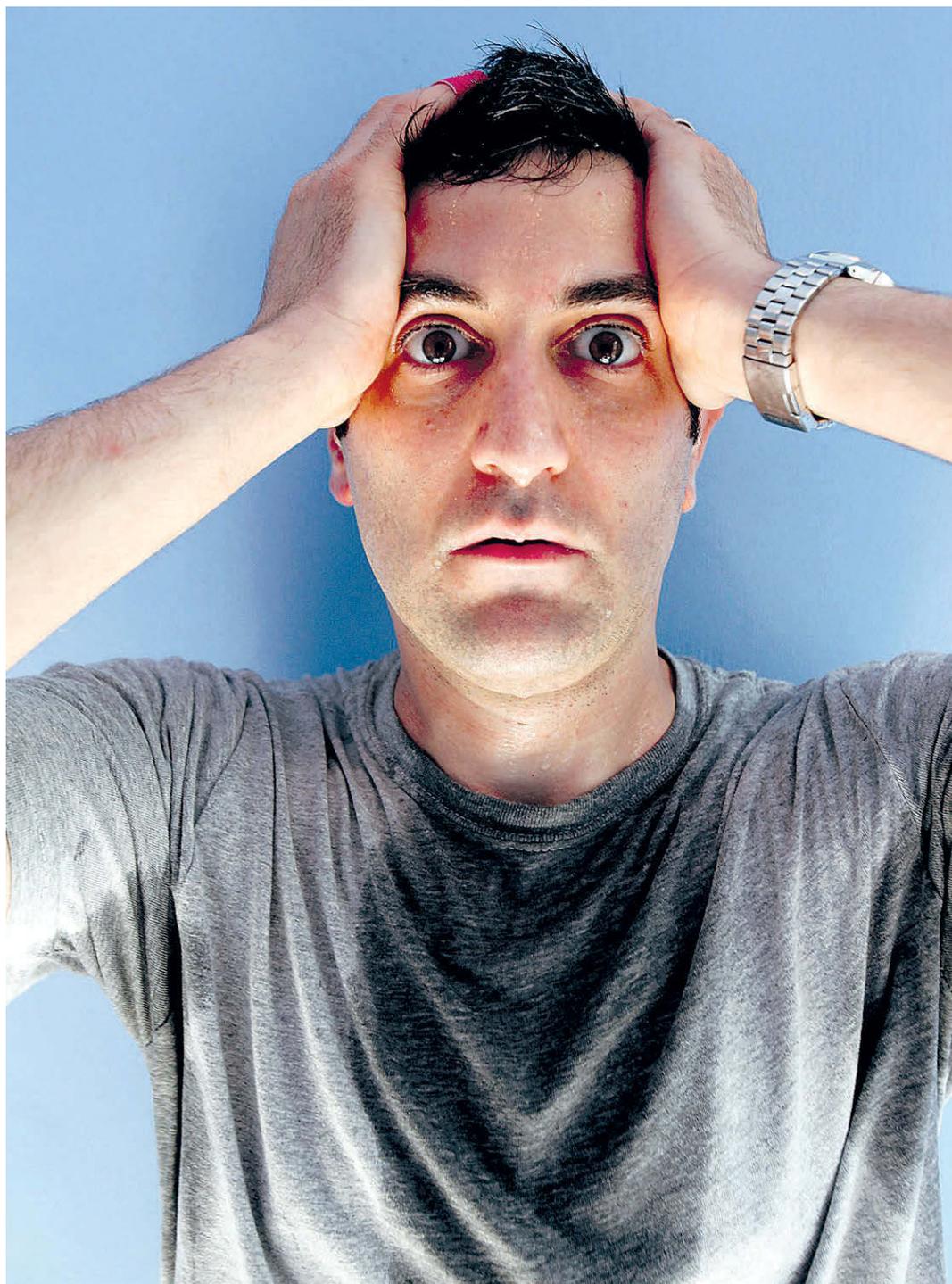
As a memoir of illness, Daniel Smith's "Monkey Mind" is a perfect 10. The author's account of his experience with anxiety disorder holds nothing back. Hilarious, well-informed and intelligent, Smith conveys the seriousness of his situation without becoming pathetic or unrelatable, and what's more, he offers useful information for both sufferers and non-sufferers. As someone in the latter group, someone who has never understood or sympathized with people who drive themselves nuts worrying all the time, I found this guided tour entertaining and educational. I learned the difference between fear and anxiety, between an anxiety attack and a panic attack, how these troubles start and why they never really end.

"The story begins with two women, naked, in a living room in upstate New York." In what is possibly the most awful story of losing one's virginity ever recorded, 16-year-old Smith was on a road trip from his childhood home in Plainview to a Phish concert when he was taken advantage of while drunk and stoned by a pair of unappetizing older lesbians. This terrible experience set off a nightmare of despair and anxiety. "In this

powerful new state, in which memory and disgust banded together like some neurological death squad to hack apart serenity, there was . . . nothing in the world that did not speak to my anguish . . . I couldn't even watch a commercial on television, because the mere sight of children playing on a swing set reminded me of the innocence I believed I had lost." To make matters worse, the poor boy confessed every detail of the debacle to his horrified and outraged mother, sobbing in her arms.

Fortunately, Marilyn Smith was herself a lifelong anxiety sufferer who had become a therapist. What she couldn't do for her son with sympathy, hugs and conversation, she made up for by doling out Xanax and sharing a copy of the guided relaxation tape she had made for her clients. Sensibly, she found him another therapist but, unfortunately, the squat blond woman was a body double for one of his violators. "It was as if Esther had returned to help me sift through the confusion she had wrought, only now she wore long floral skirts and accepted Blue Cross Blue Shield."

By his senior year of high school, Smith had calmed down. But this false respite was blown to bits the day his parents drove him up to Brandeis University, where the



Let 'em see you sweat: Daniel Smith is not shy about discussing his humiliating experiences.

mere sight of his classmates brought on Terror Code Red. "They wore expressions wide with opportunity, of almost limitless choice, of restrictions lifted, slates cleaned, surveillance minimal. They were joyful and unhindered, electric, confident. . . . My parents thought they were dropping me off at a respected liberal arts college, but where they had really dropped me off was Jewish Mardi Gras."

This environment was a nightmare for Smith. Even when he tried to hide in the bathroom and freak out, he found the place overrun by vomiting partiers. Ultimately he buried himself in the library, where he found a savior and a kindred spirit read-

ing Philip Roth. Thanks to Roth, Smith began to see his anxiety not just as a humiliating handicap but as an ethnic birthright, a membership in a historically important club, a literary merit badge.

Smith also saw in Roth's relentlessly honest if brutally flawed protagonists the possibility of "defiance in the face of shame." This was Roth's own approach when public reaction to his work was vitriolic, and it bolstered Smith's attempt to maintain his sanity when the publication of his first work of journalism, a guardedly positive piece on electroshock therapy for the Atlantic magazine, drew an avalanche of controversy and a

\$23-million lawsuit filed by the director of the Committee for Truth in Psychiatry, a violent opponent of the treatment.

"Monkey Mind" never shies away from the truth, whether Smith is talking about his unexpected reaction to his father's cancer diagnosis (excitement, liberation), his nearly mythological sweating problem (addressed with Maxi pads inside his shirts), or his rude, inconsistent behavior toward the woman he eventually married. As important as his commitment to unrelenting self-revelation is his awareness of the people listening to this story. He gives us a reason to stay with him on every page.

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