

Banana – Episode 6

Over the last few years, numerous documentaries have focused on OCD as a mental health condition, but very few television programmes use fiction to do so. In this respect, episode 6 of E4's *Banana* is something of a rarity. The episode follows Amy (played by Charlie Covell), a twenty-something woman with common OCD traits, as she heads to work and proceeds to go on a date with policewoman Kay (played by T'Nia Miller). How does this make up twenty two minutes of primetime TV you wonder? The beauty, quite honestly, lies in the delivery.

We begin by watching Amy meticulously check her flat to make sure that all appliances are switched off, the windows are shut and everything is in order. Getting halfway to work, she suddenly worries that she forgot to switch the toaster off, and we see her thoughts go from 0 to 60 as anxiety kicks in – she *will* cause a fire in the building and she *will* be responsible for someone's baby dying.

Overcome with fear, Amy runs home to check and, of course, finds that the toaster was always safely switched off. Finally on the train, she spots a fellow passenger's shoelace has come undone. Again, fearing the worst, she envisages him later tripping in front of an oncoming bus and being killed. She *has* to tell him; she *must* make him do his lace up right now, or he *will* die. Sound crazy? Not to someone with OCD. An inflated sense of responsibility, a tendency to catastrophize and an overestimation of danger are all common traits in this disorder. By playing out each of Amy's fears on screen, the programme perfectly depicts how the mind of an OCD sufferer can work, and the speed at which a small worry can turn into a huge catastrophe.

Running alongside Amy's everyday anxieties, she must also deal with the (very normal!) concerns that come with going on a date. Should she actually go? Should she kiss her at the end of the night? Rather than decide for herself, however, Amy relies heavily upon "signs" from her surroundings. If a stranger on the train looks up, she will say yes to the date. If a light turns on in the apartment block next to her, she will kiss Kay. Despite knowing what she wants to do, Amy won't act until she gets a sign that she should. Luckily for her, Kay decides to bite the bullet and kiss her herself, but Amy hasn't always been so fortunate. As she mentions on the date, her superstitious behaviour once landed her with a broken ankle. Again, the programme successfully portrays another common trait in OCD. I'm not suggesting that all OCD sufferers will end up with a broken ankle, but many of them will lose control to superstitious thinking. For countless people with OCD, touching wood, avoiding walking under ladders and similar superstitions are more than just a joke; they believe that they can *really* prevent bad things from happening. In the same way that Amy does, it is extremely common for OCD sufferers to place such a heavy importance on signs and superstitions.

Undeniably, and rightly so, awareness and understanding of OCD is increasing. A huge wealth of information is now readily available in books, on websites and in documentaries. For me, though, *Banana* offers something a little different – in a good way. Amy is likeable; she is a good person, she gives to charity and she really cares about others. She also leads a fairly normal life; she has a proper job, she gets the train, she texts her friends and she goes on dates. Regardless of her OCD, Amy is easy to warm to, to relate to and to root for. She is not weird or strange or any other stereotype that people may have of OCD sufferers. She is, in fact, the kind of person many people could imagine being friends with. Consequently, by creating a character like this, the episode helps to close the gap between mental health conditions and the concept of "normal".

In addition, in its twenty two minutes, the programme manages to dispel some of the other common stereotypes about OCD. Amy is not a hand washer or a “neat freak”, her religious compulsions are unrelated to her own beliefs and, from what we can gauge, she has had a nice upbringing. The episode very cleverly weaves these false myths into the narrative and, in doing so, helps to educate those who watch the programme.

Writing about this topic for E4 in a fictional format is, to put it quite simply, genius. By maintaining a light tone and adding comedic elements throughout, the programme remains watchable whilst also raising awareness about the disorder. Channel 4 describes E4 as ‘the entertainment destination for a cutting edge young audience’ and, if this is the case, Amy’s story is a step in the right direction to educating our future about OCD.

My only criticism? I wanted more than twenty two minutes.

By Natalie