

Book Talk: *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven



Author Information:

Jennifer Niven is a YA literature writer who is an American international selling author. Niven was inspired to write this *To all the Bright Places* because it was about a boy with bipolar disorder that she fell in love with. Her agent passed away after 15 years passed away and the last thing her agent mentioned to her was to write something that she put her whole heart into, which inspired her to write this story.

Summary:

All the Bright Places by Jennifer Niven encompasses the journey of healing from trauma and the importance of mental illness. At the novel's beginning, Theodore Finch starts by saying how he thinks of death every day and how he struggles with his mental illness and trauma. Theodore Finch meets Violette Markey on the ledge of their high school bell tower, where she is trying to take her own life. Finch convinces her not to and saves her, but the school assumes that Violet was the one that saved Finch. Violet also struggles with coping with her sister's death from the car accident and depression. Theodore and Violet have to work together on a project for geology class which makes them closer, and they slowly fall in love. Violet and Finch spend more time with each other, but Finch's mental health only continues to decline as time goes by. Violet, in this relationship, is learning to cope and heal from her sister's death, and in comparison, Theodore's depression and bipolar disorder get worse as time passes. In the end, Theodore ends up drowning himself. As Violet is grieving and healing, she, at the end of the novel, ends up swimming in the Blue Hole, where Finch drowned himself. She learns that what happened is not her fault and realizes that she needs to live her life and that things happen for a reason. In this last scene, she is at peace, and Finch is a reminder to keep going because that is what he would have wanted.

Important Quotes:

1. **“I keep talking, but I can tell I’m running out of steam. I need to take a piss for one thing...hits the ground” (Niven 7)**
 - In this quote, it is Finch trying to get Violet out of trying to jump off the ledge they are at. This quote explicitly encompasses Theodore Finch as a character because he uses dark humor to joke around about death. Still, in this instance, he is trying to stop Violet from trying to end her own life. This demonstrates his character because even though he is defined as an outcast and freak, he has a kind heart and cares about people. He is concerned about Violet even though he does not know her. He shows empathy and tries to save and talk to her because he knows that feeling and emotion.
2. **“So there’s this girl . Let’s call her Lizzy...” (Niven 144-145)**
 - This specific dialogue between the counselor and Theodore stood out because Theodore is dealing with his trauma and depression and talking about how happy he is about meeting Violet. He mentions this is the first time he is satisfied in a long time and gets his feelings shut down when Embry says, "Just be careful." At this moment, Theodore just wanted to hear someone say congratulations and support. This demonstrates how someone who is dealing with mental illness, all they need is supported and to be heard. Theodore already does not have a good relationship with Embry and constantly tells Finch that he has a legal obligation to keep him alive, so the school doesn't get sued. This also shows that even in the school system, there needs to be more support for kids dealing with mental illness and suicidal thoughts; having someone who hears, supports, and guides them can decrease the chances of them wanting to take their own life.
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3. **“I don’t need to worry about that Finch and I never filmed...it’s not what you take, it’s what you leave” (Niven 376)**
 - At this moment, Violet is looking back at the moments that she and Finch had together. Though they could not film their wanderings, she remembers these moments and the feeling Finch left with her. Finch brought happiness and healing to her, which is why she mentions how it is not what you take but what you leave. Theodore Finch was able to have her process her depression and trauma by rebuilding her life and helping her find her purpose in life again; it is something that no one else could do for her. It demonstrates how people leave a mark on your own life.

How can I Teach This?

- *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven brings up essential themes about mental health and what the healing process looks like. Jennifer Niven uses different literary devices to engage her readers and understand the story's plot. By bringing up these topics, students

can learn about empathy and maybe even open up about their own experiences. Through this novel, students can explore vulnerability. Students care if they are engaged, meaning connections need to exist for them to want to learn. Learning is more than just memorizing and testing; it has to do with connecting themes and ideas with real-life experiences. For this specific book, I would first have them brainstorm what the book might be about. After the first few chapters, read aloud in class and start with a character analysis of who they might be and how they look to help readers visualize them. After clarifying who the characters are, I would start making literature circles and place them with the reading. Every single week there would be a "pick me prompt activity." This is where students will stand up and pair up and pick a prompt to answer that is relevant to the novel and afterward have them write it on a sticky note on poster paper. Then, get in a circle and discuss the prompts as a class. This can help engage students and involve the idea of restorative justice circles.

Text Complexity:

- The text complexity in *All the Bright Places* would have to be an 830 to Lexile level and a 5.3 at the ATOS level. I would say this is a novel for older teens from 9-12 grade. This has to do with the maturity level and the triggering topics that can come up, like suicide and mental illness. In the qualitative elements, there is clarity, structure, and purpose regarding the plot, characteristics, and meaningful message at the end. Students would be motivated to read it because it is easy to understand but also has to do with experiences they may be going through and want to talk about.

Work Cited

Perez, L. (2020). How 'All the Bright Places' Author Used Her Personal Story to Offer Hope for Young Readers. Retrieved October 23, 2022, from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/jennifer-niven-talks-all-bright-places-adaptation-using-personal-experience-story-1279667/>.

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