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ENGL 112b

5/4/19

Concepts of Mental Illness in YA Books

One topic that can be seen as controversial in YA books is the topic on mental illness. Often times, young adults go through some form of mental illness growing up, leaving some suicidal. Having YA novels on the subject of self help and mental illness can open the eyes of people who suffer through this. It is representation and an escape from their everyday lives. Having representation as a young adult means everything. Authors that push for having a theme of mental help in their novels really help those looking for representation.

In *The Alan Review*, Neal Shusterman author of *Challenger Deep* (2015) said in a collaborative article that during one of his signings a girl told him "...that she had been suicidal, and the book helped her make it through that difficult time." Young adult readers who feel like they do not have a voice to speak up or are too afraid to say something to people they are close with find comfort in novels. These books make what they feel validated and can help save lives. The other authors in the same article, Brandy Colbert, Emery Lord, Sonya Sones, and John Whaley, have also mentioned their readers gave positive responses to their works pertaining mental illness.

These works can also help people who are close to someone who has mental illness. These books are not just for those who have a form of mental illness, but for those who are trying to understand it. Sonya notes about her books *Stop Pretending* (1999) and *Saving Red* (2016) that she "...hoped these stories would help mentally ill teens and their friends and families feel like they weren't the only ones going through this, while at the same time helping to encourage compassion in readers who have no personal experience with these diseases." Even people who have zero connection to others that have a mental illness, reading books on that topic can help spread compassion and understanding.

The center piece of this project is a book called *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman, the author featured in *The Alan Review* article. This book, that is inspired by Neal's son, is about a 15 year old boy named Caden who suffers with a mental illness. He got diagnosed with schizophrenia when he reported having vivid dreams, voices, and hallucinations. Through this book, Neal writes about how he and his family dealt with what happened to his son. He uses that situation to shine a light on the topic of mental illness to people who might not understand it on a personal level or even on any level. He does so by using "common experiences and connecting them to the feeling of mania, or delusions, or hallucinations," (Shushterman, 2018). Books on mental illness and suicide can help those in need of a voice or a friend. Having representation of such in books for people going through such things can help those in need of it.

Annotated Bibliography

*All The Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven

(Have not read)

**Summary**: This story is about Theodore Finch, who is suicidal, and Violet Markey, who's sister died in a car crash. Violet starts to do down the mental black hole, which bonds her and Theodore together. But as Violet later improves, Theodore does not and he ends up taking his life. Violet remembers Theodore through all the places he once visited making mends with his death.

**Evaluation**: This story can help those who know others that are suffering through some kind of mental illness. It also shines a bright light dealing with loss and getting past the feelings of guilt. This story also shows how severe suicide is with young adults.

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

(Read)

**Summary**: Speak centers on a girl named Melinda who was raped at a house party. She goes through high school seeing the guy that raped her, scared to say anything about it to anyone. Eventually she found strength through her artwork and at the end exposed her rapist.

**Evaluation**: This story shows the importance of voice. Although there is not a strong suicide theme in this story, there is a strong theme of speaking up, which most young adults find hard to do in situations like these. This story shows that speaking up is important in any situation.

*It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini

(Have not read)

**Summary:** This story is narrated by Craig Gilner, a high school student who suffers through stress and depression. He attempts suicide one night but does not go through with it. Instead he checks himself into a psychiatric clinic and meets others who are also there for problems of their own.

**Evaluation:** This story is important for readers because it shows someone recognizing their problems as something very serious and trying to make a change in their lives. This character tried to commit suicide and by doing that realized that it was not the right answer. It also shows how hearing other stories of other people can open your eyes to seeing a brighter end. Something this book might do for some people.

***Looking for Alaska*** by John Green

(Have not read)

**Summary:** This story is about a boy names Miles and his group of friends he made at a new school. One particular friend that he became fond of dies in a car accident. He later finds out, she died because of suicide and tried to cope with the death of his friend and eventually finds peace with her being gone.

**Evaluation**: This story is important to readers because it shows the process of grieving a close ones death. Sometimes, suicide of a loved one can happen out of nowhere with no real warning and people are left with no answers. This can help those who are in the same situation and who are trying to cope with it.

*My Heart and Other Black Holes* by Jasmine Warga

(Have not read)

**Summary:** This story is about 2 teenagers, Aysel and Roman and their suicide pact. However, they start to question whether or not they fully want to commit to it. They find help with each other and try to give life a shot.

**Evaluation**: This story is important because it shows people that suicide is not always the first choice even if you think it is. These two characters start to think twice about suicide after talking about their situations with each other, solidifying the importance of speaking about your problems. This can help those who might just need someone there for them.

*The Perks of Being A Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

(Read)

**Summary:** This story is about Charlie and how he just experienced 2 deaths of people very close to him, a friend through suicide and his aunt through a car accident. Charlie has always been an introvert which makes it extra hard for him to speak up about his trauma. He ends up finding a great group of friends that help him open up.

**Evaluation:** This book is important because it is told in the eyes of an introvert and of someone dealing with loss. Introverts keep to themselves and do not open up as much as extroverts. Someone who is dealing with loss is just as important to listen to as someone who is going through it. It is also a great representation of introverts and how they think and see life.

*Stop Pretending: What Happened when My Big Sister Went* Crazy by Sonya Sones

(Have not read)

**Summary:** This story is about what happened to the author's big sister and what it did to her and her family. She talks about how it was hard for her to properly grieve and how she had a lot of confusion with the whole situation.

**Evaluation**: This story is important because it is another story that talks about how suicide or mental illness effects not just the person but the people around them. Friends and family suffer through the actions of someone else and they also go through a process of healing. This book shares insight on how to deal.

*Saving Red* by Sonya Sones

(Have not read)

**Summary:** This story is about a 14 year old girl named Molly and a friend she meets, Red, at a homeless shelter. They both keep a lot from each other about their past but they soon learn they have more in common than they think.

**Evaluation**: This book shows the importance of friendship with young adults who are suffering through a mental illness. Another big thing for people who have mental illnesses is the feeling of being alone and that no one else understand them. This story shows how friendships can help with self growth and forgiveness.

*By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead* by Julie Anne Peters

(Have not read)

**Summary**: This book is about Daelyn, a girl who is obsessed with suicide. She has been bullied her whole life and is desperate for an end to it. Being abused and then ignored by teachers has also been reasons why she wants to end it all.

**Evaluation:** This story is important because it shows what bullying can do to young adults. It also shows that people who these young adults go to for help should take their words into consideration and not ignore them. People need to be there for each other.

*Suicide Notes* by Michael Thomas Ford

(Have not read)

**Summary**: This story is about a teenager named Jeff and his attempted suicide. He later gets admitted to a mental hospital following his attempt and the story takes the reader on a jounry in the eyes of Jeff.

**Evaluation**: This is important for young adults because it shows what it is like inside the mind of someone who has a mental illness. For those who do not have a mental illness, this is a good read because it explains what it is like. This is a book for everyone who wants to understand what it is like to have a mental illness and be suicidal.

Works Cited

Colbert, Lord, Shusterman, Sones, Whaley. "Complicating Conceptions of Mental Health: A Collaborative Conversation." *The Alan Review,* Fall 2018