We’re Not Crazy: Overcoming the Mental Health Stigma in YA Literature

Ashley Corbett
Baltimore County, Maryland

Mental illness directly affects the lives of millions of young adults in the United States. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Four million children and adolescents in this country suffer from a serious mental disorder that causes significant functional impairments at home, at school, and with peers” (“Facts”). Mental illness is prevalent, pervasive, and far-reaching; moreover, its effects are exacerbated by public stigma and self-stigma.

Public stigma, negative attitudes and beliefs about mental illness by the general population, increases the challenges faced by people with mental illness. Additionally, if individuals internalize stigma, they may experience diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy (Downs 23). Public stigma about mental disorders is a serious concern. Through guided reading and the promotion of literature that dismantles stigma about mental illness, teachers can raise awareness of mental health issues.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999) by Stephen Chbosky
Reviewed by Ashley Corbett
Chbosky’s novel is the classic coming-of-age story with a slight twist: posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. The novel is written epistolary style by Charlie to an anonymous pen pal. Fifteen-year-old Charlie experiences the “average” life of a ninth grader; he is confronted with drugs, sex, difficult friendships, relationships, and homosexuality. The twist in the story occurs when we realize that he’s also trying desperately to cope with being sexually abused as a child. This sexual abuse triggers Charlie’s breakdown and subsequent hospitalization. While many novels, and even films, depict hospitalization in a negative manner, Charlie embraces the therapeutic road to recovery. Therapy itself is seen in a positive light: “My psychiatrist is a very nice man. He’s much better than my last psychiatrist. We talk about things that I feel and think and remember” (Chbosky 103).

Education is one of the most effective methods for reducing stigma associated with mental illness; that is, “Education provides information so that the public can make more informed decisions . . . persons who evince a better understanding of mental illness are less likely to endorse stigma and discrimination” (Corrigan and Watson). Novels offer a narrative version of what the public needs: education. If we can encourage young readers to broaden understanding about mental illness through literature, we contribute to the reduction of stigma and enable those who suffer from mental illness a chance to be seen, a chance to let go of the shame they may feel for being stereotyped. The following novels can be used in a classroom or read independently to promote a positive awareness of mental illness.

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The best part about this book is its appeal to a wide audience; Chbosky portrays a multitude of familiar teen experiences and conflicts. While Charlie may suffer from a mental illness, he is depicted as an average teenager.
Likewise, Charlie’s therapy and hospitalization are treated as methods to manage his illness and facilitate recovery.

The Impossible Knife of Memory (2014) by Laurie Halse Anderson
Reviewed by Pauline Skowron Schmidt
This powerful narrative is about a teenage girl named Hayley, who is struggling to be the caretaker, the grownup, and the “normal” teenager in a household with a father suffering from PTSD and addiction. I had to stop reading at a few specific points because the story resonated so deeply with me. That said, I don’t think you have to have a firsthand experience with PTSD or addiction to connect deeply with this narrator and this novel. Hayley tries desperately to hide the reality of her home life when she navigates the outside world; all teenagers can connect to that on some level.

Laurie Halse Anderson is a gifted writer; she can make you wipe away tears and, on the same page, prompt a chuckle. Her writing is concise, raw, gritty, heartbreaking, and, above all, true. I’ve always connected to her writing and have used several titles in my classes to expose preservice teachers to her body of work. This was a personal work of the heart for Anderson, who does not shy away from topics that might seem “taboo.” This book meant a lot to me as an adult reader, but it would have changed my life had I read it as a teenager.

All the Bright Places (2015) by Jennifer Niven
Reviewed by Pauline Skowron Schmidt
The character-driven love story of Violet and Finch is beautiful and tragic. Having already been appropriately compared to Eleanor and Park and The Fault in Our Stars, this novel adds another dimension: mental illness.

Told in chapters with alternating narrators, the novel presents Finch’s sections as particularly heartbreaking. People are trying to help him, but he ultimately needs to want that help. His obsession with death is unnerving and his behavior effectively isolates him at school. As a reader, I wondered what would happen to a kid like Finch in the “real world.”

Violet is just as endearing. She is attempting to deal with surviving a family tragedy and processing it through talk-therapy. The ghosts of her ordeal haunt her throughout her narrative. The reader cannot help but hope for the best possible outcome for these two remarkable young individuals.

Works Cited

Ashley Corbett is a high school English teacher in Baltimore County, Maryland. She graduated from Towson University in December 2015 with a Bachelor of Science in English Secondary Education. Contact her at acorbe3@students.towson.edu.
Pauline Skowron Schmidt is an assistant professor in English education at West Chester University. She loves reading YA literature and teaching! Contact her at pschmidt@wcupa.edu.