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REVIEW

Mental Health Matters: Addressing Mental Illness in Young Adult Fiction

SIERRA HOLMES

Say What You Will by Cammie McGovern. HarperTeen, 2014.

Perfect: A Novel by Rachel Joyce. Random House, 2014.

Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets by Evan Roskos. HMH Books, 2013.

The Museum of Intangible Things by Wendy Wunder. Razorbill, 2014.

Mental illness is a familiar topic to most teenagers. They have seen the coverage of recent adolescent suicides due to bullying. They have listened as reporters from every news outlet discussed the psychological states of the perpetrators of the most recent mass shootings. And, in many cases, they have experienced mental illness in their personal lives, either by watching a loved one's struggle or by going through their own. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Adolescent Health, "approximately one in five adolescents has a diagnosable mental disorder." That fact alone should be enough of a reason to make sure our classroom libraries include texts that address the theme of mental illness. The books named in this review are about mental illness, but more than that, they are about people. They are about people who care about their friends and families, plan for their futures, face up to their fears, and struggle to make the right decisions in difficult situations, just like the rest of us—and who also happen to suffer from a mental illness. Their stories have a great deal to teach and are told in such a way that teenage readers will be eager to learn.

Say What You Will by Cammie McGovern (2014) tells the story of a girl named Amy and her classmate, Matthew. Amy lives each day with illness, but not of the psychological

variety. She has cerebral palsy. Amy is unable to walk on her own or talk without a machine, but she is extremely intelligent and determined to spend her final year of high school learning how to make friends with the other kids, something she has never done before. She asks her mother to hire several of her classmates as her assistants, hoping that her relationships with them will lead to relationships with other students as well. When her mother agrees, albeit reluctantly, Amy knows one person she definitely hopes to hire.

Matthew, also a high school senior, is physically well, but suffers from paralyzing obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Of course, Amy doesn't know about that when

she writes him and asks him to apply for a job as one of her assistants. What Amy knows is that Matthew is the first person in a long time to be honest with her. In fact, by telling her quite bluntly that she will never make friends as long as she is with an adult aide all the time, he is the one who sparked her idea to hire student assistants in the first place.

When he agrees to take on the position, an unlikely friendship is formed. Soon Amy realizes that Matthew faces just as many challenges as she does, but that while everyone can see hers, his are invisible. She convinces Matthew to seek help for his OCD, and she challenges him to overcome the rituals that consume his daily life. As their trust for each other grows, their attachment to each other does too, until they realize that their relationship has become something much more, and much more complicated, than they ever expected.

Say What You Will is a book every teenager—and adult, for that matter—should read, because it breaks down stereotypes in such a powerful way. Matthew is a teenager with OCD who cannot make it through the day without performing the rituals that are meant to soothe some of his overwhelming anxiety. Amy is a teenager with cerebral palsy who

cannot speak on her own, keep her food in her mouth, or go to the bathroom without assistance. But in this novel, the things that make them different from the other kids become secondary to the things that make them the same. Matthew, like many teenagers, is trying to plan his future while caught up in the whirlwind of his first real love. Amy, like many teenagers, is struggling to navigate the high school social landscape and make sense of the love she feels for Matthew, something she has never experienced before. They are just like the other kids, even though they are not. Readers will certainly be aware of Amy's physical condition and Matthew's mental illness, and the book can teach them a great deal about both. But they will be most aware of Amy and Matthew's love story, one that is possible not in spite of their conditions, but because of them.

Rachel Joyce's *Perfect: A Novel* (2013) also portrays the experience of living with obsessive-compulsive disorder. The book is comprised of two parallel narratives. The first is that of Byron, an eleven-year-old boy who spends his days attending a private school and being cared for by a very loving but also depressed mother, Diana, while his cold and distant

father, Seymour, passes the workweek in the city. It becomes clear quite quickly that Seymour dominates Diana's life, dictating everything from the clothes she can wear to the route she may and may not use to drive Byron and his sister, Lucy, to school. On the way there one foggy morning, Byron is sure he sees his watch moving backward. His best friend, James, has

told him that the government is planning to add two seconds to the year, and Byron is sure it is happening at just that moment.

As he tries to explain the extra two seconds to his mother, Diana accidentally runs over a little girl on a red bicycle. She is unaware of what happened, but Byron sees it all too clearly. Over several days, his anxiety builds until he can no longer keep the secret from her. The lack of news coverage convinces Byron and James that the girl must have survived relatively unscathed, but when Diana learns what she has done, she is nevertheless determined to make amends. When she meets the girl, Jeanie, and her parents Walt and Beverley, all their lives take an unexpected turn. As Beverley worms her way into Diana's life—and subtly takes advantage of what seems to be a growing friendship—Byron and James develop a plan to uncover her true intentions and protect Diana from

her schemes. But despite the boys' efforts, all their lives begin to unravel until a shocking event destroys every hope they have of protecting both Diana and themselves.

The book's second narrative is that of Jim, an extremely lonely middle-aged man who has lived in his van since the institution where he spent most of his life closed its doors, and who struggles to maintain his job while his life is dominated by the rituals he uses, unsuccessfully, to make himself feel safe. It does not take long for a reader to begin to wonder how the two stories connect. The most obvious hypothesis, only because of the connection between their names, is that Jim is the grown up version of James, but Jim's severe anxiety and constant worry about how he might inadvertently cause harm to others do not seem to match with James' careful and analytical but also very even-keeled personality. The mystery of Jim's true identity is not revealed until much later in the book, when a chance meeting between the now adult James and Byron pulls the two separate narrative threads together and answers many of the questions that remain about the aftermath of the events that changed their lives forever.

Perfect: A Novel is certainly the most somber of the four books reviewed here and will appeal to readers who enjoy plot lines shrouded in tension and mystery. Mental illness is less what the story is about and more what makes the events of the story possible, but readers can still learn a great deal from the book about the experience of those who suffer from mental illness. They will find themselves mourning along with Byron as he tries to come to terms with his many tangible and intangible losses and rooting for Jim as he battles his compulsions and struggles to build a relationship with Eileen, the first person in decades to make him feel that he is not alone. When readers realize the connection between Jim, James, and Byron, they will be reminded that the past, even two seconds that never happened, can and do leave ripple effects far into the future.

In *Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets* by Evan Roskos (2013), James, a sixteen-year-old Walt Whitman aficionado, uses therapy sessions with an imaginary pigeon he calls Dr. Bird to help him deal with his severe depression and sense of guilt over the role he believes he played in getting his sister, Jorie, kicked out of their house. James most certainly recognizes that his suicidal thoughts and constant sadness are not normal or healthy, but other than his imaginary sessions with Dr. Bird, he lacks the resources to get help for himself.

His abusive parents do not believe in therapy, telling him that his distress is simply a product of his age and not a serious illness that requires treatment. Their refusal to pay for

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counseling leads James to take on a job so that he can pay for it himself.

Even while trying to get his own needs met, James decides to investigate his sister's expulsion from school. He thinks that maybe if he can convince the administration to reinstate her, their parents will let her come back home. The problem is that nobody at school, not a principal, teacher, counselor, or even his sister's friend is willing or able to give him the whole story behind the incidents that led to her expulsion. As James pieces together the fragments they do offer, he realizes that perhaps he is not alone in his emotional turmoil. He discovers that Jorie too suffers from mental illness, and that her problems are far more serious than he ever realized. When he is finally able to reconnect with his sister and get professional help, James is able to begin working through his depression and becoming a person with hope for the future.

Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets tackles dismissive attitudes about mental illness head on. It is readily apparent to readers that his feelings go well beyond the stereotypical adolescent angst to which his parents attribute them, and it is difficult

to imagine any reader, after getting to know James, believing that he should just toughen up and get over his depression as his parents suggest. But although so much of his life is dominated by his illness and struggle to get help, James is a talented poet and photographer and a loyal friend and brother who is willing to stand up for those he cares about, even when it makes him uncomfortable.

He is the kind of character who will win over readers as he gives them a deeper understanding of what it means to live with depression.

Like the three books described above, *The Museum of Intangible Things* by Wendy Wunder (2014) is about the experience of living with a mental illness, in this case bipolar disorder. But unlike the other three books, it is at least as much, if not more, about the experience of loving someone who has a mental illness and feeling responsible for helping that person, even when her condition is much more than anyone but a professional can handle. The story centers around two teenage girls, Zoe and Hannah. The two have been best friends their entire lives, leaning heavily on each other to deal with the monotony of their dead end hometown and their strained relationships with family members. Zoe has bipolar disorder, and although she has been hospitalized in the

past, she and Hannah have developed several routines to help her maintain a hold on reality when a manic episode sets in. Those routines have helped in the past, but lately nothing is working.

After Hannah's father steals the proceeds of her hotdog stand in order to support his alcohol addiction, and when Zoe finally emerges from the severe depression triggered when an evening with a boy at a party ends badly, Zoe decides they should ditch their boring hometown and set off on a cross-country road trip. The trip is a way for Zoe to avoid another hospitalization for the illness she still does not believe she has. Hannah agrees to go along, but as the distance between them and their hometown increases, so does the severity of Zoe's mania. Hannah tries everything she can think of to bring Zoe back down, but as Zoe's hallucinations of being able to talk to aliens take over, Hannah begins to realize that her best friend is spiraling way beyond her control.

Hannah knows they should give up and go home, but Zoe will not agree to that, even when Hannah reminds her of her much-beloved younger brother Noah, who has Asperger's Syndrome. Noah depends on Zoe to teach him

about intangible things like pride and laziness by building new exhibits in their makeshift basement museum. But although she loves Noah deeply, right now Zoe is determined to use the road trip to teach Hannah about audacity, insouciance, and other intangible traits she believes are lacking from her best friend's life.

Even more than that, Zoe is determined to reach the Grand Canyon, where she believes the aliens with whom she speaks will be waiting for her to join them. Hannah knows their trip is becoming more and more dangerous, but out of loyalty to Zoe, she continues much longer than she should. When she does finally decide to reach out for help—to her crush, Danny, rather than an adult—Zoe runs away, leaving Hannah with nothing to do but try to catch up before it is too late. They know where Zoe is headed, but what they are afraid of is what she will do when she gets there. As it turns out, their fear is justified. In a dramatic scene at the edge of the canyon, Hannah and Zoe's lives and futures are changed forever. It is in that moment that Hannah finally realizes, with heartbreaking clarity, that there really is no turning back.

Many teenage readers will be able to identify with the strong best friendship between Hannah and Zoe. They will

recognize the loyalty that leads Hannah to follow Zoe's wishes, even when they place her in precarious situations. Readers who know what it is to love someone who suffers from a mental illness will understand the devastating impact Zoe's disorder has on Hannah and the desperation Hannah feels as she tries to help her friend. And although the two girls' experiences while traveling sometimes seem a bit too extreme to be believable, that extremity serves to highlight what is perhaps the most important message in the novel: sometimes being a friend means betraying a friend before it is too late.

The characters in these four books are fictional, as are their stories. But their experiences can shed light on the experiences of the many very real people, including many of our students, who live with mental illness. Those students deserve to meet characters like themselves in the books they read. They deserve to know they are not alone. That said, making a place for mentally ill characters in our libraries is not important only for the students who are like them; it is equally important for the ones who are not, but whose understanding and compassion can make all the difference for those who are affected. These four books have much to offer both populations, and are all deserving of a place in our classrooms.

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