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METHODS

Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness, Teach Empathy, and Break Stereotypes

KIA JANE RICHMOND

Disturbed. Nuts. Freak. Psycho. Spastic. Crazy. Mental. These labels are among the more than 200 that researchers (Rose, Thorncraft, Pinfeld, & Kassam, 2007) identified as being used by young adults to stigmatize people with mental illness. A lack of understanding of depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—as well as frequent disparaging references to mentally ill individuals in film, television, and newspapers—encourage young adults to “other” those with psychological difficulties. In fact, one of the main risk factors of being a victim of a bully is being identified as having depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem (“Stop Bullying”).

Individuals who have a mental illness frequently “report negative interactions with employers, landlords, and the police or social exclusion by potential friends” (Rand, 2012, p.1). Students in our middle schools, high schools, and colleges who are living with depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses are at risk of being bullied, and not just in the hallways or on the bus but *in our English Language Arts classrooms*. Therefore, one of the issues that should be at the forefront of English Education is how literature can help young adults better understand—and confront the stigma of—mental illness, especially in an ever-increasing atmosphere of bullying.

The Michigan Department of Education charges teachers with helping students to grow as learners, individuals, and citizens: “In this day and age the impact of a student’s mental health on his/her ability to learn and achieve academically is becoming more and more widely understood, accepted, and addressed. In order for students to achieve at their greatest potential they must be educated in a safe and emotionally healthy environment” (“School Mental Health Page” n.d.). Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999), “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. Of children ages 9 to 17, 21 percent have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder that causes at least minimal impairment.” Furthermore, most children with mental illnesses “fail to be identified, lack access to treatment or supports and thus have a lower quality of life. Stigma persists and millions of young people in this country are left behind.” English teachers in public and private schools across America encounter students with mental disorders every day. These students are vulnerable to bullying. In fact, students who are bullied, in addition to being viewed as “different from their peers,” are also likely to be “depressed, anxious, or have low self-esteem” (“Risk Factors” n.d.).

Koss and Teale (2009) report that bullying continues to be a substantial difficulty for adolescents:

According to the American Medical Association (Nansel et al., 2001), more than 160,000 students stay home from school due to fear of being bullied by other students. Reported adolescent bullying incidents has increased nearly 50% since 1983 (Olweus, 2003). As school shootings and other bullying incidents are becoming more publicized, a movement to curb bullying has gone into effect with national and school programs to raise awareness (Hillsberg & Spak, 2006). With this increased focus on bullying, it stands to reason that this topic should begin appearing in YA literature. (p. 569)

In this article, I will describe ways to help English teachers to expand and complement the traditional literary canon and to identify culturally relevant literature. I will also discuss ways secondary and college educators can encourage empathy for those with mental illness, confront stereotypes, and approach the topic of bullying.

Bringing in Young Adult Literature: Creating Awareness and Confronting Bullying

Too often, people use the term OCD as a catch-all for someone who is attentive to detail, or refer to a person who frequently changes his or her mind as bipolar. In 2011, a Wisconsin high school dance team made the unfortunate decision to perform a routine in costumes “made to resemble strait-jackets and restraints with the words ‘Psych Ward’ on them” (Doherty). Responses to the team’s coach include one from Erika, a teen who wrote a very powerful “Letter/Reaction to Head Coach Erin Cotter.” In her blog, Erika described her own experiences being treated in a psychiatric ward; she then called out the coach for her choice to choreograph a dance stereotyping the mentally ill, writing, “In fact, for a district that claims it values its students, you are callously alienating and hurting quite a lot of them. But don’t worry, they won’t tell you: the mindset of teachers, parents and coaches like you have effectively silenced them. Stigmatized them. Made them feel like less than human” (2011).

Though we would like to think that we have moved beyond stereotyping individuals with mental illnesses, the truth is “we still have a long way to go when it comes to educating people about mental health. People might use these terms more frequently now but the stigma of having a mental illness is as bad as it has ever been” (McCullough, as cited in Kelly & Winterman, 2011). And the number of those living with mental illness is not diminishing. In a 2006 report to Congress, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that approximately 2.4 million teens had at least one serious mental illness, most with “multiple disorders” (2008, p. 16). A majority of these teens are in our high school and college classrooms; thus, to foster empathy, English teachers at all levels ought to include texts that address mental illness or that feature characters with psychological difficulties in their curricula. They should also discuss methods to encourage empathy for those characters and for those in our communities.

The development of empathy can help high school and college students improve as peer responders in writing workshop and other cooperative learning activities in which perspective-taking is essential. Additionally, researchers note that teachers themselves should develop empathy: “Obtaining important and useful emotional knowledge about themselves, and developing emotional skills to guide and support lifelong emotional learning can only strengthen [teachers’] performance in the classroom and improve student

achievement” (Justice & Espinoza, 2007, p. 460). What’s more, empathy is listed along with “comfort” and “decision-making” as important components of “strong leadership/teaching skills.”

At a Midwestern university, I teach courses in humanities, writing pedagogy, methods of teaching English, and literature for young adults. In the case of these last two courses (EN 350: Methods and Materials of Teaching English Language Arts, and EN/ED 462: Literature for Young Adults), I specifically include books focused on Young Adult (YA) Literature to prepare future teachers to meet the needs of “21st-century global adolescents” through “an expansion of canonical literature” (Perry & Stallworth, 2013, p. 16).

Despite the inclusion of some YA literature, the majority of texts most frequently included in high school English classes are still canonical pieces, not young adult literature (Applebee, 1992, p.28). Four Shakespearean plays—*Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*—are consistently taught in grades 9-12. Popular books my students are required to teach during their sixteen-week final internships in addition to Shakespeare include *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Of Mice and Men*. While some of these pieces include characters who have mental illness (e.g., suicidal ideation in *Romeo and Juliet*, depression and suicide in *Hamlet*), most are not the focus of the pieces nor easily accessible to teen readers. In order to help the future English teachers in my methods courses, I include YA literature and we discuss some ways to help students reduce the stigmatization of those with mental illness.

According to a recent analysis of literature written for teens (Koss & Teale, 2009), 25 percent of books reviewed were focused on illness/ mental issues (p. 567). Some of the YA books featuring characters with mental illness that I’ve taught or recommended include the following:

- *The Burn Journals* (2004, memoir, Brent Runyon)
- *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010, novel, John Green and David Levithan)
- *Cut* (2000, novel, Patricia McCormick)
- *Lisa, Bright and Dark* (1969, novel, John Neufeld)
- *Kissing Doorknobs* (1998, novel, Terry Hesser)
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999, novel, Stephen Chbosky)
- *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007, novel, Jay Asher)
- *Wintergirls* (2009, novel, Laurie Halse Anderson)
- *Starved* (2012, novel, Michael Somers)

Books such as these can help English teachers to break stereotypes of mental illness. *Kissing Doorknobs* features two characters who are diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Through author Terry Spencer Hesser's thoughtful presentation of how Tara Sullivan's compulsions affected not only her daily life but also her relationships with family and friends, readers develop a better understanding of OCD. Similarly, *Wintergirls* is Laurie Halse Anderson's novel about several female teens whose lives are complicated by anorexia, bulimia, and self-harm (cutting). *Wintergirls* brings readers into the psychological—and sometimes physical—pain that can accompany eating disorders. On her website, Anderson writes, “We toss the words ‘anorexic’ and ‘bulimic’ around very casually in America. There is nothing casual or light-hearted about them. They are mental illnesses that are devastating, and they take a toll on the entire family.”

Another wonderful text focused on a male character with an eating disorder is Michigan author Mike Somers' *Starved*. One Upper Peninsula teacher who is using *Starved* in her classes has reported excellent responses from her high school students.

In one English methods course, students selected two novels as part of a unit on literature circles. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky is an epistolary novel focused on fifteen-year-old Charlie, who first turns to alcohol and drugs, then seeks psychiatric help for symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. Readers can easily connect to the characters in Chbosky's novel, partly because of the fact that they help “deepen students' thinking and provide them with a rich reading and writing experience” (Perry & Stallworth, 2013, p. 17). Many of those who selected this book recommended its inclusion in upper high school English classes because of its ability to “promote possibilities for learning about others who live next door or who live

differently than they do.” A few assignments to help students focus on the mental health issues while teaching *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* include:

- Writing a poem or drawing a picture that represents Charlie's emotional state when dealing with PTSD or anxiety.
- Reflecting with a partner on one of the following issues that Charlie experiences: anxiety, depression, panic attacks, or substance abuse. Discussing how you might help a friend who was dealing with a similar problem. (Providing students with informative literature and/or web sites could be beneficial before this activity.).

- Discussing in small groups how Charlie is treated by others in the book and which characters provide empathy and/or help.

Furthermore, by discussing Charlie's relationship with his English teacher, my pre-service teachers predicted what they might do in their own classrooms to help students who could be struggling with mental illnesses. Reaching out to stakeholders (school counselors, health teachers, special education teachers, and school nurses) about local resources available, as well as talking to parents, guardians, or administrators about any observed behaviors or written pieces that seem to

suggest a student is dealing with emotional or psychological problems, were but a few of the ideas shared.

The other novel selected for literature circles in the English methods class—and one that I used in a class focused on young adult literature as well—is *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. This is a young adult novel about a series of cassette tapes made by Hannah Baker, a high school student who is bullied, sexually harassed, and eventually commits suicide. Through the tapes and main character Clay Jensen's narrative, readers learn about the effects of depression, bullying, and



Self-Portrait Between the Clock and the Bed, Edvard Munch

suicide. Students in both my classes pronounced this book powerful because of its imagery, its presentation of strong characters who are reflective, and its textual complexity, the last of which is discussed in a 2013 LAJM article by Lisa Schade Eckert. In their discussion of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Rybakova, Piotrowski, & Harper (2013) note many studies that support the inclusion of controversial texts to foster social justice; moreover, they cite specific ways to use Asher's novel to meet Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (p. 42). Moreover, the Penguin's Classroom Classics Educator's Guide (Spicer, n.d.) offers many suggestions for Common Core related assignments to use with *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In my class, we discussed the signs that Mr. Porter missed and whether Hannah Baker gave him a fair chance to help her (p. 7).

Reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* can help teachers to discuss complex issues and to help build awareness for suicide prevention. According to a recent study (2012), every two hours or so, a young adult under the age of 25 commits suicide (CDC cited in Rybakova, Piotrowski, & Harper, 2013). Suicide is already being included in the secondary curriculum. *Romeo and Juliet* continues to be one of the most frequently taught texts in high school English classes (Applebee, 1992), and informational literature regarding self-harm and suicide prevention in Health classes continues to rise (Rybakova, et al).

Having students create Facebook pages or Twitter accounts for characters in *Thirteen Reasons Why* can help them explore Hannah's (or other characters') internal motivations and emotions. In one recent young adult literature course, students were asked to imagine themselves as Hannah Baker before her suicide. On a secret Facebook group (or in Power Points shared through a course management system, Moodle), they posted 13 pictures and hashtags that Hannah might create before her death. Through this assignment, students empathized with Hannah Baker and her emotions; furthermore, their posts also offered insight into their own emotions and points of view toward controversial issues such as sexual harassment, suicide, and bullying, which helped validate their connections to the book.

Thirteen Reasons Why also offers also a way to discuss voyeurism and its effects on victims. Students in a recent young adult literature course focused on a section of the novel in which the Hannah Baker encounters a "peeping Tom." This led to many discussions of voyeurism, fears of being watched, anxiety after discovering one is being watched, harassment, stalking, etc.; all of these topics are relevant to teenagers' lives. Stalking behavior is defined as "when one

person repeatedly intrudes on another to such an extent that the recipient fears for their safety," and it leads victims to experience PTSD symptoms such as anxiety, hypervigilance, terror and sleeplessness, and depression (Purcell, Pathe, & Mullen, 2005). Many victims of stalking consider or attempt suicide as a means of dealing with the pain associated with harassment and bullying.

Thirteen Reasons Why helps English teachers encourage critical examination of various psychological disorders while exploring a strong narrative, one that invites students to consider how bullying behaviors effect individuals and groups. In "The Use of Literature to Combat Bullying," authors note that literature can "cause one to become aware of bullying and empathize with the victim" (Labadie, Lieberman, Vargo, & Flamion, 2012, p. 96). They posit that "there is a connection that can be made between the reader and the text which enables the composition to affect the reader's thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a truly personal way." Developing empathy through young adult literature is but one of its benefits in courses for future teachers and their students.

Good Books for (a) Change

Disturbed. Nuts. Freak. Psycho. Spastic. Crazy. Mental. For the past ten years, I have taught an introductory humanities course open to all college students (EN 110: Good Books). This course has been structured with a theme on books that feature characters living with mental illnesses. My decision to emphasize this theme stems from several factors. First, research shows that college students are in jeopardy of academic, personal, and social difficulties as a result of mental illness. The National Alliance on Mental Health (2014) offers the following statistics (among others):

- 75 percent of lifetime cases of mental health conditions begin by age 24.
- One in four young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have a diagnosable mental illness.
- More than 25 percent of college students have been diagnosed or treated by a professional for a mental health condition within the past year.
- 64 percent of young adults who are no longer in college are not attending college because of a mental health related reason. Depression, bipolar disorder and PTSD are the primary diagnoses of these young adults.
- 31 percent of college students have felt so depressed in the past year that it was difficult to function and

more than 50 percent have felt overwhelming anxiety, making it hard to succeed academically.

Second, these statistics are supported by my own experience as a college instructor in English since 1995. Many students at the three colleges where I've taught have self-identified as having a mental illness. For instance, one student was depressed and suicidal after a breakup with his girlfriend of several years; I walked him to the health center when he said he didn't want to live. Another was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and was trying out different medications, which affected her sleep and study patterns. One student had PTSD after serving multiple tours in overseas conflicts following 9/11. We worked together to find information about help the student could receive from Veteran's Affairs and on campus. Various others asked me for referrals to counselors or physicians because they were dealing with anxiety, self-harm, or personality disorders. Still other students have shared that friends or roommates were struggling with depression, alcohol or drug abuse, or suicidal ideation. In one case, a young woman's roommate was admitted to the local hospital and diagnosed with schizophrenia. These examples are not particular to the Southern and Midwestern colleges in which I have taught. Studies show that the number of college students with mental illnesses has increased in recent years across the nation (Hernandez, 2006).

Third, helping students develop empathy is part of our mission as educators, especially in a humanities class whose goal is to examine texts focused on understanding the human condition. While scholars are split on whether empathy is a cognitive or affective attribute (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011, p. 181), one study suggests that "empathy failure can increase the risk for victimization and implementation of aggressive acts against peers among adolescents" (Salmon, 2003, p. 181). Furthermore, in a recent study of young adults (Naylor, Cowie, Walters, Talamelli, & Dawkins, 2009), researchers learned that improved understanding of mental illness helped students increase empathy for those with mental health disorders.

Choosing books to include in my Good Books class has not been difficult. Many texts of high quality have been written about individuals living with mental illness. Some of the books and films I've selected to read include the following:

- *The Bell Jar* (1963, novel, Sylvia Plath)
- *When Rabbit Howls* (1987, memoir, Truddi Chase)
- *The Quiet Room* (1994, memoir, Lori Schiller with Amanda Bennett)

- *My Friend Dahmer* (2013, graphic novel, Derf Backderf)
- *The Lovely Bones* (2002, novel, Alice Sebold)
- *She's Come Undone*, *I Know This Much is True*, and *The Hour I First Believed* (1992, 1998, 2008, novels, Wally Lamb)
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007, novel, Sherman Alexie)
- *Girl, Interrupted* (1999, film, based on memoir about borderline personality disorder, Susanna Kaysen)
- *Ordinary People* (1980, film, based on novel about depression and suicide, Judith Guest)
- *The Pact* (2002, film, based on novel about a suicide pact, Jodi Picoult)
- "Hold On" (2004, music video, focused on suicide prevention, Good Charlotte)

Students in this humanities course complete a variety of assignments including literary analyses, personal written and artistic responses, compare/contrast essays on characters and themes, and discussions of censorship. Most recently, in an online version of the course in summer 2013, I invited students to blog in response to the novels we read. To start the course, students reflected on what they already knew about mental illness and how literature or popular culture shaped what they knew about mental illness. The students created individual blogs (shared with the class), and I started my own blog as well. My intention was to encourage expression through a new format, conversations between/among students, and reflections on the books we read.

One student's blog in this most recent class described mental illness as a mystery because "to many, it is a hidden world." Several members of the class shared their own experiences with mental illness as well as those of friends or family members. One discussed his mother's diagnoses with bipolar disorder and how reading *The Quiet Room* helped him have more understanding for his mother's prescription drug abuse and suicide attempts. Another student shared in her blog her hesitation with sharing her own personal account of having a mental illness. She related that she felt like she was "telling a secret that shouldn't have been told," a secret that her family kept for years. Moreover, she was surprised that she chose to share her experiences with a person she hadn't ever met in person. She said that despite her family's tendency to be quiet and not to "highlight the issue of men-

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tal health,” her decision to self-disclose was based in part on reading others’ blog posts in which they shared accounts of how mental illness affected their own lives.

Others in Good Books talked about how reading the selected texts led to changes in their empathy toward those with mental illness. One noted, “I look back on my blog posting and realize a drastic change in my attitude towards the way I view mental illness and the human condition. My views have changed from a seemingly hostile demeanor to one of caring and compassion towards those that are mentally ill.” Another talked about how reading *The Quiet Room* and *She’s Come Undone* allowed her to connect with how mental illness affects family and community members. Many enrolled in Good Books blogged about the stigma associated with mental illness.

One student reflected on the stigma that “suicide has been given by society; that everyone who thinks about suicide will go through with the act, or everyone who has a drinking problem, cuts, restricts food, or purges is going to commit suicide.” She refers specifically to Arnold “Junior” Spirit, the main character in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and notes that Junior’s sharing of his anger (in a passage in which he says, “I could have easily killed myself, killed my mother and father, killed the birds, killed the trees, and killed the oxygen in the air. More than anything, I wanted to kill God. I was joyless”) helped her to remember that individuals can in fact survive depression and suicidal ideation (p. 173). Like this student, most in the classes reported that reading books about those with depression, schizophrenia, etc., have helped them reconsider preconceived notions about individuals with mental illnesses.

Conclusion

In a recent essay on how literature might expedite the development of empathy, Djikic, Oatley & Moldoveanu (2013) note that fictional stories are simulations, capable of helping us to develop empathy with literary characters. Their study concludes, “The world of literature encourages us to become others in imagination, and this may be one of the most benign means of improving one’s abilities in the social domain” (p. 44). Using literature about characters with mental illness addresses the call for culturally relevant literature. Research by Ladson-Billings (1992) shows that culturally relevant teaching is to “use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (p.4). In a

culturally relevant classroom, “Students are encouraged to interrogate “the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162).

By examining terms such as *disturbed*, *nuts*, *psycho*, *spastic*, *crazy*, and *mental*, students can question why those with mental illness are marginalized and bullied. And certainly, with half of lifetime diagnosable disorders beginning by age 14 (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008, p.1), reading novels such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *The Quiet Room*, *Wintergirls*, and others can help high school and college students investigate vocabulary associated with mental illness and explore how characters with psychological problems are treated by peers, bullies, and community members. Moreover, including books about characters with mental illness can help pre-service teachers consider their own textual choices in the English classroom and to empathize with those students who are living with mental illness or whose family members or friends are dealing with psychological disorders. Reading books about mental illness can motivate students and teachers to be aware of the power of language choices and to become empowered to confront the stigma associated with mental illness and confront bullying of those struggling with depression, anxiety, and others living with mental illness.

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