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Reducing Bullying and Suicide

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Abstract

In this essay, I present the idea that reading young adult literature can be beneficial in preventing bullying and suicide. I address how young adult novels show similar themes like a teen protagonist and coming of age issues. In doing so I show that the themes can help young adults who are struggling with similar conflicts: bullying, identity crisis, and thoughts of suicide. Young teens can use these stories and the characters as ways of coping with their conflicts, as they see how the characters cope. I argue that this teaches them what to do or not to do in different situations. It gives them someone to relate to in hopes of allowing them the realization that if the character can get through hard times so can they. I present that bibliotherapy, the use of books as therapy, is not an unknown idea. It is believed to work for many people including young adults. In the essay, I use four books to show examples of these themes. These books include *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher, *All the Bright Places* (2015) by Jennifer Niven, *My Heart and Other Black Holes* (2015) by Jasmine Warga, and *Impulse* (2007) by Ellen Hopkins. The characters in these books face the conflicts other young adults are facing. I use their stories to represent how the books can be used as bibliotherapy in the hopes of reducing, if not eliminating, bullying and suicide.

Key words: bibliotherapy, young adult literature, bullying, suicide, identity crisis

“Anyone who has actually been that sad can tell you that there’s nothing beautiful or literary or mysterious about depression.”

–Jasmine Warga, *My Heart and Other Black Holes*

Throughout high school, teens are faced with problems, and these problems can make or break them. Bullying and suicide are very common issues faced by young adults, and thus are frequently represented in young adult literature. From books that are written through the eyes of a character who has committed suicide, such as Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007), to books about suicide partners, such as Jasmine Warga’s *My Heart and Other Black Holes* (2015), teens can identify with the characters in order to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. Such empathy and un-

derstanding can help reduce bullying and suicide among teenagers. Bibliotherapy, the use of books as therapy, can help teens deal with everyday life.

In their books, young adult authors focus on the behaviors and the world of young adults. In a way, much of the time they are making guide books for teens. They try to shape their readers’ thoughts on how to behave, and, in this case, how to treat their peers, by writing stories that show the thoughts and feelings inside teens like them. According to Pam B. Cole, “Young adult literature offers a window through which teens can examine their lives and the world in which they live. Unlike classical texts, young adult literature addresses modern-day issues—peer pressure, family relationships, sexuality, bigotry and racism, and it connects teens with the pop culture world in which they live” (61). Cole further ex-

plains that all young adult books have similar traits: the teenager as a protagonist and his or her struggle to resolve conflict, coming of age issues, and endings other than “happily ever after” (49). Lastly, young adult literature shows identity crisis: the idea that young adults go through a period in their life where they struggle to figure out who they are. Based on Cole’s description, young adult literature displays what young adults are going to go through during their teen years. The books depict characters with similar traits as their readers. By doing this, a reader can relate to characters and use that relation to come to terms with themselves. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, *All the Bright Places* (2015), and *Impulse* (2007) are four novels that show the effects of bullying on suicide and identity crisis while representing common young adult literature themes.

While bullying generally invokes the idea of peer on peer action, young adult literature portrays the fact that often the worst form of bullying comes directly from the teen’s family. Parents and guardians can cause more psychological harm to their teens than the worst school bully. By definition, a bully is a blustering, quarrelsome, overbearing person who habitually badgers and intimidates smaller or weaker people (Dictionary.com). This definition exactly describes Conner’s parents in *Impulse*. His parents held him to a standard that constantly put him down. He felt he could never live up to what they wanted no matter how hard he tried. All he wanted was to be accepted and loved by his parents. Connor reflects on his situation: “I’ll go home to expectations no way I can live up to, no longer want to. But I’ve never had a say about my future” (Hopkins 635). In the end, it is their lack of acceptance and control that send him over the edge. Negligence and unobtainable standards are not the only forms of parental bullying, however. Tony, another character in *Impulse*, is sexually abused by his mother’s boyfriends. His mother does nothing about it and often seems to be chastising him as though it is his fault. She makes fun of him, calling him gay, even though the abuse was against his will. Tony remembers, “Later she said it was all my fault because I, no doubt something genetic from my dad’s side, was a little faggot” (Hopkins 330). How can teens cope when the ones they have to protect them are the ones putting them down?

Bullying occurs in almost all teen’s lives at one point or another. Batchelor, Morgan, and Pytash’s re-

search shows that “Bullying is the most prevalent form of school violence, with approximately 3.2 million students bullied yearly” (15). This large number stems from the fact that bullying comes in many forms. It can be verbal or physical. Much verbal bullying starts with the simplicity of rumors and gossip. Automatically, people are characterized into peer groups: jocks, nerds, popular kids, dirtballs, etc. Throughout the books, we learn more about individual characters, allowing the reader to discover that most characters can fit into multiple categories. The readers also discover that often people are misread and placed in an entirely wrong group due to rumors and gossip. Such bullying can be detrimental to a teen’s school experience. Rumors and gossip are one of the main forms of bullying Hannah endures in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The main theme in the life of Hannah is that the world has constructed its view of her without caring if it is true or how it makes her feel. As the rumors shape Hannah’s character into the one that everyone falsely sees, Hannah’s fate is shaped. Hannah’s story shows what happens when teens do not care about how they treat their peers. Hannah pleads, “I wanted people to trust me, despite anything they’d heard. And more than that, I wanted them to know me. Not the stuff they thought they knew about me. No, the real me. I wanted them to get past the rumors” (Asher 135). Along with Hannah, Aysel in *My Heart and Other Black Holes* is also bullied by her peers due to gossip and rumors. Aysel’s father murders the star of the school track team and leaves Aysel to suffer from his mess. No one wants to befriend her, fearing she is insane like her father is presumed to be. At one point, she is assigned a partner for a physics project. During their meeting, her partner does not even know her name and is embarrassed to be seen with her. As Aysel describes, “I watch him dash across the library to meet his friends. I can see them whispering to one another motioning in my direction. Tyler shuffles his feet and shrugs. I imagine he is explaining that he was forced to work with me. Tyler eventually walks toward me, but his pace is slow like he is doing his best to show that this is a punishment. Not a choice” (Warga 111). Aysel has done nothing to deserve such harsh treatment, but the gossip that stems from something her father has done causes Aysel to be subject to bullying.

As other young adult novels illustrate, peer bullying is not just verbal. In Finch’s case he not only experiences name-calling and other verbal harassment, but numerous times in *All the Bright Places* he is beaten

up or pushed around. Finch, who is more commonly referred to as Theodore Freak, cannot catch a break when he is getting bullied. Roamer will pick the fight and then Finch, who tries as hard as he can to avoid physical confrontation, eventually loses control. Only Finch will get in trouble, though, as Roamer is a baseball player. Violet, early in the novel, asks Finch why he is picked on. Finch responds by saying it is based on his eighth-grade appearance and odd behavior. The real reason is that when Finch tried to confide in Roamer about his feelings, Roamer judged him and began to bully him. This trend continued with the other students, even though Finch was only being who he was. Finch says, "I wonder if I count long enough whether I can go back in time all the way to the beginning of eighth grade, before I was weird and before anyone noticed me and before I opened my mouth and talked to Roamer and before they called me 'freak'" (Niven 207). Readers can relate to Finch. They know what it is like to be picked on for their appearance, for things they have confided to a friend, or for their personality in general. Every day bullies treat others badly without caring about the possible consequences.

Life is not just about how you treat others, but how you treat yourself. Characters such as Violet, from *All the Bright Places*, and Roman, Aysel's suicide partner in *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, were well-liked. They both lose a loved one and can no longer cope with life. Even though no one is necessarily bullying them, they feel like outcasts. They, in turn, bully themselves. They cut themselves off from everyone and attempt, or think, about committing suicide. Another self-abuser is Vanessa in *Impulse*. She cuts herself when she feels any emotion that overwhelms her: "And the thought of that makes me want to open a vein, experience pain, know I'm alive, despite this living death" (Hopkins). She tries to use this method to commit suicide but is caught in time to be saved. She is yet another example of a young adult struggling with self-harm and confusion about the value of her life. Though she was not being bullied by peers or parents, she was having an identity crisis.

The idea of an identity crisis is based on a theory of development by Erik Erikson. According to Erikson, from the ages of twelve to eighteen, young adults begin to try to find their identity and place in a social world. As Gould and Howson explain it, "Their sense of self is shaky, and youths search within themselves in order to gain an understanding of who they are and where they belong. Erikson's theory suggests that youths have to

resolve this issue during their adolescence to develop healthy attitudes before entering adulthood" (5). With constant environmental influences, it can be difficult for young adults to figure out the difference between who they are and who the world is shaping them to be. Bullying from parents and peers greatly affects how teens see themselves. Hannah and Finch both show this struggle throughout *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *All the Bright Places*. In a way, Hannah has more than one identity. She has the identity given to her by those who believe the rumors spread about her. She has the identity she puts forward that hides what she is really feeling inside. Additionally, then she has the true Hannah; the Hannah that is no longer alive even before she kills herself. This causes Hannah to experience an internal conflict. At first, it does not seem like Hannah would be the type to give up, but as the book progresses, Hannah loses her sense of identity more and more. Hannah explains, "But you can't get away from yourself. You can't decide not to see yourself anymore. You can't decide to turn off the noise in your head" (Asher 178). Hannah cannot escape herself and the identity she does not want. In the end, she forces herself to give up all the things that make her Hannah. Only stripped of herself can she complete the act of suicide. Hannah deserved more from everyone around her, but most importantly she deserved more from herself.

Finch fights an identity crisis the entire novel of *All the Bright Places*. He keeps changing who he is. We meet Dirtbag Finch, Badass Finch, and Nerd Finch. He does not seem to know which of these he is. At one point he is called out by his only friend on his multiple identities. This gets Finch thinking about how others see him and leads him to the train of thought: "which Finch does Violet like? What if it is only a version of the real Finch?" (Niven 205). However, who is the real Finch? A reader can put the many pieces of his personality together, but we still do not fully know who he is. We do know that Finch is struggling with an internal battle between staying awake and falling asleep, as he calls it. He is constantly thinking about death and how others have killed themselves while he fights to find a reason to stay alive. Eventually, he cannot find a reason and drowns himself. So many young adults are struggling with who they are. Teens need an environment that builds them up so that they can build their identity, not an environment that tears them down and makes them feel like less of a person.

Young adult literature can be used as bibliotherapy for young adults or anyone going through bullying or depression. Hodge informs us, “The advocates of bibliotherapy, the use of books for therapy, would argue that reading novels can help young people to understand social and emotional problems and develop insight into themselves” (Hodge). People who are contemplating suicide or who cannot figure out how to cope with day to day struggles can relate to the characters in these novels. They can gain insight into what may help them or why things are the way that they seem. These books can give teens hope. In the books presented in this essay, the teens all contemplate suicide or try some form of self-harm. Only two of the eight characters go through with killing themselves. The other characters find a reason to live despite the bullying, which shows its readers that they can too. Teens can also see the effect the characters who ended their lives had on those around them. The people who cared about the characters are crushed and wish they could have done something more. Seeing that effect can deter teens from following that example.

These books can benefit more than just teens. Parents and teachers who need to be looking out for their students/teens can read these books to better understand them and to recognize the signs of bullying and depression. The National Council of Teachers of English conducted a study with teachers who were concerned and wanted to know more about bullying. After teachers read the books, they said they were more aware of what to look for when watching out for bullying. Some were surprised by what they discovered in the books. For example, they did not realize someone similar to Hannah’s character would be bullied or disliked. As Batchelor, Morgan, and Pytash noted, “Reading YA literature helped preservice teachers think about bullying through the characters’ eyes. This new perspective made it easier for them to recognize how instances of gossip, rumors, or attention to physical attributes can make a person feel insecure or threatened” (18). These books open a world full of information that will benefit young adults and those around them that care, like teachers and family members.

Young adult authors show their audience of teens that every action they take, whether honest or a lie, sincere or joking, has a consequence. Teens need to be aware of the consequences of their actions, because whether they know it or not, not all outcomes are easy nor are they right. Hannah hits the nail on the head when

she tells Clay in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, “No one knows for certain how much impact they have on the lives of other people. Oftentimes, we have no clue. Yet we push it just the same” (Asher 156). Bullying affects more than just the victim. It hurts everyone who cares about them. Young adult novels are exposing bullying and its effects on teen suicide and identity crisis. By reading these novels, one can gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of other young adults. This understanding can create coping mechanisms, and can reduce bullying and suicide.

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