

Paradoxical Minds: Mental Health Advocacy in Young Adult Literature

Mental health advocacy in the twenty-first century is a small but growing initiative. Scholars such as Kia Jane Richmond, for example, argue that young adult literature plays an important role in cultivating empathy for others with mental illness, illustrating characters or helping readers to imagine other people as complex beings (24). But while such empathetic development is noticeably reflected between characters within a text, how do young adult novels help protagonists with mental illness learn to imagine *themselves* more complexly? Mental illness typically manifests itself within people's thoughts, altering their intellectual perceptions and making it difficult to envision themselves as more than what their illness suggests. Thus, the mind becomes a paradoxical site where, due to the effects of certain illnesses, one both advocates for and against their own interests. The question then becomes: how do you advocate for yourself when your thoughts operate against you? To combat this issue, I read novels such as Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* (2009), Cindy L. Rodriguez's *When Reason Breaks* (2015), and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017) as useful in depicting a development of self-empathy within characters. I argue that, through their experiences with intrusive thought-spirals and emotional numbness, these novels' protagonists begin to advocate for themselves by learning to co-exist with their mental illness through management techniques and treatments. Initially perceiving themselves as Other due to their illnesses, each protagonist develops by coming to terms with their mental health as *part* of a larger subjectivity rather than their entire identity.