

“The Metaphor of Madness and the Madness of Metaphor”

From the legless Velveteen Rabbit who must be loved to be truly whole to the vision-impaired child whose blindness allows her to “truly see,” disability has long been used as a narrative device to further plot and character development. Though there has been great progress made in depictions of physical disability and illness, representations of mental disability and illness remain largely stagnant. This paper addresses the lingering tropes and metaphors that surround YA texts about mental illness, as well as those texts that are making strides in improving representation.

Partially due to the fact that mental illness is a largely “invisible” disability, it remains a topic written of in heavy metaphor to convey an experience to a readership who may not have lived it and can’t necessarily picture it. But what do we risk losing when lived experience is replaced with metaphor? From tying “crazy” to creativity, to using disorders to signify characters’ inability or unwillingness to survive in society, literature has long erased the reality of life with mental illness. Hugely popular recent books like Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* (which uses a character’s suicide to teach an important lesson about bullying) or Jennifer Niven’s *All the Bright Places* (which heavily implies that the people surrounding a suicidal character truly are better off once that character is gone) further marginalize characters with mental illnesses by using them as stepping-stones to further the narrative arcs of their neurotypical protagonists.

Conversely, texts like Patrick Ness’ *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* and Hannah Moskowitz’s *Not Otherwise Specified* highlight the lived experiences of people with chronic psychiatric disabilities instead of reducing them to moral failings or obstacles to be overcome triumphantly. As more authors recognize and respect varied experiences of mentally ill people, including the fact that many individuals will never achieve a tidy “recovery” arc where the goal is to become non-mentally ill, recent texts work to find a balance in the power of metaphor to share experience while also respecting characters as people instead of props.