

Kia Jane Richmond, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Struggles through Fictional Characters* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2019)

Emma Salt-Raper (University of Leeds)

Kia Jane Richmond's text, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Struggles through Fictional Characters*, makes a timely contribution to the discussion of adolescent mental health. The World Health Organisation recently reported that half of all mental illnesses begin by the age of 14, but most cases are left undiagnosed and untreated.¹ As this growing health crisis becomes increasingly urgent, Richmond turns our attention to the need for adolescents with mental health conditions to see themselves represented in narrative.

Focusing mostly on fiction, Richmond creates a catalogue of twenty-first century young adult texts which feature teenagers with mental illnesses. Her aim is straightforward: to equip education and healthcare professionals with the resources they need to support adolescents by removing the stigma associated with mental illness. The text's introduction gives a brief and succinct history of young adult fiction on the subject, noting S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) as a landmark novel of the genre, before briefly highlighting existing research on the portrayal of mental conditions in modern adolescent literature.² The introductory chapter also outlines Richmond's methodology for the study. She uses the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* as a diagnostic tool to establish the

¹ World Health Organisation, 'Adolescent Mental Health Fact Sheet' < <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health> > [accessed 19 March 2020].

² S. E. Hinton, *The Outsiders* (London: Penguin, 1967).

organisation of the chapters, allowing each section of the book focus on different categories of mental illness.³

Using this diagnostic approach, each of the book's ten main chapters is based on a separate *DSM-5* entry, such as bipolar disorder or eating disorders. Within each section, Richmond gives a medical definition of the illness and any related conditions. The chapter then examines between two and four relevant young adult novels through three lenses: how the writer presents the characters' symptoms, their treatment, and their family's reactions. After exploring the texts about the mental illness individually, Richmond then draws some parallels between them in a conclusion and provides the reader with a list of additional books on the mental disorder. Significantly, each reading list is not limited to young adult fiction but also includes non-fiction, twentieth-century texts, and memoirs. The final section of the book includes sample lesson plans for teaching some of the novels previously explored, with teaching activities and discussion points.

Richmond's style is consistently succinct and concise. Her exploratory analysis of the chosen texts is vital in aiding the reader's understanding of how mental health conditions are portrayed through twenty-first century young adult narratives. Furthermore, the text covers analysis of a wide variety of fiction: thirty novels are examined in detail throughout the course of the book, and a broader range of fiction and non-fiction texts are referred to in the additional reading list at the end of each chapter. Richmond's book is also significant in its comprehensive detailing of different illnesses, covering varying conditions including attention-deficit disorder, schizophrenia, social anxiety disorder, addictive disorders and non-suicidal

³ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th edn (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

self-injury. As such, it represents the first book-length study on the portrayal of mental illness in twenty-first century young adult literature.

Richmond's investigation into the portrayal of mental illness in adolescent fiction is often clinical in style. Each novel undergoes similar analysis relating to the protagonist's symptoms, treatments, and family support and as such, the study occasionally risks becoming similar to a catalogue which briefly summarises a vast number of texts. Furthermore, it is debatable to what degree such a wide range of conditions can be understood using the same three lenses. This regimental approach to analysis could rely on an underlying assumption that all these illnesses, such as eating disorders and ADHD, are inherently similar. Yet, while it could be argued the book sometimes oversimplifies the nuances of narratives about different mental illnesses, the subheadings themselves are broad enough to invite some appreciation of the unique characteristics of each text. Similarly, the structuring of the chapters based on these same subheadings may make the text accessible to a more diverse readership, particularly those who are not so familiar with English literature.

The text's regimented style makes it a compelling read for teachers, librarians and mental health workers, as it offers guidance on how to navigate selected young adult texts in order to broaden the discussion surrounding adolescent mental health. Furthermore, the text would benefit anyone who works with young people as it uses vivid adolescent narratives to remove the stigma surrounding mental illness. Richmond's text gives guidance on using young adult texts to promote empathy, develop compassion, and encourage understanding of the mental health needs of an underserved population. The author uses her background in education to provide the reader with a range of lesson plans, making the book an appropriate choice for

teachers engaging in continuing professional development. Although many of Richmond's resources could be universal, it is worth noting that the teaching activities often assume an American education readership.

This book marks an exploratory beginning to the increasing field of criticism on literature about mental health written for a young readership. Although it is not necessarily a comprehensive analysis of contemporary literature, this was not Richmond's sole aim. Instead, the text offers support for professionals who seek to use narratives to reduce the stigma surrounding the discussion of adolescent mental illness.

Bibliography

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