MENTAL HEALTH REPRESENTATION AND THE EMPATHETIC TURN IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the representation of mental health in Anglophone Young Adult (YA) literature has moved from the margins to the center of literary attention. This article examines the development and major features of this trend, focusing on how contemporary YA fiction represents mental illness and encourages empathy among young readers. Holly Bourne's Am I Normal Yet? (2015) serves as the primary case study, while The Immeasurable Depth of You (2023), Forever Is Now (2023), and The Memory of Light (2016) provide comparative examples. The article explores first-person narration, embodied storytelling, recovery narratives, and digital media as important narrative strategies. It argues that contemporary YA literature can contribute to mental health literacy by presenting psychological difficulties in relation to treatment, social stigma, identity, and everyday adolescent life. However, the article also considers the limitations of the "problem novel" approach and the danger of reducing complex characters to their diagnoses. Ultimately, the future of mental health writing in YA literature depends on balancing empathy and educational value with literary complexity.

Keywords: Young Adult literature; mental health; narrative empathy; mental health literacy; 21st-century fiction

I. Introduction

Mental health has become an increasingly important subject in contemporary Young Adult literature. The psychological well-being of adolescents is a major social and public health concern, while mental illness is often described as "invisible" because its symptoms may not be immediately visible to others. Stigma can make young people reluctant to speak about their difficulties or ask for professional help. In this context, literature can provide an important space for discussing mental health and understanding the experiences of others.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, YA literature has increasingly included characters experiencing depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health conditions. These representations differ from some earlier portrayals because mental illness is often presented as part of a character's everyday life rather than simply as a plot device.

A significant example is British writer Holly Bourne's Am I Normal Yet? (2015). The novel follows sixteen-year-old Evie, who has OCD and is trying to return to everyday life after receiving psychiatric treatment. Her experiences show the difficulties of recovery, social expectations, relationships, and the pressure to appear "normal."

This article examines how twenty-first-century YA literature represents mental health and how literary techniques can create empathy between readers and characters. It focuses particularly on first-

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person narration, embodied descriptions of psychological symptoms, recovery narratives, and digital media. It also considers the cultural value and limitations of mental health representation.

II. From Silence to Speech: The Rise of Mental Health Writing

The growing presence of mental health themes in YA literature is connected to wider social and cultural changes. One important factor is the development of mental health literacy. Mental health literacy includes the ability to recognize mental health problems, understand basic information about them, reduce stigma, and know when and where to seek help.

YA literature is particularly suitable for this purpose because it is written for adolescent readers and often deals with problems that young people can recognize in their own lives. Richmond's Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature (2018) examines the representation of different mental disorders in American YA fiction and demonstrates how literature can support discussions about mental health.

The publishing industry and reader interest have also contributed to this development. The success of books such as Am I Normal Yet? encouraged more writers to explore mental health. Later works expanded the range of represented experiences. For example, Francisco X. Stork's The Memory of Light (2016) focuses on recovery after a suicide attempt, while Maria Ingrande Mora's The Immeasurable Depth of You (2023) explores severe anxiety and intrusive thoughts. Mariama J. Lockington's Forever Is Now (2023), written in verse, presents the experience of a Black teenager living with chronic anxiety and agoraphobia.

Another important reason for the rise of mental health writing is the pressure faced by contemporary adolescents. Academic competition, social media, relationships, identity questions, and social expectations can influence young people's emotional well-being. YA fiction can create a safe literary space in which readers encounter difficult emotions through fictional characters. In this way, literature can encourage discussion and help readers understand that mental health problems are not something that must always remain silent.

III. Narrative Strategies and the Development of Empathy

Contemporary YA writers use different narrative techniques to represent psychological experiences. Among the most important are first-person narration, embodied storytelling, recovery narratives, and digital media.

3.1 First-Person Narration and Narrative Empathy

First-person narration is one of the most effective techniques for representing mental illness. It allows readers to experience events through the character's thoughts and emotions rather than simply observing the character from the outside.

In Am I Normal Yet?, the story is closely connected to Evie's thoughts and experiences with OCD. Her intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors become part of the narrative experience. As Demir (2025) argues, first-person and embodied narration can encourage empathy for a protagonist experiencing OCD.

This technique changes the reader's understanding of mental illness. Instead of simply learning what OCD is from an external explanation, readers encounter the character's fears, thoughts, uncertainty, and emotional struggles. In this way, literature can make an "invisible" psychological experience more understandable.

3.2 Recovery Narratives

Another important development is the increasing focus on recovery. Earlier representations of mental illness sometimes used psychological problems mainly as dramatic elements. Contemporary YA

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literature, however, often focuses on treatment, recovery, relapse, and the difficulties of continuing everyday life.

The Memory of Light is an example of this approach. The novel concentrates on what happens after a suicide attempt and explores the process of continuing life and recovering from emotional suffering.

Similarly, Am I Normal Yet? presents recovery as a difficult and imperfect process. Evie believes that she must become "normal" in order to be happy. She tries to hide her illness and behave like other teenagers. However, this pressure makes her situation more difficult. Her experience demonstrates that recovery is not simply a quick movement from illness to health. It can involve setbacks, uncertainty, treatment, relationships, and learning to accept oneself.

This realistic approach makes contemporary YA mental health narratives different from simplified stories in which a character's problems are quickly solved.

3.3 Digital Media as a Narrative Space

Digital technology is another important feature of twenty-first-century YA literature. Social media, blogs, messaging, and online communities are often part of adolescents' everyday lives, so contemporary novels naturally include them when representing mental health.

Digital media can have both positive and negative roles. Young characters may use the internet to communicate with others, find information, express emotions, or receive social support. At the same time, social media can increase isolation, anxiety, comparison, or emotional pressure.

In The Immeasurable Depth of You, the protagonist Brynn's online life becomes an important part of her emotional experience. Her blog reveals her suicidal thoughts to her mother, which leads to major changes in her life, including the loss of internet access and physical isolation. Her online friendships are also presented as an important source of emotional connection.

Therefore, digital media in YA literature is not simply a technological detail. It can represent both connection and isolation and can show how contemporary adolescents experience and manage emotional difficulties.

IV. Beyond Empathy: Cultural and Educational Functions

Mental health representation in YA literature has cultural importance beyond entertainment. These novels can influence how readers understand mental illness and how they think about people experiencing psychological difficulties.

4.1 Literature and Mental Health Education

YA fiction can contribute to mental health education by presenting experiences that are difficult to explain through medical or academic texts. Am I Normal Yet?, for example, has been discussed in the British Journal of Psychiatry because of its insight into adolescent mental health and the relationship between young people and health services.

Literary fiction can provide a patient perspective. Readers can see how therapy, medication, social expectations, and relapse may be experienced by a young person. This does not mean that fiction can replace professional medical information, but it can complement it by providing emotional and social perspectives.

For this reason, YA literature may also have value in medical humanities education. It can help future professionals think about mental illness not only as a diagnosis but also as a personal and social experience.

4.2 Challenging Stigma

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Another important function is challenging the stigma surrounding mental illness. When readers encounter characters with mental health conditions as complete human beings—with friendships, ambitions, families, relationships, and personal identities—they may develop a more complex understanding of mental illness.

Contemporary YA literature increasingly connects mental health with other aspects of identity, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social background. Richmond (2018) emphasizes the importance of examining these connections instead of treating mental illness as an isolated condition.

This intersectional approach is important because people do not experience mental illness in exactly the same way. Social and cultural factors can influence how psychological difficulties are understood, treated, and experienced.

V. Ethical Tensions and the "Problem Novel"

Despite its positive potential, mental health representation also has limitations. One important concern is the "problem novel" label. When mental illness becomes the main selling point of a novel, there is a risk that a character may be reduced to a diagnosis.

A character should not be understood only through a mental health condition. A person with anxiety, depression, or OCD is still a complete individual with relationships, interests, dreams, strengths, and weaknesses. Good YA literature therefore needs to show both the difficulties of mental illness and the wider identity of the character.

Another question concerns the effectiveness of narrative empathy. Although readers may feel sympathy or emotional connection with a fictional character, this does not automatically mean that their real-world attitudes will change. Emotional engagement can sometimes remain at the level of temporary sympathy rather than producing a deeper understanding of stigma and social inequality.

Therefore, authors need to avoid overly predictable formulas in which a diagnosis is introduced, a crisis occurs, and everything is solved through a simple recovery. Mental health experiences are usually more complicated. Contemporary YA literature is strongest when it combines emotional accessibility with realistic and complex storytelling.

The growing representation of mental illness across different genres, including fantasy and science fiction, can also help challenge stereotypes. It demonstrates that characters with mental health conditions can participate in many kinds of stories rather than being limited to "illness stories."

VI. Conclusion

The representation of mental health in twenty-first-century Anglophone YA literature has developed into an important literary and cultural movement. Contemporary YA novels increasingly bring psychological experiences from the margins to the center and use literature to explore anxiety, depression, OCD, trauma, and other mental health conditions.

Works such as Holly Bourne's Am I Normal Yet? demonstrate how first-person narration and embodied storytelling can create narrative empathy. Recovery narratives provide a more realistic understanding of treatment and relapse, while digital media reflects the changing social environment of contemporary adolescents.

These novels also have wider cultural functions. They can support mental health literacy, challenge stigma, encourage discussion, and provide readers with perspectives that are difficult to gain from clinical descriptions alone. At the same time, writers must avoid reducing characters to diagnoses or turning mental illness into a simple literary formula.

Ultimately, the most valuable mental health narratives are not only stories about illness but stories about people. Mental illness can be an important part of a character's experience, but it should not

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completely define that character. The future of YA mental health literature therefore depends on maintaining a balance between empathy, educational value, and literary complexity.

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