

Depictions of Mental Illness in Fiction and Memoir: The Power of Representation

Instructor: Jennifer D'Andrea, PhD

Class Meetings: Thursdays 6:30 – 9:00 PM

Location: TBD (in-person)

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Course Description

Mental illness has captured the attention of writers and the interest of readers for generations. The manner in which mental illness is portrayed in a particular work is a reflection of societal attitudes toward those who struggle with it. Authors have great power to worsen stigma, stereotypes, and fear, or to improve understanding, empathy, and education. This course will first provide a context for attitudes toward mental illness through the examination of selected scholarly articles. The rest of the course will be devoted to reading a variety of fiction and nonfiction works incorporating the experience of mental illness. Students will utilize the insight gained through early readings to reflect on and critique the portrayals of mental illness in the course readings. Particular attention will be paid to the impact of individual identities on the experience of mental illness, as well as the issues arising from the intersection of author identities and character identities.

Course Objectives

At the conclusion of the course, students will better understand the historical underpinnings and nuances of stigma toward those who are diagnosed with mental illness. Students will possess a framework with which to critique the manner in which writers represent mental illness in their works and will better understand the ways in which stereotyping people with mental illness leads to increased stigma and isolation, while complex and nuanced portrayals of characters with mental illness as well as personal illness narratives enhance understanding, increase education, improve empathy, and decrease isolation.

Books

Memoir:

- Danquah, Meri Nana-Ama. *Willow Weep For Me*. (274 pp.)
- Mailhot, Therese. *Heart Berries*. (143 pp.)
- Styron, William. *Darkness Visible*. (84 pp.)

Fiction:

- Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. (230 pp.)
- Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. (256 pp.)
- Lee, Mira. *Everything Here is Beautiful*. (368 pp.)
- Walker, Chantal. *Post-Traumatic*. (320 pp.)

Additional Required Articles (see below)

- Will be available on the course Moodle

1 additional book (chosen by student)

- Book suggestions are attached to the end of this syllabus

The following articles will be posted on Moodle:

Holder, Sharon, Peterson, Eunice, Stephens, Rebecca, & Crandall, Lee. (2019). Stigma in mental health at the macro and micro levels: implications for mental health consumers and professionals. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 55, 369-374.

Johnson, Amy. (2012). I should be included in the census. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 38, 207-208.

Sirois, Linda. (2014). He's mad! Stigma and the changing understanding of mental illness. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 30, 7-15.

The following memoirs are required reading for all:

Danquah, Meri Nana-Ama. *Willow Weep For Me*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Mailhot, Therese M. *Heart Berries: A Memoir*. Berkeley California: Counterpoint, 2018.

Styron, William. *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*. New York: Random House, 1990.

The following novels are required reading for all:

Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998.

Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. New York: Grove Press, 2018.

Lee, Mira T. *Everything Here is Beautiful*. New York: Penguin Books, 2018.

Johnson, Chantal. *Post-Traumatic*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2022.

In addition to the preceding books and articles, class participants will select a book of their choice for their final paper and in-class presentation. A list of potential books is attached to this syllabus; however, participants need not confine themselves to this list. It is included only as a resource.

ASSIGNMENTS

4 short (3-5 pp) reflection papers

- Papers will be based upon the books due as well as class content from that week
- Reflection papers are due on the following dates:
 - Thursday September 18th
 - Thursday October 9th
 - Thursday October 30th
 - Thursday November November 20th

Final Project: Long reflection paper with short in-class presentation/discussion facilitation

Assessment

Class attendance/participation: 30%

Written reflections: 40%

Final Project: 30%

Final Project

Students will select a book of their choice to read for their final project. Students will write a long reflection paper based upon the book they have chosen. The paper should critique the representation of mental illness in the work while paying particular attention to issues related to the identities of both characters and author. Class participants will facilitate a brief in-class discussion based upon their project on the last class meeting. Students have wide latitude in their book choices; a list is provided with this syllabus but students are free to choose any work that incorporates the experience of mental illness. Students may choose the focus of their final project to suit their areas of personal interest or professional expertise.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is required for all classes. Please email me as soon as possible if you must miss a class meeting.

Class Schedule

Class 1 September 11th: Course Introduction

- Johnson, Amy. (2012). I should be included in the census. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 38, 207-208.
- Holder, Sharon, Peterson, Eunice, Stephens, Rebecca, & Crandall, Lee. (2019). Stigma in mental health at the macro and micro levels: implications for mental health consumers and professionals. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 55, 369-374.
- Sirois, Linda. (2014). He's mad! Stigma and the changing understanding of mental illness. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 30, 7-15.

Class 2 September 18th

Read Styron's *Darkness Visible* (83 pp)

Reflection 1 Due

Class 3 September 25th:

Read most of Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me* (274 pp)

Class 4 October 2nd:

Finish reading Danquah

Read Mailhot's *Heart Berries* (143 pp)

Class 5 October 9th:

Read the first half of Cunningham's *The Hours*

Reflection 2 Due

Class 6 October 16th:

Finish Cunningham

Class 7 October 23rd:

Read first half of Lee's *Everything Here is Beautiful*

Class 8 October 30th:

Finish Lee

Reflection 3 Due

Class 9 November 6th:

Read first half of Johnson's *Post-Traumatic*

Class 10 November 13th:

Finish Johnson

Class 11 November 20th:

Read first half of Emezi's *Freshwater*

Reflection 4 Due

Class 12 December 4th:

Finish Emezi

Class 13 December 11th:

Informal presentations of individual final projects (no readings for this week)

December 18th:

Final project due (8-10 pp. paper on book/topic of your choice)

ADDENDUM: POTENTIAL BOOKS FOR FINAL PAPER AND PROJECT (MEANT ONLY AS SUGGESTIONS)

Potential Books for Final Paper

The following is an incomplete list of fiction and nonfiction books involving the portrayal of mental illness. This list may help you to develop your final paper/presentation topic. The list is meant only as a guide; you may choose any book depicting mental illness for your final project.

Memoir

Lucky – Sebold
The Quiet Room – Schiller
Drinking: A Love Story – Knapp
Little Panic – Stern
The Collected Schizophrenias – Wang
The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness – Saks
The White Album – Didion
The Snake Pit – Ward
A Shining Affliction – Rogers
Girl, Interrupted – Kaysen
Haldol and Hyacinths – Moezzi
Loud in the House of Myself: Memoir of A Strange Girl – Pershall
My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind – Stossel
The Eden Express – Vonnegut
Manic: A Memoir – Cheney
Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia – Hornbacher
Prozac Nation – Wurtzel
I Never Promised You a Rose Garden – Greenberg
Madness: A Bipolar Life – Hornbacher

Fiction

The Bell Jar – Plath
Tender Is the Night – Fitzgerald
The Catcher in the Rye -- Salinger
Ordinary People – Guest
The Marriage Plot – Eugenides
The Passion of Alice – Grant
All is Beauty Now – Faber
Free Verse – Dooley
She's Come Undone – Lamb
I Know This Much is True – Lamb
We Need To Talk About Kevin – Shriver
The Gargoyle – Davidson
Mosquitoland – Arnold
Lisa, Bright and Dark – Neufeld
The Silver Linings Playbook – Quick
Jane Eyre – Bronte
Wide Sargasso Sea – Rhys
The Bluest Eye – Morrison
Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine – Honeyman
Imagine Me Gone – Haslett

Beloved – Walker
Possessing the Secret of Joy -- Walker
Mrs. Dalloway – Woolf
Radiant Daughter – Grossman

Young Adult Fiction

Challenger Deep – Shusterman
Paperweight – Haston
History is All You Left Me – Silvera
When We Collided – Lord
Turtles All the Way Down – Green
They Both Die At the End – Silvera
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian – Alexie
Wintergirls –Anderson
It’s Kind of a Funny Story – Vizzini
Say What You Will – McGovern
Highly Illogical Behavior – Whaley
My Heart and Other Black Holes – Warga
All the Bright Places – Niven
A World Without You – Revis
By the Time You Read, This I’ll Be Dead – Peters
Girl In Pieces – Glasgow
The Memory of Light – Stork
Made You Up – Zappia
Every Last Word – Stone
Museum of Intangible Things – Wunder
Dr. Bird’s Advice for Sad Poets – Roskos
Impulse – Hopkins
The Perks of Being A Wallflower – Chbosky
We Are the Ants -- Hutchinson