

Trends in the bookstore: YA books and mental health

By Nicole Dalrymple

Barb MacKenzie has been with Indigo Books and Music for close to fourteen years, and is currently the manager at the Sunnyside Mall location in Bedford, Nova Scotia. At the time of her hiring, she was the single mother of two sons and two stepsons who are now grown up. She has been able to work closely with books (young adult and otherwise) ever since. Her friendly, helpful spirit and genuine passion for guiding people to their perfect book has allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of the trends in young adult novels. We sat down with MacKenzie to discuss how young adult novels have dealt with mental health recently, how important this is, and some of the more popular picks at her store.

Young adults

Of course, when dealing with mental health in young adult books, the young adults themselves are what is most important. Do young adults ever ask for books about mental health specifically? “In my experience, they don’t,” MacKenzie says. “Most who want to read about it, ask for titles specifically. At that point it usually leads to great discussions on other similar titles.”

One way that young adults are discovering books is finding out that they were novels before movies. “*It’s kind of a funny story* by Ned Vizzini is one [movie that was previously a young adult book dealing with mental health] that I have seen,” MacKenzie says. “It is super super dark. Though I read most of the book before letting my son read it, the movie shocked me. I would only recommend it [to a younger adult] if a parent were to read it first and watch the movie with the child.” Other examples of books becoming movies or TV shows discussed included *The perks of being a wallflower* and *13 reasons why*.

Trends

Something that MacKenzie has noticed is the prevalence of the young adult books that discuss mental health today compared to when she first began working in books. “I believe it is because of the destigmatization of mental illness in the public eye, and the belief by so many authors that they have a platform for getting the information out in a very unique way”, she says. “[The authors can] have an amazing ability to change the perceptions of mental illness.”

She has also found an uptake in the amount of LGBT+ young adult books that deal with mental illness - an important combination, considering the high rates of suicide and other mental illness in LGBT+ youth. “Again, the general public is more open now to reading such material, and so the demand is there for it. There are more LGBT+ books [dealing with mental health] now, and more coming every day. The authors and publishers have that unique ability to change public perception and really help inclusion.”

Mackenzie also sees the need for more young adult books discussing physical illness to include the role mental illness plays in recovery or acceptance. “Those around persons who are physically sick [may struggle] with mental health issues. Same with young people struggling with LGBTQ+ support systems [that may be] lacking or perceived as such ... with so many stories being written from these two standpoints, I think that the knowledge can be power.”

She notes that not many of the older books dealing with mental health (for instance, the books written by Ellen Hopkins) are sold at her store anymore - interested young adults are now looking towards the future at newer books.

Adults and young adult books



A growing number of adults are realizing that young adult books are not just for young adults. “These books are not just for YA – kids. More and more adults are reading them to gain insight. Anytime information and stories are shared, those listening to or reading them only gain [from them], and are changed.”

However, she does not believe the same goes for adult books and mental health. Coming from an environment where parents trust her to recommend books that will be appropriate for their child, MacKenzie bears a big responsibility if an adult book negatively affects a young adult who was not mentally prepared for it. “I firmly believe that when a book has such a strong subject line such as [mental health or suicide] and we place it in adult fiction, there are good reasons why children should not [buy] them.”

Parents and reading

An important point of young adult literature when it comes to mental health for MacKenzie is parents or guardians. “Personally, I think the parents of kids should *always* know and help choose what their kids are reading. When subjects are strong, and the kids may be so impressionable and think that this is the only way to be [for instance, in cases when the book deals with suicide] ... it may not be a good thing. Unfortunately, many parents don’t get involved in what their kids are reading.”

And as for parents in the store - do they have a difficult time with some of the subject matter in young adult books dealing with mental health, such as suicide? “Of course they do ... I know that many parents are somewhat afraid of it as they know that youth are so impressionable and if they [have or may be at risk of developing] mental illness then it can be a tough situation.”

Mental health and younger adults

While there are plenty of books dealing with mental health aimed at high school age teens, younger adults do not get the same representation. “One [book that deals with mental health aimed at a younger audience] that comes to mind in the [ages] 9-12 section was *The reluctant journal of Henry K Larsen* by Susan Neilsen,” Mackenzie says. *The reluctant journal of Henry K Larsen* tells the story of Henry, who has to learn to grieve and understand mental illness after his brother murders his bully and commits suicide. The book explores the effects that both suicide and bullying have on people at a young age. “This book (though I did not read it), when it came into the store a few years back, took me by surprise [because] it was in the young reader’s section. However, I did feel that for those kids with that experience in their lives, it could be cathartic if read aloud to them by an adult who would discuss it.”

Who got it right?

“*All the bright places* by Jennifer Niven is the one that comes to mind for me. It was centered on two teens in the struggle of their lives. The young lady fared much better -but I felt she had a better support system. The young man with no support to speak of did not fare well. I felt that it was so true to life”, MacKenzie notes. This book, which is featured in our book list as well, focuses on two teens who meet while struggling to cope with their mental illnesses. Its ending is ultimately painful, and brings to light the seriousness of mental illness in younger adults (trigger warning: suicide). Some readers may struggle with this, as MacKenzie notes - “the ending was so true to life, but very unfortunate, so I don’t recommend it for everyone.”

Other popular YA books dealing with mental illness that she sees picked up often include, *It’s kind of a funny story* by Ned Vizzini, Jennifer Niven’s *All the bright places*, and Nicola Yoon’s *Everything everything*.”

Any last thoughts?

As for MacKenzie herself? “My favorite was *All the bright places*—I wanted to jump into the story to manage these kids!”

And finally - “I really think the adults in the [young adult] readers’ lives should be involved.”