

Let's Talk About it: Promoting Mental Health Awareness and Empathy Through YA Literature

Paralyzed by the fear of being ill, John Green's heroine Aza Holmes finds herself stuck in a "spiral." The *Turtles All the Way Down* protagonist explains that "the thing about the spiral is, if you follow it inward, it never actually ends. It just keeps tightening, infinitely" (15). The novel follows Aza inward into that spiral, creating an almost oppressive reading experience that tightens, infinitely.

Green's novel is an exceptional example of a trend in YA literature that seeks to write honestly about mental health issues. The National Institute for Mental Health estimates that 49.5% of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 have a mental health disorder. Given the abundance of afflicted adolescents, it seems necessary to address these issues with young people directly in a way that appeals to them.

In this paper, I explore how YA literature has been both imperative and detrimental to the empathetic promotion of mental health awareness. Suzanne Keen defines empathy as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (21). Using her work with empathy and reading, I focus on two novels that actively promote empathy—*Turtles All the Way Down* and Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*—and one novel—Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*—that seems to *discourage* empathy for youth struggling with mental health, an avoidable mistake. Adolescents are vulnerable, and deserve to feel understood. With these texts, I argue that we as advocates and academics should encourage the production of and reading of YA books that *accurately* explore mental illness to foster a more empathetic youth.