

## Exploration of Mental Health and Mental Illness in English Novels: An Overview

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### ABSTRACT

According to the most recent data from the National Institute of Mental Health, one in six adults in the world live with a mental illness. Despite the fact it is so common, individuals who don't suffer from a condition, and even those who do, still struggle to understand mental illness. Luckily, there are some pretty incredible books about the topic that shed an important light on a difficult topic so many of us still have a hard time making sense of. What's important to know with these books is that for some readers, they may be triggering and they may feel inauthentic to their own experiences. But mental illnesses, even those understood fairly well by the mental health community, don't play out in nice, conventional, and easily-understood ways. There is no single way to "do it right" when it comes to depicting mental health or mental illness. It's a spectrum, and by reading about a wide variety of fiction as well as non-fiction books related to the themes of mental health and mental illness, we better see that mental illness can take a range of symptoms, treatments, and more. The main motto of this paper is to highlight some fictional books which are related to the themes of mental health and mental illness. The novels I have chosen here for this paper are 'Everything Here Is Beautiful' by Mira T. Lee, 'Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression and the Unexpected Solutions' by Johann Hari and 'My Heart and Other Black Holes' by Jasmine Warga.

**Keywords:** *Mental Health, Fiction, Lost Connections, Depression*

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## Introduction

Being mentally healthy is the main aim for all of us. But what is 'mentally healthy'? Good mental health means more than the absence of symptoms. It means the ability to manage life proficiently and to deal in a reasonably healthy way with the challenges it inevitably throws at us from time to time. It means being able to take satisfaction and pleasure in everyday life. This includes the range of feelings and thoughts we have in life, in response to what happens to us. It's normal to feel sad, lonely, disappointed, or confused at times, for example. We all know these feelings. They are part of being human. When these feelings persist – but don't seem to have a cause that justifies them – and interfere with the ability to lead and enjoy everyday life, then it's a good idea to talk to a doctor or other health professional about any possible mental health problem that might need attention. Similarly mental illness includes a wide range of conditions that affect how we feel and think. Most of these are first experienced in the late teens or early twenties, but may only emerge later in life. Like many physical illnesses, mental illnesses are thought to arise from the interaction of genetic vulnerability and stresses in life. An example of this vulnerability-stress model is heart disease, caused by the

interaction of inherited vulnerability and lifestyle factors such as diet and level of physical activity. It's not a question of 'nature or nurture' therefore, but the interaction of both. The same holds true of mental health problems. All of us have varying degrees of genetic vulnerability to developing mental illnesses, but these may only triggered depending on the degree of stress we experience – 'stress' in the widest sense, from possible exposure to viruses in the womb, through to early childhood experience, later drug use, or highly distressing events in relationships or at work. For people who are highly vulnerable, the stress may only need to be slight. For others who are more robust, it may be an extreme, traumatic event which triggers an episode of mental ill health. Mental illnesses includes the more common conditions such as Anxiety and Depressive disorders, as well as the far less common but often more severe conditions such as Schizophrenia and other forms of psychotic illness. Many are also affected by psychological conditions, such as Borderline personality disorder, for example. Mental illnesses vary in how long they affect people: sometimes a single episode, sometimes a lifelong condition. Mental illnesses vary in severity: sometimes transitory, sometimes



causing psychosocial disability requiring long-term support.

Renowned authors like Mira. T. Lee, Johann Hari, Jasmine Warga, Matt Haigh and Lisa Jakub have written fantastic and superb fiction books whose main themes revolve around mental illness and about mental health. As per the latest and recent statistics about mental health and adolescents are sobering. Roughly one out of every five teens under the age of 18 struggle with mental illness. Depression accounts for one of the leading illnesses and disabilities in this same age group, and the third leading cause of death in this same demographic is suicide. But as much as knowing this—and living it, either via one’s memory of youth or by witnessing and working with today’s adolescents—can be scary, there is hope. Culturally, were fostering more open dialog about mental health, and more and more communities throughout the world are offering resources to their teens via school psychologists and counselling. It’s far from perfect, but these first small steps lead to greater leaps. The more representation of mental health, the more opportunities to see the ways it plays out. There are plethora of books which are best the best non-fiction books the novelist have written. They are heart touching, and deeply make us feel. These are the books

that teach us how to get rid of depression. These books make us live depression. It gets so deep under our skin, that sadness starts to pour into our veins, our emotions are heightened. The authors of these novels have a way of making us understand not only the sickness, but every aspect of it, as well. The books i have chosen here for this research paper are some of the famous books about mental health and mental illness which have had a big impact on our lives. I’ve also included some of the books they’ve been written, in order to offer up some excellent reading in the world of mental health. Like nearly one in five people. Everyone’s lives are touched by mental illness: if we do not suffer from it ourselves, then we have a friend or loved one who does. The novelists’ frankness about their experiences is both inspiring to those who feel daunted by depression and illuminating to those who are mystified by it. Above all, their humour and encouragement never let us lose sight of hope. Speaking as their present selves to their former selves in the depths of depression, these novelists are adamant that the oldest cliché is the truest—there is light at the end of the tunnel. These novelists teach us to celebrate the small joys and moments of peace that life brings, and reminds us that there are always reasons to stay



alive. There is societal stigma, community and family stigma when it comes to the idea of seeking help, many times people see it as a sign of weakness that if they can't take care of their own issue, then they need help and people see therapy as complaining to someone. There are a lot of ideas that are behind therapy where they think if they can't solve their own problems then they are weak and they should keep those issues at home and not talk to a complete stranger.

**•Support and Love as the means to Overcome Mental Illness in 'Everything Here Is Beautiful' by Mira T. Lee**

'Everything Here Is Beautiful' is a famous novel written by Mira T. Lee. In the novel, one of the main characters is suffering from mental illness and it is her sister who helps her to overcome this disease. In this captivating story about mental health and the bonds of sisterhood, one young woman struggles against the bonds of her illness, while another searches for the right way to offer support. Miranda has always been the responsible one, so when her younger sister Lucia starts to hear voices, Miranda tries everything she can to help her. Despite her best efforts, however, Lucia continues down a self-destructive path until, ultimately, both women must confront her mental illness head-on, or risk losing

everything, including each other. It is truly remarkable book about love, belonging, and sacrifice. Everything Here Is Beautiful is also a novel of two sisters and their emotional journey through love, loyalty, and heartbreak. Two sisters—Miranda, the older, responsible one, always her younger sister's protector; Lucia, the headstrong, unpredictable one, whose impulses are huge and, often, life changing. When their mother dies and Lucia starts hearing voices, it is Miranda who must find a way to reach her sister. But Lucia impetuously plows ahead, marrying a bighearted, older man only to leave him, suddenly, to have a baby with a young Latino immigrant. She moves her new family from the States to Ecuador and back again, but the bitter constant is that she is, in fact, mentally ill. Lucia lives life on a grand scale, until, inevitably, she crashes to earth. Miranda leaves her own self-contained life in Switzerland to rescue her sister again—but only Lucia can decide whether she wants to be saved. The bonds of sisterly devotion stretch across oceans—but what does it take to break them? Told in alternating points of view, Everything Here Is Beautiful is, at its heart, the story of a young woman's quest to find fulfilment and a life unconstrained by her illness. But it's also an unforgettable, gut-wrenching story of the



sacrifices we make to truly love someone—and when loyalty to one’s self must prevail over all.

First novelist Lee's story of mental illness and its effects on Lucia and those who love her alternates points of view from among various characters. The portrayal of sisterly love and its limits is visceral. A solid choice for general fiction readers. The interaction of cultures, with the inevitable misunderstandings that accompany it, forms a vibrant subtheme, and as the novel branches out from New York to Ecuador and then Minnesota, its sense of place deepens. To Lee's credit, Lucia, the more compellingly drawn of the two siblings, never seems like a psychological case study. Instead, we get inside her head—perhaps even inside her soul—to grapple with the challenges she faces. Lucia points out that in our society, cancer survivors are viewed much differently from sufferers of mental illness. She further says that Anosognosia, or "lack of insight," is a frequent symptom of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and makes these illnesses especially difficult to treat. How do one help someone who doesn't realize they are ill? How did we feel about Manny putting pills in Lucia's tea. The novel involves a sisterly relationship, certainly, as two of the narrating characters are sisters, but the fabric of the novel isn't primarily of one colour. It weaves

in several Big Themes: immigration in America, mental illness, romantic love, motherhood. However, in practice, it's a satisfying, surprising, multifaceted novel, not easily summed up by its themes. Appropriately, the prose is narrated by a variety of entities. These include two sisters, Miranda and Lucia, who were brought to America in childhood by their Chinese mother and who bounce from New England to South America and Europe seeking home; Lucia's Ecuadorian lover, Manuel; and her Russian husband, Yonah. Two sections are seemingly narrated, in third-person omniscient, by locations: Crote Six (a psychiatric ward) and Meyer, Minnesota (a small town). The primary characters are Manuel, a quiet and hardworking man who cannot help but disappoint anyone out of sync with his traditional perspective, and Lucia, a complex woman with a strong will, exceptional charisma, and a difficult-to-manage mental illness. She is extremely eloquent about her own illness:

“In Crote Six, they said I “suffer” from schizoaffective disorder. That's like the sampler plate of diagnoses, Best of Everything. But I don't want to suffer. I want to live”.



This novel could have been another assembly-line debut in a publishing landscape full of them, and instead, it feels like something truly original. Mira T. Lee's voice is not reassuring or simple; it is alive, worthy of pursuit and concentration. The sprawling structure of her novel reveals a sly interest in mental health and mental illness. In nutshell she reveals that how love and sympathy could help an individual to overcome the deadly disease (mental illness) and society could also help a person to the large extent to fight the depression. The unlikeliness of the novel's events, each one presented with supreme authorial confidence, recalls Ann Patchett, except the style is jolted upward by several thousand volts. Everything Here is Beautiful is a novel to savour, and Mira T. Lee is a novelist to watch.

***•Depression and Anxiety are a Direct Result of our Cultural Norms, Societal Expectations, and the Way We Live Our Daily Lives as the main Theme in 'Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression — and the Unexpected Solutions' by Johann Hari***

In his new book about the underlying causes of common mental illnesses and how to address them, bestselling author and award-winning journalist Johann Hari argues that depression and anxiety are a direct result of our cultural norms, societal expectations, and the way we

live our daily lives. Drawing from personal experience as well and interviews with social scientists actively working in the mental health field, Hari introduces readers to a whole new way of examining mental illness. Bold and thought-provoking, *Lost Connections* is a must-read for anyone trying to understand depression, anxiety, and how to address the two biggest issues threatening America's mental health. Hari says that the world is increasingly designed to depress us. Happiness isn't very good for the economy. If we were happy with what we had, why would we need more?

"I hate depression. I am scared of it. Terrified, in fact. But at the same time, it has made me who I am. And if – for me – it is the price of feeling life, it's a price always worth paying. I am satisfied just to be." 2018 —The demon came. 'Twas the year I lost a part of myself. My soul wept and mourned for that someone I once truly cherished — the previous me. Looking into the mirror, I saw nothing but hopelessness, worthlessness, and sadness in those eyes — bereft of joy and love. The demon succeeded — almost. Menacing and taunting, it dragged me helplessly into the insatiable abyss — the unfathomable, frigid depths of the ocean. The agonising pain was consuming every bit of my sanity. And I was



left wondering if ever my fall will ever be caught by someone or something. It was definitely my end — as I once saw in my dreams, precognition of my own death, my finality. As the demon plunged me into the murkiest depths, I told myself I needed to go back to where I came from. This is not the coda I was expecting and yet, the proverbial light seemed to be receding. Yes, it was dragging me into its deeper, darker, and suffocating embrace muting and subduing all the prismatic colours that once enveloped me. " All hope was nearly lost, yet I clung to that spark of light, saving most parts of myself that are slowly disintegrating and dissipating into that vast expanse of infinite darkness". (Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression — and the Unexpected Solutions)

In Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression — and the Unexpected Solutions Johann Hari says that if you have ever believed that a depressive person wants to be happy, you are wrong. They could not care less about the luxury of happiness. They just want to feel an absence of pain. He further says that to escape a mind on fire, where thoughts blaze and smoke like old possessions lost to arson, to be normal and as normal is impossible.

And now, here I am. Not the same and never will be, but now stronger and still keeping the demon at bay. Well, I think "it" is going to be a part of me anyway, being an empath and a highly sensitive individual all my life". (Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression — and the Unexpected Solutions)

Reading the book, Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression — and the Unexpected Solutions, gives a person comfort, hope, validates experience, and made him accept things that he cannot change and still be hopeful and stop "worrying about worrying" and all that. This is a book that is meant to be read by everyone — for those who wanted to understand what depression/anxiety is, for those whose light has been consumed by the darkness but are still looking for the momentary spark that will truly guide them into the light and out of the blue; and for those who are carers of depressed individuals.

According to Johann Hari that depression is an illness. Yet it doesn't come with a rash or a cough. It is hard to see, as it is generally invisible. Even though it is a serious illness it is also surprisingly hard for many sufferers to recognise it at first. Not because it doesn't feel bad – it does – but because that bad feeling seems unrecognisable, or can be confused with



other things.

**•Suicidal Tendency and a Moving Exploration of Depression, Isolation, Strength, and, ultimately, Hope as the Main Themes of My Heart and Other Black Holes by Jasmine Warga**

My Heart and Other Black Holes by Jasmine Warga is a thought provoking novel about mental health and mental illness where the main protagonist Aysel, a physics nerd, thinks her future is a black hole. She's terrified that she will turn out to be a monster like her father, who killed a local teen. She looks online for a suicide partner, someone who would plan with her and make her go through with it. She comes across a boy whose handle is Frozen Robot. In real life, his name is Roman, he's a year or so older than Aysel is, and lives only 15 minutes away from her small town of Langston, Kentucky. Roman is looking for someone to die with him on April 7, the anniversary of a horrible event in his life. This gives the teens less than a month to plan and prepare for their suicides. Aysel (who is Turkish and tells a classmate that her name rhymes with "gazelle") often references the black slug that is depression. It lives in her and eats up all the goodness and joy that there could be. While talking about her classmates

trying to decode poems by depressed poets, she thinks, "Anyone who has actually been that sad can tell you that there's nothing beautiful or literary or mysterious about depression." She goes on to say, "If I know anything about [depression], this is what I know: It's impossible to escape." There is a lot of this extremely honest talk about depression, something I appreciated. Roman needs Aysel to basically stand in as a new friend who will allow him to get out of the house long enough to kill himself. For the past year, his parents have watched him closely, taking away his driving privileges and even checking on him in the middle of the night. They know he's depressed and the fear what he might do. But if he has a new friend and acts "normal," he should be able to start getting out of the house more. Together, they form a weird and tense friendship. As they get to know each other and really talk about their lives, their pain, and their depression, they grow closer. All along Roman has been worried that Aysel will flake out on him, and when she begins to realize she might not want to go through with this, she wonders if she can turn Roman into a flake, too. Small peeks of humour and the slow friendship between the teens keeps this from being unbearably sad. Aysel is a great character. She thinks a lot about her depression and grows





over the course of the story. The writing is beautiful and the plotting is perfect—the countdown at the top of each chapter reminds us that even if they're having what feel like regular experiences and conversations, they are moving quickly toward their ends. A moving exploration of depression, isolation, strength, and, ultimately, hope. An author's note at the end talks about the depression, encouraging readers to treat suicidal thoughts as a medical emergency and to get help. Warga also addresses readers who think they might have a friend struggling with depression, and asks them to talk with the friend or an authority figure about it. Suicide prevention and counselling hotlines and websites are also appended.

### **Conclusion**

In these thought-provoking books about schizophrenia, anxiety, mental health and illness and depression, writers like Mira T. Lee, Johann Hari and Jasmine Warga has crafted a fearless narrative about what it is really like to grow up under the weight of mental illness, anxiety and depression based on the real-life experiences and events. A thoughtful adaptation of their own erratic novels include rich details of their shared family history, the cultural and historical

context, and their own experiences coming of age in the 21th century, when they were simply called "crazy" during a time when the whole world was still struggling with terms like "schizophrenic." Honest, heartbreaking, and often humorous, these remarkable books offers a window into an experience of mental illness that many people often never get the chance to see through. Similarly these novels looked at mental health issues through a gender-specific lens and sought to “inspire, educate and empower people in general and readers in particular to take charge of their mental health and cultivate resilience and well-being. These thought provoking novels made people feel like that they weren't alone to suffer this mental ailment but there are millions of other such people who have suffered and experienced it one way or the other and had overcome this deadly disease with the help of friends, family, love, sympathy and with the help of society.



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