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Exploring Adolescent Grief, Mental Health/Illness, Coping Mechanisms, and Recovery through Young Adult Literature 'Problem' Novels

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Exploring Adolescent Grief, Mental Health/Illness, Coping Mechanisms, and Recovery through
Young Adult Literature 'Problem' Novels

Honors Research Project

Department of English

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Introduction

In their November 2016 issue “Teen Depression and Anxiety: Why the Kids Are Not Alright,” *TIME Magazine* reckons with a troubling, yet at this point undeniable, reality: rates of mental illness in teens are on the rise. Citing data from national surveys conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as well as the National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH), the article reports that within the past year, 20% of boys and 40% of girls aged 12-17 experienced symptoms of depression, while about 3 million in total experienced a major depressive episode. When it comes to depression’s all too frequent companion, anxiety, 20% of boys and 30% of girls in the same age range had a diagnosable disorder within the last year. Mental health professionals believe that self-harm is also increasing, although it is harder to collect data on this phenomenon because victims deliberately keep these behaviors private (Schrobsdorff par. 6, 41). The recent spike of mental illness in teens is certainly a cause for concern, especially since rates of illness had plateaued during the 1980s with the introduction of SSRI’s like Prozac (Singal par. 9). It appears that some aspects of life for teens today, such as heightened pressure to excel at school/ extra-curriculars, as well as the significant amount of time they spend in online environments that can breed insecurity and act as host to vicious cyberbullying, are stressing teens out more than ever, creating an “epidemic” of anxiety and depression.

Fortunately, as rates of illness in teens have increased, so has the amount of reading material available for their age range with the proliferation of the new literary category “Young Adult literature.” This is literature which features a teenage protagonist and describes “initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world” (Carlson qtd. in Vanderstaay 48). YA literature, whose popularity has only grown since its emergence in the 1960s with classics such as *Catcher in the Rye*, offers an ever-growing body of text on how the adolescent mind perceives and processes life experiences.

The availability of reading material that caters to teens' psychological needs is crucial for a number of reasons. First and foremost, YA novels (especially those that address illness or trauma) offer suffering teens something they may not be able to access anywhere else: a "prolonged and authentic view into what it's like to be a teenager and to be dealing in some way with illness" (Monaghan 34). The process of building an emotional identification, of discovering parallels between their own experience and that of the protagonist, is therapeutic in that it helps to dispel feelings of isolation and loneliness. It shows readers they are not the only ones coping with mental anguish and may guide them towards strategies for healing and recovery (Heath and Wolf 147). In a world that still highly stigmatizes mental illnesses, stories that discuss them openly, honestly, and without judgment can penetrate the walls of shame and secrecy that society has constructed around them. The availability of thoughtful literature about the adolescent psyche is also critical for adults in that it can help them better understand a generation whose attitudes and behaviors often perplex them. In the face of trends among teens that can seem scary and bewildering, like self-harm, an enhanced understanding of the teenage perspective is of vital importance.

Many YA novels like these, the ones that frankly discuss mental illness in teens, the ones which are often branded as "dark" or "depressing" by their critics, are grouped under the umbrella category of "problem novel." Problem novels are those which depict a teen's first confrontation with a personal crisis, such as grief, abuse, or illness (Nelms, Nelms, & Horton 92). Despite the variety of issues represented in these novels and their popularity among teen readers, much of the recent commentary on problem novels (even, sometimes, on YA literature in general) is highly critical. Thacker, who claims he "know[s] problem novels," sweepingly defines them as "the ones where young people are abused, abandoned, drunk, or pregnant" (17). Another critic describes them as "narrower in focus" and "less rich in narrative tone" than regular realistic YA fiction novels, as though "the writers had begun with the problem rather than the plot or the characters" (Egoff qtd. in Feinberg par. 49). Parents worry that the dark content of these novels will "have detrimental

effects on a teen's developing understanding of self, relationships, and the condition of being ill" (Monaghan 33). The prevailing opinion seems to be that teenagers are not ready and, for that matter, do not need, to read literature so dismal and dark. What can they possibly gain from submergence in narrative worlds so dominated by pain and suffering?

Not every literary critic agrees that problem novels are inherently depressing and devoid of literary value. While acknowledging that some might be needlessly or overly bleak, Monaghan provides criteria for YA novels that deal effectively, or "productively," with mental illness. First, the protagonist must come across as a real teen, at the appropriate level of intellectual and psychological development for their age. Their experience must allow real teens (the readers) to find meaningful similarities to their own. The protagonist's progression from illness to recovery must adhere to a logical narrative. Finally, the illness or condition which the protagonist has been dealing with must be stated explicitly by the narrative's conclusion (39). When written tactfully and according to these criteria, YA problem novels can be productive in that they provide relatable and therapeutic stories for teens as well as education and insight for adults about the unique ways in which teens experience illness and recovery (34). These takeaways are invaluable to anyone seeking to understand and improve rates of mental illnesses in adolescents.

The teenagers who may have the most trouble articulating the nature of their distress to adults are those who have experienced a traumatic event for the first time. One's first confrontation with abuse, violence, or grief can make them particularly susceptible to depression/anxiety, self-harm, and other self-destructive behaviors such as isolation. A lack of resources combined with a long-standing stigma against candid discussions about mental illness results in many struggling teens failing to acquire the support they need and deserve. This is where YA literature which openly deals with adolescent trauma, such as those to be discussed in later sections, can play an important cultural role in bringing these underrepresented voices and stories to light.

To narrow the analysis and demonstrate how the consumption of a well written “problem novel” can be therapeutic to teens dealing with the particular mental condition addressed in the text, I will examine two recent releases whose young female narrators are coping with grief following the traumatic death of a parental figure: *Change Places With Me* (2016) by Lois Metzger and *We Are Okay* (2017) by Nina LaCour. The latter’s narrative begins just a few months after the death while the former finds the protagonist a few years after the fact and still reckoning with the grieving process. Even subtle variations in the narrative such as this are significant in speaking to the uniqueness of each adolescent’s experience and providing truly relatable stories.

Relatable stories about mental illness are paramount to breaking the stigma and enabling those who suffer to speak their truths rather than suffering in silence. In different ways, both of these novels provide a blueprint for recovery from a traumatic death that could be useful and helpful to readers who find themselves in similarly distressing circumstances. The therapeutic nature of these two stories suggests that literature and YA problem novels in particular can, and should continue to be, used in the prevention and treatment of mental illness in adolescents. **Both *Change Places With Me* and *We Are Okay* manage to be productive texts about mental illness through a few common threads to be examined: first, the narrators’ remarkable self-awareness of their mental states and attempts to conceal them from their friends and family; next, their tendency to process and cope with trauma by adopting a new self; and finally, the importance they attach to acknowledgement and understanding of their experiences (in other words, the elimination of stigma), rather than finding a “cure” for their afflictions. Grieving teens would relate well to both of these texts because they each trace a realistic progression from trauma/bereavement to recovery.**

***Change Places With Me* by Lois Metzger**

Lois Metzger's *Change Places With Me* addresses the trauma that occurs due to the unexpected death of a parental figure and its aftereffects that can persist years into the future. This novel features Rose (who also goes by Clara in Part II), a high schooler living in the near future (around 2029) whose father has died of a heart attack during her childhood. She lives with her stepmother Evelyn (whom she snidely refers to as "Evil Lynn" throughout much of the novel) and has decided to undergo experimental treatment for ongoing issues related to her grief. She consents to Memory Enhancement at a treatment center called "Forget-Me-Not." According to an advertisement, this procedure "simply dissociates the emotions you have from the memory itself, and replaces them with serenity and understanding" (Metzger 162). Supposedly, this treatment would keep all of Rose's memories of her father and his death intact but alter their emotional associations, so they would elicit not debilitating grief and depression but rather a resilient acceptance and determination to move on. Readers, as well as Rose herself, are unaware that she has undergone this procedure until the end of the novel when she experiences "breakthrough," or the re-emergence of memories of the Enhancement itself. This is dangerous in that it can render the procedure ineffective: according to Dr. Star, whom Rose sees at Forget-Me-Not, "it's crucial that you don't remember going through the ME procedure. This is because your conscious mind simply wouldn't accept the fact that we can accomplish in hours what usually requires months, if not years, of psychological treatment" (161).

The story is not told chronologically---Part I, "Forget-Me-Not," features the brand-new Rose right after her ME procedure; Part II, "The Glass Coffin," flashes back to the past and unveils her mental state before the treatment; and Part III, "You Are Here," returns to the present, when Rose is confronting the fact that her memory has been enhanced and facing an uncertain future. But despite the non-linear narrative and the elements of science fiction, Rose's story contains multitudes of potentially helpful material for real teen readers also experiencing mental distress as a result of grief.

Self-awareness:

One aspect of mental illness that adults and adolescents alike report experiencing is a kind of “split” between the part of their brain that is ill and the part that, due to stigma, works to conceal evidence of the illness from others. Thus there exists an emotional detachment between the inner and outer self, which is dangerous because healthy recovery usually requires the opposite: the willingness to articulate inner pain to the others on the outside, or in other words, to allow oneself to become emotionally vulnerable. For teens, this split is often exacerbated by feelings of guilt that they are not justified in their pain since they often do have adults in their lives who genuinely care about them. Many of them can identify with this cycle of guilt and secrecy regarding mental afflictions---contrary to stereotypes of today’s teens being too coddled, less resilient, and less considerate of others, many teens coping with illness are actually acutely aware of how their condition is impacting them and make an effort to cultivate a socially “acceptable” outer persona. Keeping up appearances despite inner pain or distress requires a great deal of self-awareness, which we repeatedly witness in Rose’s character throughout the story of her grieving process.

Rose’s story begins in Part II, “The Glass Coffin,” in which she goes by Clara, her old name, and is trapped in a deep, socially debilitating depression. She communicates with her stepmother Evelyn almost exclusively through notes left on the kitchen table, as she has vowed “to never talk to Evil Lynn again, or only when she absolutely [has] to, and never about her dad, not one word” (Metzger 101). She banishes her childhood friend Kim from her life by refusing lunch invitations, instead “planting herself at a corner table with a view of a brick wall” (104). At first her impersonal, closed-off behavior towards her stepmother and her peers might come across as rather callous and insensitive, but as her narration continues, we see that Clara is actually quite aware of others’ perceptions of her. Her self-isolation is not a strategy to shun others but rather to shield them from the ugliness of her own emotional pain.

She articulates her fear of emotional vulnerability in indirect ways which nonetheless reveal her emotional self-awareness. First, during a lesson on frog dissection in biology class, Clara is deeply uncomfortable with cutting her virtual frog open. She thinks, "*This isn't the way it's supposed to go....The outside is supposed to stay outside so the inside can stay inside*" (107). Later in the same lesson, she recalls learning about "billion-year-old rocks, and how when meteors fell to earth, those rocks got thrown up to the surface, turned upside down, and thrust into the light when they should have stayed buried forever" (108). And finally, when she agrees to let her old friend and aspiring makeup artist Kim practice on her, she readily rejects her assertion that makeup is supposed to reveal what a person is feeling inside: "Kim [has] it so exactly wrong. The outside [is] meant to protect and hide and deny the very existence of the inside" (139). In therapeutic settings, Clara is true to her word and remains stubbornly silent. "She's not willing to do any of it," one therapist informs her stepmother (103). Another, a doctor at a "biofeedback" clinic, refuses to give a refund after Clara remains obstinately silent and uncooperative during her appointment (136). It is safe to say Clara would not have such a preoccupation with keeping emotions buried "inside" if she were not aware of the ways in which her grief has hindered her ability to enjoy life and connect with others. Even as she endeavors to bury them, she exhibits a keen awareness of her own emotions.

Clara's fear of opening up is fully realized after Kim finishes her makeover---she has been transformed into a sad, lonely old woman, a character in the upcoming school play. In the mirror, Clara sees "her face overtaken by wrinkles and age spots, with a broken nose, a black eye, and the remnants of a wound near her lower lip." Horrified, she realizes, "*The whole rest of my life will be spent catching up to the image in the mirror until the outside matches the inside*" (Metzger 142). Her awareness of the severity of her grief constantly cautions her against expressing how she really feels to her stepmother, her peers, and even therapists and psychologists.

We witness Clara's journey to emotional self-awareness not only in her refusal to open up but also in her certainty about what it would take to get her to feel better. Walking home from an

appointment, she accidentally bumps into a girl her age and is taken aback by her style, beauty, and kindness. As this girl smiles at her and apologizes for running into her, Clara feels “an intense surge from her innermost core to the outermost reaches of her being: / *Change places with me*” (Metzger 122). She imagines the girl has lots of friends who hang out together all the time, that she has a reputation for kindness and generosity, and that her parents are proud of her. Clara wants to be her “with everything in her and more” (123). She believes that the assumption of an entirely new identity is what it would take to make her appealing to others, to transform her into someone who does not need to bury what she feels. She is so firm in this conviction that once she finds a way to make it a reality through Memory Enhancement, she does not rest until her stepmother consents to the procedure. At her appointment, she states on camera, “I just want to say that I want ME. I want it more than anything. I want it with every cell in my body” (164). She is emotionally aware enough to know why past treatments have not worked on her and why this one has the potential for success. At this point, readers suspect that ME will only further bury emotions of Clara’s that badly need to be expressed openly and in a vulnerable setting in order to be truly resolved.

Even after her procedure and the dramatic transformation in her personality it causes, Rose (the name Clara adopts as soon as she awakens the following day) is still careful to keep secret any indication that anything is amiss. Of course she does not remember having undergone ME, but like her old self, she is reluctant to admit to emotional distress. In the first chapter, she wakes and for a second and sees “nothing but a cloud of red light” (3). As it turns out, this is a side effect of ME, but even as it worsens, appearing brighter and for longer durations, “like the wrong kind of alarm clock,” she does not admit it to anyone (18, 33, 51, 69). This strange red light is a metaphor for her still unresolved emotional pain, which never entirely leaves her. For instance, while reflecting on how lonely her widowed neighbor Mrs. Moore must be, she thinks, “In a small corner of her mind, she [knows] exactly what that [feels] like, to want something so desperately and have no idea how to get it” (43). While out with friends who are recounting the story of a family dog’s death, she

thinks it sounds “awful. Never getting a chance to say goodbye” (71). These private thoughts indicate that she is aware of the emotional distress her subconscious is still experiencing underneath the façade of her new happy, sunny personality.

Adoption of a new self:

Another one of Rose’s (not entirely healthy) coping mechanisms that bereaved teens might identify with is her adoption of a totally new identity. Grieving as a teenager is unique in that they are in need of emotional support but at the same time have arrived at a developmental stage when they are supposed to be gaining independence from their family unit. This conundrum sometimes causes grieving teens to go to extremes to assert that desired independence and prove that they are successfully developing despite the trauma of the death (Robin & Omar 99). From the very first page of Rose’s narrative, we see her efforts to abandon aspects of her old self: she thinks, “*I’m Rose, in my own bed---and in a granny nightgown, ugh. Gotta get rid of this thing*” (Metzger 3). At the breakfast table with her stepmother Evelyn, she demands to know, “Why should you be stuck with something that no longer fits? I wasn’t born with the name Rose, but it’s perfect for me” (5). At school, she further explains to Kim how her new name offers her an extra layer of protection, stating, “It suits me, like a second skin” (20).

Rose’s identity transformation does not stop at her name. She begins to prioritize her appearance in particular ways. Impulsively she decides to cut her hair, instructing the stylist on the “exact, even, almost chin length she wanted,” cautioning her to not cut off too much so she can tuck it behind her ear if she so desires (26). Once her hair is cut and dyed to her satisfaction, she wanders to a thrift store, insisting that she *has* to have a jean jacket, “but not just any old jean jacket. It [has] to suit the new haircut, complement it” (27). She also takes to wearing Evelyn’s fashionable clothes---“basics, like pressed black pants and tailored blouses, and lots of colors, nothing too loud or gaudy, soft purples and browns and blues and pale reds, and a bunch of

different textures, mohair sweaters, corduroy shirts, silky shirts, knit shawls that [drape] her shoulders, a velvet jacket that [feels] wonderfully soft” (32). As Evelyn helps her into a colorful outfit, Rose expresses regret that she “got stuck on those old, drab clothes for a while” (33).

Rose’s new appearance gives her the confidence to change how she engages with those around her as well. From the flippant way her lab partners, Selena and Astrid, treat her, we can assume they have previously not gotten along. But Rose does not let their standoffish behavior inhibit her from engaging the girls in conversation and even trying to forge a friendship with them: “I heard you guys talking about Halloween. Why don’t you come to a party at my house? You know, you and a bunch of other kids,” she suggests (Metzger 33). The girls’ dumbfounded reactions indicate that this behavior is out of character for Rose. She hosts the Halloween party and starts hanging out regularly with Selena and Astrid. She fantasizes about the social life she’d like her new self to cultivate, imagining “the three of them coming back here [a Korean restaurant] with Kim, and they’d do stuff outside of school too, go to a movie, listen to music, or just hang out---a new group of best friends” (45). Comments from her stepmother Evelyn have led readers to infer that Rose used to fear animals, but around this time, she also lands a job at a local animal hospital, where she wastes no time in trying to befriend her older coworker, Stacey, as well. Just a few days after they meet, she insists that Stacey attend her Halloween party and meet all of her friends (59).

Despite Rose’s cheery narration, readers quickly suspect something is awry with her mental state. We witness the tenuous nature of Rose’s “new identity” whenever she expresses frustration with people who know her well commenting on the transformation in her character. When Evelyn remarks that Rose does not usually talk so much during their meals together, she responds with, “Evelyn didn’t really need to call attention to the fact that they usually ate in silence, did she? Especially since they were having such an enjoyable, relaxed talk now” (Metzger 11). She echoes herself later after her neighbor Mrs. Moore comments on the change in her demeanor: “Why mention something from the past if it was no longer true in the present? Such a waste of time...as if

you moved to a new house and someone kept pointing out, 'You used to live over there,' like you didn't know" (14-15). She is bothered by the cafeteria cashier, Cooper's, observations that her smile looks "kind of Photoshopped or something" and that she has been as quiet as a "silent movie star...before now, that is" (19). When Kim mentions that she and Rose used to barely speak, Rose is again perplexed: "[She is] fully aware that she and Kim [haven't] been that close recently. Why did she have to bring it up?" (29).

Rose seems to have a bad visceral reaction to any reminder of who she was before the adoption of her new happy-go-lucky, outgoing personality. It is easy to empathize with her, given the brief flashes she allows us into her past life, which betray a heavy, persistent sadness. She admits to previously having always done crossword puzzles "by herself, off at a corner table that faced a brick wall" (36). Chatting with Stacey at work, she lets it slip that she's seen "so many therapists, you wouldn't believe it" (59). At her Halloween party, when she watches Selena cover her ears, she recalls doing the same thing as a child: "holding her hands over her ears, pressing hard, shutting her eyes tight---anything to blot out the world, make it go away" (71-72). Rose's somber memories of the not-so-distant past seem at odds with her cheery disposition---a contradiction that teens dealing with grief may identify with quite well.

Acknowledgement/articulation of illness:

Finally, for a grieving teenager, the most therapeutic part of Rose's story would likely be its resolution, when she comes to terms with the fact that the treatment she had chosen for herself was unhealthy and that she will need to become vulnerable and directly confront her pain in order to move on---not bury it behind either excessive sullenness or cheerfulness. In Part III, Rose visits Forget-Me-Not and learns that she has experienced breakthrough, or the emergence of memories of the Memory Enhancement procedure. When she learns she won't be able to have a corrective procedure until the following Saturday, she is devastated. She grows distraught and confused about

her true identity, describing herself as “no-longer-Clara, not-yet-Rose” (Metzger 176). However, it is during this week of confusion and intense emotion that Rose arguably progresses the most in her healing process.

When she initially begins to understand her predicament, she is completely shaken: “panic fill[s] her throat, and waves of sadness [wash] over her, and there [is] anger, too, coursing through her veins” (Metzger 163). She finds it is “too much for her, what she [is] feeling on one side, and who she [is] supposed to be on the other. *Rose*” (173). After pleading unsuccessfully to Dr. Star to give her an earlier appointment, she returns home with Evelyn, totally conflicted about who she is and how she is supposed to think and act. It is in this uncomfortable “in-between” state that Rose finally begins to feel and express emotions that Clara had never allowed her to. She “rummage[s] around inside herself, wanting to feel what Clara had felt, and not felt, all that time in the glass coffin, after suddenly losing her dad, and not having Kim, either, and living with Evil Lynn all those years” and resolves to “somehow try to feel closer to Clara, a lost soul if ever there was one” (177).

During the ensuing days, Rose/Clara feels emotions, both pleasant and painful, more intensely than she ever has. When her boss Dr. Lola asks her if she can come in to walk dogs on her day off, she is surprised by the heat of her anger, “like a lake of lava seething inside her” (Metzger 191). She is able to recognize that the anger is Clara’s and that it is a projection of the pain she feels over having never had the happy childhood that Dr. Lola did: “What was it about having a blissful, carefree childhood that made someone think she could snap her fingers and get what she wanted?” (191). After waking from a dream about her father, she allows herself to properly feel grief for the first time as well, which she describes as “a wrenching pain unlike anything she’d ever felt” and “a fist...tightened around her heart” (205). As awful as this pain is to experience, it is what finally allows her to gain some closure. Fully present in her grief, she feels “close to Clara here in this place, and it [feels] like a place, where Clara had never been” (205). Shortly after this episode, she wakes Evelyn up in the middle of the night to inform her, “I’m canceling it,” referring to her upcoming

corrective procedure at Forget-Me-Not (209). This decision signifies Rose/Clara's decision to live in a more emotionally honest, vulnerable, and healthy way, even if that means feeling the full magnitude of her pain, rather than hiding it behind an outer layer of stubborn sadness or blind cheeriness. It is this honesty which will allow her to process and better cope with her emotions surrounding her father's death. She commemorates this milestone in her mental health journey with yet another name change, although this one feels much more natural and less forced. Talking to Evelyn, she places her hand on her chest and announces, "Cora...my name" (210). Cora, a combination of Clara and Rose, seems an appropriate name for her as she tries to reconcile her 'old' and 'new' selves.

As gratifying as it is to witness Cora's recovery as told in her own words, *Change Places With Me* also includes the specific articulation of her illness that Monaghan requires for a problem novel to productively discuss mental health issues. We receive some clues from Evelyn's research into childhood grief. Clara has revealed that her stepmother has an entire bookshelf of child development books, in which she's underlined phrases that apply to her, such as, "*Some psychiatrists believe that true mourning is not possible until adolescence; only then can the older child process the younger child's pain.*" She also happens upon the phrase, "*move beyond shock and numbness to despair and sorrow, and finally to remembering and mastering the events with an eye toward the reorientation and equilibrium of the self and object*" (Metzger 121). At one of her many appointments, her doctor confirms her stepmother's suspicions and tells Clara that she most likely has a severe case of adjustment disorder, to which she responds, "So, it had a name" (134). This comment might seem rather offhand or flippant, but it actually articulates the therapeutic value of identifying and learning about one's own mental health condition quite well. Once one has a name for what is going on in their mind, it is much easier to integrate their experiences within the context of others' and find strategies for healthy coping and recovery.

***We Are Okay* by Nina LaCour**

Of course, not every adolescent's experience with grief and recovery will follow the same narrative---this is why it is critical for teenagers to have access to a variety of stories that highlight the individual nature of mental health/illness. Although some might relate well to Clara/Rose's prolonged grief and adjustment disorder, many others will experience the death of a loved one for the first time as a teenager. For the latter group, Nina LaCour's *We Are Okay* might be a more relatable and therapeutic text to consume. This story is narrated by Marin Delaney, a university student whose trauma stemming from her absent father, late mother, and beloved but recently deceased grandfather come to a head during winter break after her first semester at school in New York City.

In addition to severe grief, depression, and anxiety, Marin is also harboring confusion and anger over some of the ways her grandfather dealt with her mother's death. She learns that he spent hours writing letters to his dead daughter (letters which were purportedly for his long-distance girlfriend) and had secretly hoarded all of her old clothes, books, toys, and photos in a closet in his room. Marin, who has craved a stronger connection to her mother as long as she can remember, is justifiably angry. When she looks back on the deception, she rants, "He had all of it. He had pictures of me and pictures of her. He had a fucking museum back there and he never showed me any of it. I could have *known* her" (LaCour 175). The revelation of a hidden stockpile of her mom's things makes Gramps's death doubly traumatizing for Marin.

The narrative opens to a rather dismal scene in her dorm room, just after all of the other students have left for winter break. Marin, who no longer has any family in her hometown in California since Gramps's death, has decided to spend the month-long holiday alone in the dorm. Feeling stifled by the quiet during her first night on her own, she ponders sadly, "All of this is my home now....I'm taking in the stillness of that, the sharp truth of it. My eyes are burning, my throat is tight. If only I had something to take the edge off the loneliness" (LaCour 7). She surrenders to the sadness just a few sentences later: "I know that I am always alone, even when surrounded by

people, so I let the emptiness in" (7). The only break in her isolation will come during the three days before Christmas, when her childhood best friend Mabel, whom she has not spoken to since Gramps's death, is due for a visit. Marin is excited to see her friend but also dreads her questions, afraid they will trigger memories of the death and of the emotionally difficult summer that preceded it.

Like *Change Places, We Are Okay* is not told chronologically: the chapters alternate between the present, during Mabel's visit to Marin's dorm, and the past, the months leading up to Gramps's death and the beginning of the fall semester. As the narrative progresses, we come to an increasingly nuanced understanding of why Marin's grief has manifested the way it has. Although her circumstances are certainly different than Clara/Rose's, at least in terms of age at the time of the death and the amount of time that has elapsed since, Marin's narrative also contains the key elements of self-awareness, the adoption of a new self, and the eventual articulation and acknowledgement of the particular mental disruption that make it a relatable story for grieving teenagers.

Self-awareness:

Marin is another teenage protagonist in whom we can locate an awareness of the disconnect between her actual emotional state and the outward persona she maintains to deflect emotional attention from herself, so as to not let on that anything is amiss. We know that as a young adult, Marin has a psychological need to assert independence and display emotional resiliency, in spite of the severity of the distressing emotions she is coping with. Her entry into a totally new chapter of her life, in a new city surrounded by all new people, only intensifies this desire. But even as she fits in and gets through the days and weeks well enough, Marin is still acutely aware of the ways she fails to perform "normalcy." Much of the novel's opening is a reflection on how she is noticeably different than her fellow students despite her best efforts to blend in.

Marin's social life is almost nonexistent apart from occasional meals and excursions with her kind roommate, Hannah, "and [Hannah's friends]"---she notably does not call them her own friends, signifying an awareness of her social isolation (LaCour 67). She notes her desperation not to call attention to herself during these get-togethers, how she has to remind herself "to act normal, to laugh along with everyone else, to say something once in a while" (67). She is quite observant of her peers' behaviors and cognizant of how sharply her own habits differ. Walking past the communal dorm kitchen that she has admittedly never used, she muses, "I think of it as the place girls in clubs bake brownies for movie nights, or a gathering spot for groups of friends who feel like cooking an occasional dinner as a break from the dining hall" (12-13). Even unremarkable social interactions like these have become foreign to Marin, who says her evening routine consists of "Watering my plant. Making ramen. Cleaning my yellow bowls night after night after night" (72). We can sense her discomfort and frustration at the contrast between her and her peers, and more so at her inability to bridge that distance due to her grief, anxiety, and depression. At one point she admits, "Every time I think about [Gramps], a black pit blooms in my stomach and breathing becomes a struggle;" at another, she reflects dismally on "the exhaustion that comes with knowing that something will have to happen next, and then after that, and on and on until it's over" (44, 114). As she regularly faces mental anguish this intense, it is no wonder she cannot readily conjure the emotional energy to behave like a "normal" university student.

Still, this emotional distress does not stop her from trying. During a notable scene at the novel's opening, Marin makes a desperate attempt to distract from her evident psychological distress by decorating her side of the dorm room in a way that suggests normalcy and stability. As she prepares for Mabel's three-day visit, she remarks that "it only takes a moment to notice the contrast between [Hannah's] side and mine. Other than my plant and the bowls, even my desk is bare....and when I turn back, I'm faced with the worst of it all: my bulletin board without a single thing on it" (LaCour 9). Fortunately she has spent an entire semester observing other students, so

she knows exactly how to remedy the problem. “I need photographs and souvenirs, concert ticket stubs, evidences of inside jokes,” she thinks. Then, in the same breath, she realizes, “Most of these are things I don’t have” (9). Undeterred, she spends several hours handwriting song lyrics, printing pretty pictures of healing crystals, and printing out quotes by an essayist she enjoys, in the hope of constructing a “passable” bulletin board. But in the end she realizes these efforts are futile:

“Everything is too crisp, too new. Each paper is the same white. It doesn’t matter that the quotes are interesting and the pictures are pretty. It looks desperate” (10). This realization is a reflection of Marin’s self-awareness more generally. She can try her best to cultivate a socially acceptable outer persona, but as long as the unaddressed emotional pain is there, the façade will remain unconvincing.

Another manifestation of Marin’s self-awareness is a heightened sensitivity to how her mental state and behaviors/actions affect those she cares about. For instance, she frequently experiences all-consuming guilt over the silent treatment she gave Mabel throughout the majority of the semester. She “torture[s]” herself by scrolling through the hundreds of unanswered texts from her friend, “Asking if I’m okay. Saying she’s thinking of me. Wondering where the fuck am I, whether I’m angry, if we can talk, if she can visit, if I miss her” (LaCour 13). Even after the two have reunited and made up, Marin still reckons with a “sick feeling, the whisper that I am a waste of her money her, time her effort...I didn’t answer her texts. I didn’t return her calls or even listen to her voice mails. She came all the way to New York to invite me home with her, and I can’t even tell her yes. *A waste, a waste*” (90-91). Mabel has indeed invited Marin to spend the rest of the break at her parents’ house in their California hometown, but again, her emotional awareness prevents her from doing the “normal” thing and saying yes. Guilt-ridden over her refusal of what “should be so simple to say yes” to, she still concludes sadly, “I can’t say yes. / I have only just learned how to be here. Life is paper-thin and fragile. Any sudden change could rip it wide open” (93). Still reeling from the painful memories of Gramps’s death, she knows going home in her current emotional state “would

be flying into ruins...I can't even think about my old house or Ocean Beach without panic thrumming through me" (94). Marin exhibits a persistent frustration at how her mental illness prevents her from acting unaffected by her grief for her grandfather. Like Clara, she copes in part by attempting to revamp, or at least re-contextualize, her entire identity.

Adoption of a new identity:

Throughout *We Are Okay*, Marin gives readers the impression that she has worked hard to become a "new" person since her arrival at university. We learn that in her mind, the adoption/acceptance of this new identity is the only way to survive in her new environment in spite of her grief. She can even recall the precise day she chose to abandon her "old" self, the person she associates with expressing her grief openly. She explains at the novel's opening, "In this place [university], my history only goes three months back" (LaCour 6). And when we learn of the emotional anguish that preceded this decision, we might not blame her for her desire to cut ties with the past.

For Marin, Gramps's death was traumatizing in that it was unexpected but also in that at the same time, she uncovered just how many secrets he'd been keeping from her. She recalls the rash decisions she made after the jarring discovery of her mother's things in his room, the grief-stricken two weeks she spent in a dirty motel after fleeing town: "instead of grieving like a normal person, I ran away to New York even though the dorms wouldn't be open for two weeks. I stayed in a motel and kept the television on all day. I ate all my meals in the same twenty-four-hour diner and I kept no semblance of a schedule" (LaCour 45). Her mental state only deteriorates as the days pass, until she develops a genuine fear of becoming "at home" among the other "broken" residents at the motel, who stare vacantly out the windows and scream at all hours of day and night (182). "Sometimes I felt like I understood what [they were] trying to say," she explains to Mabel later (131). She is determined to shed (at least publicly) her brokenness upon her arrival at her dorm just days later.

Marin gives herself a kind of pep talk as she is on her way to meet her roommate: "I was a normal girl. I was the kind who showered daily and wore clean clothes and answered the phone when it rang. When danger approached, I crossed the street. When mornings came, I ate breakfast. / This person who stood in the doorway wasn't me" (LaCour 200). Here, she is making a conscious decision to adopt a new, "normal" identity as a survival tactic, and she quickly acts on her desire to look the part. In the dorm bathroom, she comes face to face with herself for the first time in a while. She says that "the girl in the mirror [is] feral. Puffy face. Wild eyes, greasy hair....I [am] shocked" (200). Even after a long, hot shower, she is still uneasy about the "wildness in [her] eyes," afraid it will betray how she truly feels. She rushes to the student store and impulsively buys over three hundred dollars' worth of new clothes, and when she returns to the dorm to check on her laundry, she decides to throw the old clothes away rather than put them in the dryer (203). She is clearly quite serious about becoming a new person who is able to fend off mental anguish, in order to navigate life at university successfully. After all of her efforts, she regards herself in the mirror and decides she can pass as a typical freshman: "My hair [is] clean and straight, still a little damp. My clothes fit me fine. I [smell] like a spa. I [look] like any other girl" (203).

Of course, taking such drastic measures to blend in will have consequences, since Marin, similarly to Clara, has simply buried the emotional pain rather than taking healthy steps to address it. She is now grieving not only her grandfather but also an older, more innocent version of herself, as well as her old friendship with Mabel. Guilt and regret over losing touch with her past self are recurring feelings for Marin throughout the novel. She realizes just how dramatically she has changed when Mabel comments on her disappearance at the end of the summer. She begins to protest that she didn't simply *vanish* but then realizes Mabel is right, that "the girl who hugged her good-bye before she left for Los Angeles, who laced fingers with her at the last bonfire of the summer and accepted shells from almost-strangers, who analyzed novels for fun and lived with her grandfather in a...house in the Sunset that often smelled like cake" has, indeed, "disappeared"

(LaCour 46-47). As much as this realization upsets her, she also feels it was necessary to survive the semester. After her firm resolution to act normal and blend in, it was like she was “a stranger with a secondhand phone and someone named Mabel had the wrong number... / That girl she was trying to reach...was gone now” (119). She further explains, “I had to deny all of it [the past], because it was part of a life that was over.” Nonetheless, in Mabel’s presence she “can feel the ghost of [her] creeping back. *Remember me?* she’s asking” (119).

Marin realizes that getting in touch with this ghost, with the old self she has attempted to bury, might not be a bad idea. Although the adoption of a new identity allowed her to navigate her first semester and survive, there are aspects of herself that she regrets losing, as well as painful emotions resulting from the traumatic death that remain unaddressed. In order to truly heal, she will need to willingly engage with her past and work through her grief.

Acknowledgement/articulation of illness

Throughout her narrative, Marin gradually opens up to the audience about the long-standing patterns of emotional neglect that she experienced under her grandfather’s care, which help to elucidate why her grief for him seems so profound and all-encompassing at times. These revelations about her past life are ultimately crucial to both Marin’s recovery and to the story’s resolution. It is through articulating her painful experiences and their effects that she begins to process them and move from a place of trauma to recovery.

Through Marin’s memories of and flashbacks to her past, we learn that although Gramps was always loving and well-intentioned, he has inflicted some serious emotional damage upon his only granddaughter. The most egregious flaw in his parenting style is his refusal to open up about the past, which upsets Marin because she has so few memories of her mother before she died to begin with. In fact, sometimes she feels they are not even real memories, just “feelings that may have only been inventions” (LaCour 34). But Gramps is adamant: he rants to a counselor who suggests he talk to his granddaughter more about the past, insisting that she is being entirely

insensitive and inappropriate, even though Marin secretly wishes he would take her advice (33-34). One instance that speaks volumes about his closed-off approach is when Marin asks him if he has a baby picture of her to include in her class's senior yearbook. Even posing the question is a nerve-wracking experience. She "shift[s] [her] weight from one foot to the other" and "hear[s] her voice go high-pitched and shaky" (59). He doesn't react well. He makes a begrudging promise to look through some storage for old photos but the next day reports shortly that he couldn't find anything. (Of course, after his death Marin learns he actually had entire piles of pictures stowed away in his closet.) The distance between Marin and her grandfather is not only emotional but physical. She explains that while Gramps was alive, he never went into her room and she never went into his (LaCour 21). She recalls the shock and confusion of her high school friends when she mentioned to them at a party that she rarely goes in the back of her own house. She remembers making excuses (his old age and need for rest, respect for his privacy), but internally she wonders "why I tried to be quiet when I walked past his rooms" (85).

The distance that Gramps has wedged between them, whether consciously or not, has negative psychological effects on Marin that only serve to exacerbate her grief after his death. First, she experiences frequent guilt that she had not been an adequate companion for Gramps at the end of his life, that perhaps she only brought him pain and reminders of what he'd rather not remember. For instance, after he tells her he has not found any baby pictures, her initial feeling is shame. She asks herself worriedly, "Did I dredge up memories he'd worked hard to forget? Did I drive him out...with my request?" (62). Her irrational fears rise again when Gramps confesses that he "would be lost" without his penpal/sweetheart Birdie. Marin takes the comment personally, critical of herself for not being "enough of a companion" or "any kind of anchor," but she "swallow[s] the hurt" so as to not upset her grandfather (122-23). She wonders if it were not for his responsibility for her if Gramps would move to be closer to Birdie or to see the Rocky Mountains, but she never has the courage to ask him directly before he is gone (55).

Another detrimental emotional effect of Gramps's lifelong distance and secretiveness is Marin's inability to properly mourn his death. Grieving him is impossible because she cannot take solace in happy memories or gain any closure; her mind is already occupied with figuring out who he really was and processing the ways he neglected her while he was alive. She angrily ruminates on actions he could have and *should* have taken that would have made his death easier for her to process. Reflecting on the photos he kept hidden away, she thinks, "he should have sat next to me and shown me. he should have said, *Now, I think this was the time that ... or, Oh yes, I remember this day ...* He should have told me all the ways in which I reminded him of her. He should have helped me remember her. He never should have let me forget" (LaCour 196). She desperately tries to explain this profound pain to Mabel, crying, "None of it was real" (163). In other words, she fears that since there is so much he never shared with her that she never *really* knew him at all. She asks herself, "[H]ow do I mourn a stranger? And if the person I loved wasn't even a person, then how can he be dead?" We can see now that throughout her semester, Marin has been unable to process her grief because she has not yet processed her fear that the relationship with Gramps was not genuine, or "real," in the first place. It is the articulation of this fear, however, which allows her to realize what she was missing for all those years and finally understand her current emotional needs.

Towards the novel's conclusion, Marin finally confronts her fear and insecurity directly rather than hiding it behind an adopted identity. Reflecting on the past few years of her life, she admits, "I was afraid of my loneliness. And how I'd been tricked. And the way I'd convinced myself of so much: that I wasn't sad, that I wasn't alone. I was afraid of the man who I'd loved, and how he had been a stranger" (LaCour 210). She finally experiences sadness and anger about her grandfather's emotional neglect instead of making excuses for it: "I was afraid of the way we'd lived without opening doors. I was afraid we had never been at home with each other. I was afraid of the lies I'd told myself. The lies he'd told me. I was afraid...*all of it* had meant nothing" (211). The chapter that follows these painful admissions consists of just a single sentence---perhaps the most

heart-breaking admission of all: "I am afraid he never loved me" (212). Within the context of these realizations about her past, Marin's unhealthy/misguided coping mechanisms begin to make more sense. Truly grieving would have required confronting not only the death of Gramps but also that of many illusions surrounding her childhood and adolescence. It is unsurprising that during the semester, she channeled her emotional energy not towards understanding the past but towards constructing a new future.

Now that Marin has articulated and acknowledged the ways her grandfather's emotional neglect has complicated her grief (put more simply, now that she has opened herself up emotionally to the past), both she and the reader realize what she needs now in order to actually start to recover---not just survive. We see that she harbors a profound emptiness due to the absence of any real family, as well as the knowledge that the small one she had had was not exactly the most nurturing. We also understand that some of these revelations/admissions regarding her past are still very new and overwhelming for Marin, that she could use some validation from an outside source. At this point we may have given up on a happy (or at least redemptive) ending for this protagonist, but fortunately Mabel and her family are able to anticipate Marin's emotional needs. Mabel has left for the airport after her three-day visit, supposedly to catch a flight back home, but really she went to meet her parents, Ana and Javier, who have flown in so they can all celebrate Christmas together in Marin's dorm. When she sees them arriving in a cab from the window in her room, Marin, who has been feeling more isolated than ever, rushes outside to meet them. She does not realize how much she had been craving their company until she is wrapped up in their arms, "saying thank you, over and over, saying it so many times that I can't make myself stop" (218).

Mabel's family's unannounced visit is not the only surprise or show of emotional support they have in store for Marin. During their stay, they provide desperately needed validation of her feelings and experiences from the past few months. When she expresses worry over the trouble they have gone to at her expense, Mabel is quick to reassure: "We all understand. It makes sense

why you don't want to go back yet" (LaCour 223). Even this simple statement goes a long way in making Marin feel supported---she sees that her trepidation surrounding her hometown is valid and not an irrational coping mechanism rooted in avoidance. She has even admitted that she will consider going home to California again, "someday" (186).

It is Mabel's mother Ana, a peripheral character up to this point, who eases Marin's grief and loneliness the most, again by providing emotional validation. In a private conversation, she acknowledges that Marin has indeed been "betrayed" by Gramps. Her eyes "bear into" Marin's when she explains that although her grandfather loved her, she was "alone for longer than [she] realized." She emphasizes that Marin's grief has and will continue to change her but that in the end, "you're still you" (232). We know that Marin has made many of these realizations for herself already, but hearing them repeated aloud to her from a trusted adult eases her remaining guilt and doubt. Finally, Ana gives her the best Christmas gift she could have asked for: an invitation to be a member of their family (232). She explains to Marin, "I wanted to be your mother. From the first night I met you, I wanted that" (231). After some hesitation, she accepts with a simple "yes" on the final page of her story (234). Even though her narrative only began a few days previously, we can feel how far Marin has come in her recovery. After all, at the novel's opening, she was completely closed off, unwilling to engage with the past, and trapped in self-imposed isolation. Now, she is ready to enter a new chapter and truly work through her grief.

Marin's narrative certainly differs from Clara/Rose's in significant ways---the circumstances surrounding the death of their respective parental figures are each quite unique and thus uniquely challenging. But both narratives grant us access to the mind of a grieving teenager, who moves from a denial/suppression of her feelings under the guise of a newly minted identity, to a difficult engagement with unpleasant emotions with the help of friends and family, and finally to an acknowledgement of what has happened, how it has affected her, and what she will need to do to properly grieve and regain mental health.

Conclusion:

As we have seen, Metzger's *Change Places With Me* and LaCour's *We Are Okay* are YA problem novels which successfully depict adolescent grief and recovery. They each adhere to Monaghan's criteria for narratives that deal productively with mental illness: they both feature protagonists whose level of psychological development is age-appropriate and believable; they contain characters and settings that are comparable to real teens and their worlds; their progression from illness to recovery follows a realistic narrative timeline; and finally, the specific sources of their psychological pain are articulated and addressed by their stories' conclusions. Both narratives grant us access to the mind of a grieving teenager, who moves from a denial/suppression of her feelings under the guise of a newly minted identity, to a difficult engagement with unpleasant emotions with the help of friends and family, and finally to an acknowledgement of what has happened, how it has affected her, and what she will need to do to properly grieve and regain mental health.

While the parallels between these two novels are certainly meaningful, the ways they differ are also important in that they speak to the uniqueness of every teen's (and indeed, every *one's*) reckoning with trauma and psychological distress. One of our protagonists is in high school, while one has just started university. One is dealing with severe adjustment disorder years after the death, while the other is experiencing grief for the first time. Finally, in addition to her grief, one is dealing with a strained daughter-stepmother relationship, while the other is trying to repair a childhood friendship. These variations may not seem too significant, but they all broaden the representation of grieving teens in literature, which makes it all the more likely that everyone in this demographic will be able to find a story they relate to and from which they can potentially derive therapeutic value. Hopefully in the coming years and decades, we will see publishers expand on this diversity by prioritizing stories by and about those marginalized by other identities, such as

race, class, religion, sexuality, and ability. In short, the more variety present in effectively written illness/recovery narratives that are available, the better they will serve their intended audience: real struggling teenagers.

Now that we have analyzed two YA novels dealing with adolescent grief in detail, it is time to return to the more general plight of real-world teens who are coping with mental illnesses and who benefit from relatable and therapeutic narratives such as those that problem novels provide. A brief review of the history and evolution of YA literature will be useful in demonstrating how narratives falling under this category have evolved to appeal more to their adolescent readers. For our purposes, we will concentrate specifically on problem novels.

Salinger's classic *Catcher in the Rye*, which features a "disaffected adolescent at odds with a disappointing adult world" and is widely considered to be the first of its kind, paved the way for this new literary subcategory. It was followed up by notable titles such as Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Zindel's *The Pigman*, ushering in a sort of new era in children's literature. Up to this point, we had not seen issues like alcoholism, violence, and death/grief addressed so directly in texts written for children. Since its introduction in the 1960s, the problem novel has evolved in response to teens' loyal attachment to some of these classic stories (Feinberg par. 48). The narratives that fall under its scope have grown progressively more diverse throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, so that today, nearly every mental affliction that teens face can find representation in a popular YA title.

In fact, for every illness/issue that is on the rise in teenagers today, there are dozens of novels to choose from whose narrators cope with and in some way overcome the same problems. Some recent novels showcase characters coping with specific conditions, such as anxiety and depression (*It's Kind of a Funny Story*; *Thirteen Reasons Why*), self-harm (*Cut*; *Impulse*; *Girl in Pieces*), drug addiction/dependency (*Go Ask Alice*; *The Spectacular Now*), and eating disorders (*Wintergirls*; *A Trick of the Light*). Others trace the recovery process following a specific trauma

such as sexual abuse (*Speak; The Perks of Being a Wallflower*), subjection to interpersonal violence (*Dreamland; Bitter End*), and, of course, a difficult reckoning with grief (*Saving Zoe; Hold Still*).

Writers for teenagers have clearly come to understand how effective and therapeutic these kinds of novels can be when they are written with care and sensitivity, and they have responded by contributing increasingly diverse narratives to the canon. What is most encouraging is that they seem to have pinpointed the elements of illness/recovery narratives that appeal most to teenagers--honesty about unpleasant symptoms and coping mechanisms, a realistic progression from trauma to recovery, and a refusal to perpetuate the silence and stigma surrounding mental illnesses---and made a commitment to producing work that honors these preferences.

Despite the sheer number and variety of YA books, “problem novels” or otherwise, this literary category is still quite new, just around sixty years old. It will be intriguing to see how it evolves and continues to impact our culture in the coming decades. Hopefully, its contributors and consumers will keep frank discussions of mental illnesses/traumatic experiences and the elimination of the stigma surrounding them as priorities. Perhaps the next step in the evolution of YA literature will be its introduction into more formal therapeutic settings, such as literary support groups, where individuals can receive more direct validation of their experiences. Whatever its future, one thing is clear: we should not underestimate the YA problem novel or dismiss it as a needlessly dark or overdramatic subcategory. It has proven itself to be an impactful cultural tool that can alleviate the suffering of adolescents dealing with mental illness---a number that seems to grow every day. If we use these books to their full potential, as well as provide more adequate resources and funding for the prevention and treatment of mental health conditions, we could finally see those numbers begin to decline and raise a generation of strong, emotionally resilient teenagers.

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