

Messages of hope  
from asher's thirteen  
reasons why



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Suicide is a persistent enemy that affects thousands of young people across the country every year. Bullying is one of the main reasons young people decide to commit suicide. Many young adult authors are writing books that address these hard topics to help readers learn how to better deal with them. In Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the unique structure, double narrative technique, and multi-sided conflict contribute to the theme that a person's actions can hurt others. Schools can use the book's theme and message to promote healthy behaviors, discourage bullying, and raise suicide awareness.

Hannah Baker, one of the main characters in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, is a high school student who commits suicide. Classmates and relatives are left in the dark until a mysterious box begins circulating through the mail. It contains cassette tapes that hold thirteen recorded stories. Each tape is addressed to a person who Hannah believes plays a part in her suicide. Hannah requires each person to listen to her tapes and pass them on. In her first tape, she threatens that the tapes will be released to the public if the listeners do not comply. Clay Jensen, the ninth person on the list, gives his own commentary while listening to the tapes. The book ends with Clay passing the tapes on to the next person and reaching out to another bullied student.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* contains thirteen chapters. Each chapter represents one of Hannah's tapes. Asher also includes a short introduction and conclusion, which narrates when Clay Jensen receives the tapes and mails them to the next person on the list. Hannah firmly believes that "everything affects everything" (Asher 202). Therefore, her tapes are consecutively linked to when people negatively affected her life. For example, the person

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Hannah believes starts the “ snowball effect” is the person to whom the first tape is addressed (Asher 31). Tape two is addressed to the next person who contributes to the snowball effect and this structure continues throughout the book. Even though the stories are ordered consecutively, each one seems worse than the previous, which further aligns with the idea of the snowball effect. As a snowball rolls, it gets bigger and the damage it can do (or does do) becomes worse. Ironically, the book’s structure is both predictable and suspenseful. Readers know that each chapter will be a story of another individual who has wronged Hannah. However, readers do not know when Clay’s name will pop up on the tapes or even what he did wrong. In this way, Asher’s book is brilliant, leaving readers constantly anticipating and asking for more, yet knowing exactly what to expect next (another story).

Despite the predictable structure and heavy tone, Tazanfal Tehseem argues that the novel’s style is completely laid-back and conversational (343). This is because the book is written as a double narrative. Hannah knows that Clay Jensen loves her, so she puts him on the list to receive the tapes. Hannah wants “ to explain [and] say I’m sorry” (Asher 206). As Clay listens, Hannah’s tapes offer one narration and Clay’s interjectory comments offer another. Miller comments that there is a “ notion of multiple truths” and that “ sometimes we need all five stories to determine what really happened” (34). By using this double narrative technique, Asher challenges readers to listen to the multiple truths and consider which character has the reliable perspective. Hannah defends her perspective in the first tape when she asks, “ Why would a dead girl lie?” (Asher 8). However, Hannah’s perspective “

lacks objectivity” because she records the tapes “ at a time of total despair” (Tazanfal Tehseem 342). She is emotionally unstable but believes that she has every right to feel the way she does. Clay realizes that this is a problem and even points out when Hannah is not being fair (Asher 166). Although Clay sympathizes with Hannah’s perspective, he sees things more clearly and objectively. Readers benefit from reading the perspectives of both characters.

The double narrative technique also proves that coping with suicide seriously affects an individual physically and emotionally. For example, after Clay listens to some of the tapes, his high stress level begins to weaken him physically. Clay explains his relentless stress-induced headache, saying that “ the pounding is back again” (Asher 195). On the eighth tape, Hannah asks listeners, “ What if other people could hear your thoughts?” (Asher 174). Clay’s narrative response shows his emotional pain, “ They’d hear confusion. Frustration. Even some anger” (Asher 174). Clay is devastated by Hannah’s suicide and even more hurt when he hears her tapes. Hannah does not blame Clay for her suicide. However, he gets angry at the other people on the tapes and feels compelled to observe their same physical and emotional decline. Hannah puts intense pressure on all the people listening to her tapes with a tone that is a “ mix of guilt and blame” (Tazanfal Tehseem 340). She blames the people on the tapes for her suicide because she is “ trying to make sense out of a chaotic situation” (Tazanfal Tehseem 340). The listeners would be even more affected by the tapes because they would know Hannah is already dead and there is no way to change that. Although the book only shows Clay’s adverse reaction to the tapes, it is implied that everyone who

listens to them suffers. Readers can see these effects in a more personal way through Asher's double narrative technique.

Because of Asher's use of the double narrative technique, *Thirteen Reasons Why* also has a unique, multi-sided conflict. Hannah, one of the two main characters, is dead. Therefore, Hannah's conflict takes place before she commits suicide. However, Clay's conflict - man vs. self - takes place during the course of the novel. Throughout the book, Clay is trying to cope with Hannah's suicide. Until he hears his tape, he is constantly blaming himself, terrified of what he might have done to cause Hannah's death. When he receives closure from listening to his tape, his internal conflict begins to weaken. Clay's internal conflict is finally resolved when he finishes all the tapes. At this point, his health improves and he begins to feel more hopeful about his life. He then takes it upon himself to reach out to a lonely, distant girl. The book ends with Clay as he runs after her and calls out her name, "Skye" (Asher 288).

Hannah's conflict, however, is more difficult to pin down. From one perspective, Hannah's conflict is man vs. man. She gives twelve examples of other people harming her well-being through rumors, accusations, invasion of privacy, sexual assault, and more. In a man vs. man conflict, Hannah "wins" when she commits suicide because she finally saves herself from her enemies. Another perspective is that Hannah's conflict is man vs. self. As Hannah stands face to face with her enemies, it's likely that she begins to believe what they say about her, which lowers her self-esteem. Instead of correctly dealing with her pain, Hannah hurts people on her tapes in a similar way that they have hurt her. This upsets many readers who believe Hannah  
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is suggesting that suicide is a rational choice when trying to escape pain or get revenge on others (Jacobson 8). However, readers must understand that Hannah is dealing with depression and is not thinking clearly. Clay, as the other narrator, helps guide readers to see the objective truth and Hannah deals with her conflict.

These three elements - structure, narrative technique, and conflict - all contribute to the novel's theme that one person's actions can hurt others. Hannah's cassette tapes are a symbol of the finality of treating people poorly or bullying them. The past cannot be erased. Once something is "caught on tape," there is no denying it or turning back. Hannah's tapes prove this theme that people's actions affect others, for good or bad. Chisholm and Trent argue that the purpose of Hannah's tapes were to reveal how her suicide "was shaped by previous and subsequent negative events in her life" - these events being bullying (78). Hannah's stance against bullying was grounded in her idea that "everything affects everything" (Asher 202). One little thing can affect every part of a person's life. This theme applies to everyone - the bully, the victim, and the onlooker. This theme especially hits home for Clay, who as a past onlooker of Hannah's bullying, feels regretful for "pretending not to notice" (Asher 50). Clay's tiny decision to not stand up for Hannah hugely affected her well-being. This is just like Hannah says, "everything affects everything" (Asher 202).

The theme of *Thirteen Reasons Why* ties closely with its message: treat others better. Although Hannah does not explicitly state this in her tapes, Clay figures the message out on his own. In the final chapter, he decides to reach out to someone in his school who has "learned how to avoid people"

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(Asher 287). In the Thirteen Reasons Why Netflix series, Clay even gives a passionate speech in the final episode, “ It has got to get better. . . the way we treat each other and look out for each other” (Swanbrow 18). Young people who are reading Thirteen Reasons Why are also taking Clay’s new outlook to heart. After reading the book, one student said, “ This book opens up people’s eyes. It opened up my eyes” (Chisholm and Keller 31). Teachers are also benefiting from the book’s message, “ This book reminded me to recognize, to pay attention to even the smallest interaction that might seem like a student needs help” (Pytash 476). When readers catch the theme and message of Thirteen Reasons Why, they are more likely to appreciate the story and develop empathy for those being bullied, a skill Chisholm and Keller identify as a “ necessary capacity for life in the 21st century” (25).

In her tapes, Hannah talks about the topic of bullying and how it can affect people. Hannah personally deals with depression and thoughts of suicide that are brought on by bullying. Her privacy is invaded, she is in a drunk-driving accident, she loses all her friends, and she is stood up on a date. To make matters worse, she witnesses a rape and then is raped by the same person at a later date. Hannah’s experiences are not exclusive. According to Pytash, about 3. 2 million students in grades 6-10 are bullied every year, making this type of “ persecution the most prevalent form of school violence” (470). Rybakova has found that bullying and sexual harassment are the most prominent contributing factors to suicide (41). In Thirteen Reasons Why, this holds true. Most of Hannah’s feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness stem from her bullying and sexual harassment. These feelings lead to Hannah’s desire to commit suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause

of young adult death in America, which makes it a haunting part of a youth's reality (Rybakova 41-42). Similar to Hannah's experiences, most bullying takes place outside of school, "in social contexts in which teachers and parents are generally unaware or absent" (Miller 30). Hannah was bullied in severe and dangerous ways when school administration and parents were unable to see what was happening or provide help.

Hannah does go searching for help one time, but this is her problem. Hannah waits until she has already created the first twelve tapes and made preparations to commit suicide before backtracking and considering that someone might be able to help her. She immediately gets angry when Mr. Porter, the school counselor, does not understand that she is in severe crisis. Swanbrow suggests that suicidal young people like Hannah are afraid to ask for help because they "believe no one will help them if they do acknowledge how they are feeling" (18). Hannah enters Mr. Porter's office with this mindset and refuses to give him a second chance to help her. She adds Mr. Porter to tape thirteen and then commits suicide the next day. This is alarming to many adult readers who claim that the book does not give information about mental illness, and instead undermines the help schools can give (Jacobson 8). However, one must again take into consideration that Hannah's perspective is shattered by pain and confusion. In Clay's narration, he supports the idea of getting help for mental illness when he says, "Maybe a therapist would have helped, Hannah" (Asher 176). When looking at the bigger picture, readers will understand that Asher is not undermining the support that school staff can give. He is simply providing the perspectives of two different students who are in two different emotional states. Hannah's



perspective may seem offensive and dangerous, but Clay's healthier view makes up for it.

While some adult readers argue that *Thirteen Reasons Why* "does not make a difference," many classrooms are proving these readers wrong (Jacobson 8). The book is an exceptional resource for secondary teachers to use in their classroom. For one, the book's content is relevant to young adults. Statistics show that "68% of those who have seriously considered suicide first thought about it in high school, or even earlier" (Swanbrow 18). As surprising as this may be, shying away from the discussion of suicide is not the way to make these numbers go down. Rybakova says that "Literature is a way to learn about and understand important, even disturbing events" (40). Suicide is disturbing, but even so, it should be talked about in secondary classrooms because it is an important decision that young adults across the nation face daily. Facing this relevant topic head on in the classroom could mean the difference between life or death for some students.

Secondly, in reading about Hannah's experiences, students learn to empathize with the characters and other people. Not all students have gone through what Hannah has, but many will know students who have. By studying this book, students learn to "develop the tools they would need" in considering the perspectives of others (Chisholm and Trent 76). According to Miller, everyone tends to see the world through a certain lens that shapes their beliefs and behaviors, whether it be socioeconomic class, age, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, etc (33). Asher's dual narrative already gives students two different perspectives to consider. When students link events from their lives with Hannah and Clay, they "empathize with  
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characters and classmates by relating to and collaborating with others (Chisholm and Keller 25). These skills are important in this ever-growing global society.

Finally, in reading about Hannah's experiences, students learn to consider the consequences of their actions. Chisholm and Keller did a study of high school students as they read *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The scholars found that as students empathized with Hannah Baker and Clay Jensen, they often developed insights into their own lives, such as " understanding the consequences of their own behavior" (30). Students who read *Thirteen Reasons Why* will quickly pick up on the book's theme and message. Teachers then challenge their students to consider their own actions and " reflect on their own roles in protecting the feelings of others and preventing bullying in their own lives" (Chisholm and Trent 78). When students hold a magnifying glass up to their own lives and reflect it against Hannah's story, change is likely to occur.

On a broader scale, the book is a valuable resource that schools can use to promote healthy behaviors, discourage bullying, and raise suicide awareness. According to Swanbrow, many schools are beginning to " create a more positive environment that supports and promotes the well-being of students" (18). Some of these aspects are as simple as encouraging students to talk to a trusted staff member when they are in crisis or training staff and select students to identify those who are in crisis. To discourage in-school bullying, Miller suggests that " locker rooms, hallways, and other school locales not populated by teachers" should be the places that teachers monitor on a regular basis (30). Although teachers cannot help what <https://assignbuster.com/messages-of-hope-from-ashers-thirteen-reasons-why/>

happens outside of school, by monitoring the school more closely, fewer students will have to go through in-school bullying experiences like Hannah does. Neither Clay or Hannah make any mention of their school having anti-bullying and suicide programs. Until Hannah talks to Mr. Porter, no one encourages her to talk with other students or school staff members about how she is feeling. Starting with the influence of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, schools are beginning to recognize the importance of “ anti-bullying and suicide programs that encourage adolescents to turn to teachers if they are bullied or contemplating suicide” (Pytash 470). Schools cannot completely prevent bullying and suicide but can make a change when putting in an effort to do so.

It is worthwhile for young people to read Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* because the story examines the serious topics of bullying and suicide in a realistic manner. Despite some serious backlash from older readers, teachers are finding that the book can be used in their classrooms in a positive way. Hannah Baker's story is a painful, but powerful one. Young people who see the serious consequences of suicide may be encouraged to talk with a trusted individual. Jay Asher created a masterpiece that will continue to change the lives of young people with the message to treat others better.

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