The Art of Being Normal with a Mentally Troubled Mind:

The sweet spot of representing mental illness in contemporary YA literature and using such literary texts as bibliotherapy

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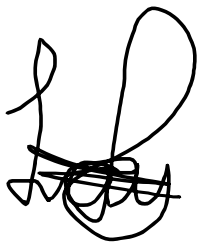

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Abstract

As mental health is a topic that is becoming more and more prevalent in present-day society it also is more widely recognised in cultural products such as literature. Now more than ever, these representations of mental illness are shedding a more positive light on the subject. This thesis will explore how mental illness is represented in literature aimed at young adults and whether those representations can be considered to be realistic and authentic, glorifying and romanticising, or both. In doing so, two contemporary novels will be studied, John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2019). This research will reveal that there is a "sweet spot" of mental illness representation that combines realistic and authentic imagery with a somewhat glorified and romanticised way of storytelling. Additionally, these types of representations can help with destigmatising the topic of mental illness. They can contribute to showing that 'normal' is not the same as able-bodied and/or able-minded. Lastly, literature such as the case studies used in this thesis can be utilised as a form of bibliotherapy. This form of therapeutic intervention can create a better understanding and help sufferers by relieving, restoring and renewing the troubles of their minds.

Keywords: disability studies, representation of mental illness, bibliotherapy, Sally Rooney, John Green, Young Adult (YA) literature

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Introduction

"I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know why I can't be like normal people."[1] This quotation from Sally Rooney's *Normal People* exemplifies a question frequently asked or thought by people suffering from mental health issues. This is striking because currently, more people are expressing that they are dealing with mental health issues and, therefore, destigmatisation of the topic is at the forefront of society.[2] The World Health Organisation (WHO) explains that one in seven adolescents is battling mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.[3] According to Ariane Manutscheri, the bad mental state of adolescents frequently goes unnoticed as the topic is still largely stigmatised and sufferers are afraid to speak out about it.[4] Failing to address mental illness is, according to the WHO, harmful both mentally and physically and it limits the opportunities for sufferers to lead fulfilling lives.[5]

While it is presently more discussed, mental illness can be considered to be as old as time as it has been a theme in mainstream/canonical literature for decades.[6] Therefore, representing mental health issues has, thus, been done for centuries.[7] For example, the Victorian trend of negatively representing mentally struggling characters as "mad" or "hysteric" can be observed in texts such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.[8] Somewhat more recently, a different trend emerged, namely the image of the Prozac-consuming American women of the 1990s.

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[1] Sally Rooney, *Normal People*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 181.
[2] Ariane Manutscheri, "'Your now is not your forever': Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature." *Clele Journal* 9, no. 2 (2021): 30. https://clelejournal.org/article-2-manutscheri/
[3] World Health Organization, "Adolescent Mental Health of Adolescents" *World Health Organization Newsroom Factsheets*, 2024. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health
[4] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 30.
[5] World Health Organization, "Adolescent Mental Health of Adolescents" *World Health Organization Newsroom Factsheets*, 2024. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health
[6] Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves & Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
[7] Anca-Luisa Viusenco, "The Madness Narrative, Between the Literary, the Therapeutic and the Political." in *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 310. 10.2478/rjes-2013-0030
[8] Frederika Thelandersson, *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp.33-37.

These mentally struggling characters, which are described as "mad" and "sad" can be seen in pop culture products such as Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* and TV show *The Sopranos*.[9] These representations create a stigmatised image by glorifying the use of medication, Prozac, in the treatment process of mental illness.[10] Currently, mental health awareness is becoming increasingly prevalent in all types of cultural products. A relatively new focus on mental illness started to emerge largely in the 21st century.[11] This can be found in popular TV shows, films and songs as well as more generally on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.[12] It is interesting to observe that this trend is also included in the more popular contemporary literature aimed at a younger audience.[13] However, there is quite some debate surrounding this topic as frequent representation can have both positive and negative influences.[14] This thesis aims to participate in and add to this debate.

The representation of mental illness in contemporary literature aimed at young adults is a very relevant topic in current society and the attempt to remove the present taboo on the subject of mental illness allows for more space in the literary field to touch upon the topic in new ways.[15] Previous research has been focused on the effects of literature on mental health,[16] how good representation could help sufferers and people close to them,[17] the importance of destigmatisation[18] and the role that specifically Young Adult (YA) literature

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[9] Ibid., 33.
[10] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 30.
[11] Thelandersson, "Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture," 2.
[12] Ibid., 1.
[13] A.S. Monaghan, "Evaluating Representation of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction: The Case of Stephen Chbosky's The Perks of Being a Wallflower" in *N16* (2016): 32-34. https://doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/7400
[14] Emily T. Troscianko, "Fiction-reading for Good or Ill: Eating Disorders, Interpretation and the Case for Creative Bibliotherapy Research." in *Medical Humanities* 44, no. 3 (2018): 209. 10.1136/medhum-2017-011375
[15] Kia Jane Richmond, "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness, Teach Empathy, and Break Stereotypes." in *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 30, no. 1 (2014): 19-20. https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2038
[16] J. Carney & C.B.J. Robertson, "Five Studies Evaluating the Impact on Mental Health and Mood of Recalling, Reading, and Discussing Fiction." in *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 4 (2022): 1.
[17] S. Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health." in *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 54, no. 4 (2012): 381-384. 10.4103/0019-5545.104831
[18] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 30.

could play in the destigmatisation process.[19] However, this leaves the question of whether such representations are veracious and how the distinction can be made between positive (realistic and authentic) and negative (glorified and romanticised) representations. Further research can be conducted about the effect of such representations and whether authentic representation can change attitudes and lead to destigmatisation for readers and society. Additionally, it is important to learn more about the concept of "bibliotherapy" and how its practice might help sufferers in their day-to-day lives as it is a concept that is not used very often in the broader field of literary studies yet. Previous studies point out that it can be further researched how authors interweave the topic of mental illness into their stories.[20]

This thesis aims to conduct a critical analysis to examine which factors contribute to positive or negative representations of mental illness and which of those can be found in the two novels that will serve as a case study for this thesis, John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2019). Furthermore, this thesis will explore whether accurate representation of mental illness can lead to destigmatisation and if it influences the general societal attitude toward the topic. Lastly, it will be investigated whether these books can serve as a form of bibliotherapy. These topics will be explored in relation to the research questions: To what extent does touching upon mental health issues in contemporary literature, specifically John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, offer readers realistic representations of mental illness? Are these representations realistic and relatable or romanticised and glorified? Additionally, does the representation of mental illness through literature offer support through so-called "bibliotherapy"?

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[19] Richmond, "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness," 19-20.
[20] M. Hall, "Bibliotherapy and OCD: The Case of Turtles All the Way Down by John Green (2017)", in *New Horizons in English Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 74. https://doi.org/10.17951/nh.2020.5.74-87

It would be logical to assume that the representation of mental illness through literature can be realistic and relatable while at the same time being glorified or romanticised as it involves a commercial cultural product that must sell. Derived from this idea, the following thesis statement can be formulated: In Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Rooney's *Normal People,* there is a fine line between the different ends of the representation spectrum that results in a "sweet spot" where mental illness is represented in an authentic and relatable way but at the same time is beautifully and engagingly written and thus somewhat glorified or romanticised for storytelling purposes. Additionally, representations of mental illness through fictional characters in wildly popular books, such as the ones by Green and Rooney, will help sufferers deal with their own issues through recognition and by offering possible coping strategies.

This thesis aims to answer the research questions by methodologically using close reading of the primary texts, discourse analysis, and by reviewing literature about pre-existing academic research in a number of fields such as disability studies, including ableism, stigmatisation, and destigmatisation; representation of mental illness in literary texts; and the use of bibliotherapy in mental illness treatment. By considering scholarship about these topics, both on their own and combined, the case studies can be critically analysed. This thesis' specific focus is on contemporary literature aimed at teenagers and young adults. As such, John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* are apt case studies as these wildly popular novels are explicitly marketed as novels dealing with mental illness. These bestselling books show how the characters live their lives and how that is impacted by mental illness. Additionally, these novels have impacted me personally in the sense that the recognition and relatability of the representation of mental health issues in these novels spoke to me and stayed with me after first reading these novels. These stories and their mentally struggling characters have made a long-lasting impression on me and for

that reason, I thought these novels could serve as the perfect example of mental illness representation as well as bibliotherapy. While this thesis focuses on disability studies, representation of mental illness and bibliotherapy, Green's and Rooney's novels are more widely studied as well. Sally Rooney's novels are generally analysed in relation to topics such as sexuality,[21] feminism,[22] modernism[23] and their setting in recessionary Ireland[24] as Rooney's novels touch upon becoming an adult in contemporary Ireland. John Green's novels on the other hand are often analysed in their relation to relatively heavy topics such as death, disease, and loneliness[25] but also more broadly concerning transcendentalism[26] and existentialism[27] as Green's novels touch upon the lives of adolescents and young adults and all the issues they encounter while growing up.

In chapter one of this thesis, various theoretical aspects will be explained. This includes disability studies, particularly mental illness, ableism and the definition of 'normal'; representation of mental illness in literature; stigmatisation and destigmatisation; and, finally, bibliotherapy or the potential use of literature as a form of therapeutic intervention. Chapter two includes a close-reading analysis of the two novels, *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Normal People*, in connection to the theoretical aspects which are explained in the theoretical

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[21] Sofia Alferes Mendia, "The Coninuum of Irish Female Sexuality in Sally Rooney's Conversations with Friends and *Normal People*: A Contradicted Ireland" in *Estudios Irlandeses* 18, no. 18 (2023): 148-160. https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2023-11443

[22] Madeleine Gray, "Making Her Time (and Time Again): Feminist Phenomenology and Form in Recent British and Irish Fiction Written by Women" in *Contemporary Women's Writing* 14, no. 1 (2020): 66-83. https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpaa014

[23] Paige Reynolds, *Modernism in Irish Women's Contemporary Writing: the Stubborn Mode,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[24] Maria Amor Barros-Del Rio, "Sally Rooney's Normal People: the Millenial Novel of Formation in Recessionary Ireland" in *Irish Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (2022): 176-192. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09670882.2022.2080036

[25] Trudelle Thomas, "The spiritual quest amid loneliness, depression, and disability: reflections on "The Fault in Our Stars" by John Green" in *Religious Education* 113, no. 1 (2018): 73-83. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00344087.2017.1383871

[26] Lucja Kalinowska, "Searching for the Self: Transcendentalist Ideas as an Inspiration for American Teenagers in Little Women by Gillian Armstrong and Paper Towns by John Green" in *New Horizons in English Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 143-156. https://doi.org/10.17951/nh.2020.5.143-156

[27] Kiramatullah & Samina Ashfaq, "Self-realization in Green's Looking for Alaska: An Existentialist Critique" in *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 7, no. 2 (2024): 153-160. https://jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll/article/view/277

framework and which draw on disability studies and representation of mental illness in literature. Then, in chapter three both novels are analysed in connection to treatment forms, bibliotherapy, and the way in which literature can offer support to sufferers and people close to them. The analysis in chapter three shows that *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Normal People* can be used as a form of therapeutic intervention. Lastly, a conclusion is drawn based on the theoretical aspects and literary analysis from chapters one, two, and three.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

This thesis aims to determine the effect of mental illness representation in contemporary literature aimed at adolescents and young adults, specifically John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People*. Additionally, this research aims to show if literature can be used as a form of therapeutic intervention in the treatment process of mental illness. To draw conclusions about these topics, three theoretical approaches will be analysed: disability studies, with a particular focus on mental illness, ableism, and the definition of 'normal'; representation of mental illness in literature and how such representations contribute to stigmatisation and/or destigmatisation; and, finally, bibliotherapy, more specifically how literary texts can potentially serve as a form of therapeutic intervention.

1.1 Disability Studies

Disability studies is the research of disability, both physical and mental, in individual bodies and how those disabilities are perceived and understood by the world.[28] According to Clare Mullaney, this field of research encourages people and scholars to value disability as a form of cultural difference.[29] Disability studies emerged in the late twentieth century from the disability civil rights movement and originally had its basis in sociology and social policy.[30] However, it has developed into an interdisciplinary field of study which can be found in fields such as Arts and Humanities as well; for example, by representing disabilities such as mental illness in cultural products.[31]

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[28] Clare Mullaney, "Disability Studies: Foundations & Key Concepts" *JSTOR Daily*, 2019. https://daily.jstor.org/reading-list-disability-studies/
[29] Ibid.
[30] Nick Watson & Simo Vehmas, "Disability Studies: Into the Multidisciplinary Future." In *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 9.
[31] Ibid., 3-4.

Matthew Wappett and Katrina Arndt explain that the field of disability studies can help people understand the social experience of those who have been marked as mentally or physically disabled.[32] The field of study has shown that people with apparent or assumed differences on a physical, mental, or behavioural level often face ableism which consists of prejudices, stereotyping, and discrimination.[33] Additionally, research by Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas highlights that three main emotions form the building blocks of the emotional side of ableism: fear, pity, and disgust felt by able-bodied and able-minded people about disabled people.[34] Research in the field of disability studies has shown that, often, people with disabilities are portrayed in a prejudicial and stereotypical way. These portrayals often have negative connotations. For example, people with mental illnesses are often described as bizarre, dangerous, or mad.[35] These types of aversion towards disabled people, including people with mental illnesses, have resulted in a stigma surrounding the topic of mental illness which is not only prevalent in cultural products but also in society more generally.[36]

One of the main focus points in disability studies is highlighting that ability should not necessarily be considered to be the default in determining human worth. People with a disability, regardless of the type of disability, are as worthy as any able-bodied and able-minded person.[37] As disability studies partially set out to show that 'normal' is not necessarily the same as able-bodied and able-minded, it could be deduced that a good representation of mental illness communicates this as well. A good representation should, thus, show that a character with mental health issues is not completely and utterly defined by their condition but rather that it is merely one small aspect of their character. Mental illness might affect

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[32] Matthew Wappett & Katrina Arndt, "Handicapism" in *Foundations of Disability Studies,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.
[33] Ibid., 4.
[34] Watson & Vehmas, "Disability Studies: Into the Multidisciplinary Future," 91-98.
[35] Wappett & Arndt, "Handicapism," 7.
[36] Ibid., 25.
[37] Clare Mullaney, "Disability Studies: Foundations & Key Concepts", *JSTOR Daily*, 2019. https://daily.jstor.org/reading-list-disability-studies/

people in various ways and that might have an impact on their day-to-day lives. Nevertheless, as Heather Stuart states, a person is more than their mental illness.[38] However, Watson and Vehmas explain that even though certain discriminatory practices can be blocked or removed, it can be a challenge to find or think of appropriate factors to replace them with to create realistic and authentic representations.[39] The theoretical aspect of disability studies offers valuable insights into ableism, not being defined by mental illness, and that 'normal' does not equate to being stereotypically able-minded. People who suffer from mental illness are 'normal' people too, and this aspect will be further elaborated on in chapters two and three in connection to the case studies.

1.2 Representation of Mental Illness in Literature

W. J. T. Mitchell explains that representation can be regarded as a triangular relationship that is based on something, by someone, directed at someone else.[40] In this thesis, the main focus will be on the representation of mental illness in recent YA fiction by John Green and Sally Rooney. Frederika Thelandersson explains that a substantial increase in representations of mental health issues can be found in popular culture, touching upon topics such as depression and anxiety.[41] Adam Cetorelli indicates that representation of mental illness transcends the expected metaphorical and narrative purposes in storytelling as they serve an additional purpose that helps to show the general audience that even though able-mindedness, as explained above, is often depicted as the compulsory norm, this depiction can be harmful and

[38] Heather Stuart, "Media Portrayal of Mental Illness and its Treatments" in *CNS Drugs* 20, no. 1 (2012): 100. https://doi.org/10.2165/00023210-200620020-00002
[39] Watson & Vehmas, "Disability Studies: Into the Multidisciplinary Future," 5.
[40] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Representation" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11-13.
[41] Thelandersson, "Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture," 1-2.

dangerous.[42] The image of able-mindedness generally pushed upon broader audiences consists of uncompromising rationality and social conformity. However, as it can be observed that more and more people struggle with their mental health, it has become clear that able-mindedness might not be the ultimate norm for many people in society. Pushing the image of characters with mental health issues as "mad" or "crazy" can be damaging.[43] Moritz Wigand confirms this view by explaining that cultural products should, instead of pushing damaging portrayals, function as a mirror of society to help people gain an understanding of particular topics, such as mental illness.[44] Shashi Deshpande explains that for an author to present truthfully, they should not simply mirror the image of society, but rather they should create an image that goes behind the facade, beneath the surface and fills the gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions.[45] Furthermore, Deshpande mentions that reading a novel is like going through the described human experiences yourself, leading readers to become more sensitive and open to other people and allowing for a change in perspective.[46] Similarly, good representations can offer a form of recognition which can help them feel seen and understood as it can be considered to be healing, strengthening and transforming to realise that you are not the only one struggling and that other people might have similar issues.[47]

A.S. Monaghan explains that some might consider addressing weighty issues, such as mental illness and death in YA literature, to be very heavy, especially for younger audiences.[48] Additionally, the appropriateness of addressing these types of issues is questioned as some texts can provide a glorified and romanticised image of (mental)

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[42] Adam Cetorelli, "Entering "the Dimension of Imagination": The Twilight Zone's Tales of Madness." in *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2022): section 1. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v42i1.7398
[43] Ibid., section 5.
[44] Moritz Wigand, "Migration, Identity, and Threatened Mental Health: Examples from Contemporary Fiction." in *Transcultural Psychiatry* 56, no. 5 (2019): 1076. 10.1177/1363461518794252
[45] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 381.
[46] Ibid., 383.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Monaghan, "Evaluating Representation of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction," 32-33.

illnesses.[49] These glorified and romanticised representations can result in harmful influences on the development of the self, relationships with others, and the view of being ill. These wrongful representations can be damaging as the younger audiences are still developing and constructing their identities, a process which can, thus, be negatively influenced by glorification and romanticisation.[50] Michael Montagne confirms that glorified images of mental illness or medication use can be harmful to the audiences involved as the very real negative aspects that are involved are blatantly ignored.[51] Manutscheri, also, confirms that romanticised and glorified representations of mental illness can be deemed highly dangerous.[52] Similarly, Hall argues that novels that feature representations of disability, including mental illness, should contain authentic and realistic portrayals of the disability since false portrayals can lead to an increase in stereotypical views and decrease destigmatisation.[53] A different argument mentioned by Thelandersson explains that sometimes an unequal double standard is used in the representation of mental illness in cultural products. She mentions that mental illness is often described as a condition for women, particularly white women. However, men and women of colour also struggle with mental illness even though they are represented considerably less.[54]

Nevertheless, texts that portray issues like mental illness are widely produced and consumed and this can also be regarded to be positive because accurate and truthful representation based on proper research of the topic can help people feel seen and supported.[55] Cetorelli argues in favour of using cultural products, such as literature and film, to portray mental illness with more realistic complexity. This approach can, eventually, even

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 33.
[51] Montagne, "The Prozac Phenomenon," 1269-1272.
[52] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 33.
[53] Hall, "Bibliotherapy and OCD," 77.
[54] Thelandersson, "Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture," 7.
[55] Monaghan, "Evaluating Representation of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction," 33-34.

challenge cultural ideologies regarding mental illness and possibly contribute to further destigmatising the topic in general society.[56] This thesis will further explore to what extent realistic representations contribute to destigmatisation of mental illness.

Stigmatisation can be defined as "the act of describing or considering somebody or something in a way that unfairly suggests that they are bad or do not deserve respect."[57] According to Kia Jane Richmond, the stigma as well as the encouragement to 'other' people with mental illness comes from a lack of understanding and the derogatory representations of the mentally ill in cultural products.[58] This stigma affects sufferers in real life through negative interactions and possible exclusion.[59] Ariane Manutscheri explains that the stigmatisation and the resulting way in which the topic is discussed has a major influence on sufferers, both on how they see themselves and their opportunities in life as well as how others perceive them.[60] Harmful representations of mental illness contribute to the fostering of more stigma.[61] Therefore, and especially because mental health disorders are affecting more and more young people, destigmatisation is, according to Manutscheri, of utmost importance.[62]

The Oxford English Dictionary defines destigmatisation as: "The action or process of removing the negative connotation or social stigma associated with something or someone; the process of making a person or thing socially acceptable."[63] Destigmatising the topic of mental illness entails, according to Manutscheri, giving a voice to marginalised groups and providing alternatives for the wrongful beliefs that are believed about them.[64] Richmond

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[56] Cetorelli, "Entering "the Dimension of Imagination,"" section 2.
[57] Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, "Stigmatization" in *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, 2024. https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/stigmatization
[58] Richmond, "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness," 19.
[59] Ibid., 19.
[60] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 32.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 30.
[63] Oxford English Dictionary, "Destigmatization" in *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2024. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/destigmatization_n
[64] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 33.

explains that destigmatisation is also about creating a better understanding of mental illness.[65] Destigmatising the topic can result in sufferers feeling more seen and less alone and, additionally, it can enhance a sense of empathy for those dealing with mental health issues.[66] Destigmatisation of mental illness also links directly to the field of disability studies, as destigmatisation is also about deconstructing the idea of 'normal' being able-minded and able-bodied persons. Sufferers who view themselves as 'other' instead of 'normal' can have intense feelings of shame, self-hatred and doubt about the ability to have a normal life, a normal career and maintain normal relationships. Manutscheri highlights that most of the ideas regarding 'being normal' are socially constructed ideas that place mental illness in a stigmatised corner.[67] Representation of mental illness can, thus, be considered positive when it can be labelled authentic and realistic and contributes to the destigmatisation of the topic or negative when the representation of mental illness can be labelled as romanticised, glorified, and harmful and contributes to furthering the stigma of the topic. Both novels that will be further discussed in this thesis represent mental illness, though in somewhat different ways.

1.3 Bibliotherapy

In addition to disability studies and representation of mental illness in literature, this thesis will determine whether or not the exemplary case studies can serve as a form of bibliotherapy. To determine whether or not this is the case, the concept first needs to be defined. Bibliotherapy, as defined by Michael Hall, is the use of literary texts by people with psychological disorders to understand themselves better, learn about their disorders, and seek relief.[68] Literary texts can serve as a potential form of therapeutic intervention, bibliotherapy,

[65] Richmond, "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness," 19.
[66] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 33.
[67] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 35-36.
[68] Hall, "Bibliotherapy and OCD," 74.

when they help readers identify with characters with a similar worldview and experience.[69] Similarly, J. Carney and C. B. J. Robertson explain the cognitive effects that are brought about by bibliotherapy: reading poetry, fiction, and drama is valuable in treating mental illnesses as they help to relieve, restore, and renew troubled minds.[70] S. McArdle stresses that it can be an important addition to bibliotherapy to get guidance from a therapist because the literature used as bibliotherapy might be triggering for sufferers.[71]

Emily Troscianko explains that mental illness and fiction reading are brought together through the fact that storytelling has helped the human species to survive by increasing cognitive fitness.[72] In the case of bibliotherapy, stories or narratives are created to interpret the experience of mental illness and then be interpreted by the patient and caretaker.[73] Additionally, Troscianko argues that literature might be a better form of cultural products used in a therapeutic sense as it allows for more free interpretation and connection than more visually prescribing media such as film or theatre.[74] It is mentioned that bibliotherapy can be a helpful tool as it can inform people about disorders and illnesses; it can create a new perspective by viewing mental illness through someone else's, the fictional character's eyes; it shows that you are not alone; it can offer an insight into what recovery might look like and it can potentially offer a view of life after or with mental illness.[75]

However, bibliotherapy can also have negative effects.[76] Carney and Robertson highlight that for bibliotherapy to be recognised as a genuine therapeutic efficacy, it needs to be tested and evaluated in order to determine the best way to use the medium. While they

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[69] Ibid., 86-87.
[70] Carney & Robertson, "Five Studies Evaluating the Impact on Mental Health," 1-4.
[71] S. McArdle, "Fiction, Poetry and Mental Health: Expressive and Therapeutic Uses of Literature" in *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 8, no. 6 (2001): 520. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1046/j.1351-0126.2001.00428.x
[72] Troscianko, "Eating Disorders, Interpretation and the Case for Creative Bibliotherapy Research," 201.
[73] Ibid., 202.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 207.
[76] Ibid., 208.

show that it is true that various studies have shown therapeutic changes in people with mental health issues due to the experience of reading literature, those positive results cannot be generalised. Some people experience reading about experiences similar to their own as confronting and triggering, which is the opposite of what a therapeutic intervention should aim to achieve.[77] James Carney explains that cultural representations of mental illness can be used therapeutically for the treatment of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety if the text touches upon the topic realistically and authentically and if there is guidance by a medically trained professional if necessary.[78]

Deshpande highlights that, in addition to the therapeutic effect of reading literature, writing literature can also serve as a therapeutic intervention as it creates a setting in which the writer is confronted with emotions and feelings that they previously refused to look at, accept or put into words.[79] McArdle sets out similar findings which highlight the therapeutic effects of expressive writing, storytelling, and poetry.[80] Additionally, Rothenberg mentions self-creation as an option for mental illness treatment in which creative writing can help with better understanding and reconstructing yourself.[81] While writing can, thus, also serve as a form of bibliotherapy, this thesis will focus mainly on the therapeutic uses of reading YA literature, more specifically the two novels: *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Normal People*.

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[77] Carney & Robertson, "Five Studies Evaluating the Impact on Mental Health," 3.
[78] James Carney, "Culture and Mood Disorders: the Effect of Abstraction in Image, Narrative and Film on Depression and Anxiety" in *Medical Humanities* 46. Is. 4 (2019): 430. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1136/medhum-2018-011459
[79] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 381-383.
[80] McArdle, "Expressive and Therapeutic Uses of Literature," 517.
[81] A. Rothenberg, "Creativity, Self Creation, and the Treatment of Mental Illness." in *Medical Humanities* 32. Is. 1 (2006): 19. https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1136/jmh.2004.000185

Chapter 2: Disability Studies and Representation of Mental Illness in Green and Rooney

This chapter will explore how John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* represent mental illness throughout the stories. First, the novels are analysed in connection to the field of disability studies. Furthermore, it will be established that while the novels are largely realistic and authentic, they also have some glorified and romanticised aspects. Additionally, the representations in these novels affect the destigmatisation of mental illness.

2.1 Ableism and the Art of Being 'Normal' (Disability Studies)

As Thelandersson explains, more and more representations of mental illness can be found in popular culture.[82] The widely popular novel *Turtles All the Way Down* is an example of such a representation as the main character, Aza, suffers from anxiety and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).[83] The main purpose of representing mental illness through cultural products is, according to Cetorelli, to transcend the topic as a method to further the plot of the story and serve an additional goal of showing that able-mindedness does not have to be the compulsory norm because that can be harmful.[84] This is in line with one of the main focus points of disability studies which argues that able-mindedness should not necessarily be considered to be 'normal'.[85] While mental illness might influence the daily lives of the sufferers, it does not define them.[86] As Heather Stuart explains, people are more than their mental illness and Green's novel does not only convey this message through its storytelling

[82] Thelandersson, "Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture," 1-2.
[83] John Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 1-7.
[84] Cetorelli, "Entering "the Dimension of Imagination,"" section 5.
[85] Clare Mullaney, "Disability Studies: Foundations & Key Concepts", *JSTOR Daily*, 2019. https://daily.jstor.org/reading-list-disability-studies/
[86] Stuart, "Media Portrayal of Mental Illness and its Treatments," 100.

but also explicitly mentions this key aspect of disability studies. In chapter eight of the novel, Aza talks to her therapist, Dr Singh, about her OCD and anxiety. Aza expresses how her thoughts appear to consume her and completely take over her mind and her life to such an extent that she thinks: "You will never be free from this."[87] This scene in the novel, especially in combination with this specific quote, portrays how mental illness can feel all-consuming. However, in Aza's own words: "But I also had a life, a normal-ish life, which continued."[88] This quote highlights that in addition to the illness, sufferers also have a life alongside that and Aza is, thus, more than her mental illness. Aza is also a student, a friend, a daughter, a girlfriend, and a person with hopes and dreams for the future. Similar points about refusing able-mindedness as the expected societal norm can be found throughout Rooney's novel. *Normal People* offers the ultimate evidence for showing that 'normal' people are flawed, struggling and growing. This focus point of disability studies oozes out of the novel, starting with the title. Through the title, Rooney challenges the socially constructed idea of what it entails to 'be normal'.[89] Rooney introduces her readers to Connell and Marianne, two teenagers who are followed in their journey towards adulthood, with all the pains of growing involved. While both characters have their own struggles and issues to deal with, they find safety and comfort with each other, a sense of support, feeling seen, and accepted.[90] The novel then proceeds to question what 'normal' is or should be. In chapter thirteen, after fighting with Jamie, Marianne has a conversation with Connell. She is questioning her self-worth and worthiness of love and assumes that something must be wrong with her: "I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know why I can't be like normal people."[91] In this fragment, Marianne confronts both Connell and the reader with the fact that she, in her own

[87] Green, *Turtles All The Way Down,* 90-92.
[88] Ibid., 93.
[89] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 35-36.
[90] Sally Rooney, *Normal People,* 6-7.
[91] Ibid., 181.

opinion, does not match with the general idea of 'normal' that is socially constructed.[92] She, thus, views herself as 'other' rather than as 'normal' which creates doubt about her ability to have a normal life and maintain normal relationships.[93] In this scene, Marianne places herself, and mental illness more generally, in a stigmatised corner as she does not fit into the mould of 'being normal' that she believes to be the norm. In *Normal People*, Rooney challenges Marianne's perception by giving a voice to characters dealing with mental illness. In doing so, Rooney provides an alternative for the wrongful belief of not being 'normal'. According to Richmond, destigmatisation is about creating better understanding and that is what this novel does by showing how the characters live, grow and deal with their mental challenges.[94]

2.2 Negative Connotations and Stigmatisation

At various points in Green's novel Aza's descriptions and depictions of her illness have negative connotations. An example of this is how Aza uses the terms "crazy" and "mad" to define herself multiple times.[95] In doing so, Green creates a character that deviates from the able-minded, socially conforming norm.[96] As Cetorelli has mentioned, pushing these types of negative imagery regarding mental illness can be damaging and negatively influence the young audience to whom this novel is aimed.[97] It can thus be concluded that *Turtles All the Way Down* does contain some aspects which make the representation potentially harmful. Nonetheless, Green's novel is based on the writer's personal experience with mental illness which results in a novel that can be classified as authentic and realistic.[98] As Wigand explains, an authentic and realistic representation, which can be considered helpful, needs to

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[92] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 35-36.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Richmond, "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness," 19.
[95] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* 131; 237.
[96] Cetorelli, "Entering "the Dimension of Imagination,"" section 5.
[97] Monaghan, "Evaluating Representation of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction," 33.
[98] Hall, "Bibliotherapy and OCD," 75.

avoid damaging portrayals and instead function as a mirror of society.[99] Deshpande adds to that, that a representation should aim to even go beyond the facade, beneath the surface, and fill the gaps to be realistic and authentic.[100] Green's novel does this by realistically showing to what lengths mental illness can go. After the car crash and the aftermath of the accident, Aza's mental health spirals out of control and she puts herself in harm's way by drinking hand sanitiser.[101] This episode shows realistically how mental illness can take over which makes the sufferer lose control. The importance of avoiding romanticised and glorified portrayals of mental illness is stressed by Montagne as well as Manutscheri.[102] Green makes the narrative decision to follow the point of rock bottom that Aza experiences after the car crash by having her character reflect on her situation and her behaviour. Ultimately, Aza asks her mom for help by uttering: "I'm in trouble, Mom. Big trouble."[103] At this moment, Green directs the story away from glorifying and romanticising mental illness by showing the dangers of Aza's condition and stressing the importance of asking for help.

Stigma can originate from negative connotations that portrayals of mental illness in cultural products sometimes carry.[104] In *Turtles All the Way Down*, it can be observed that some characters, at certain points in the novel, express that they find Aza to be weird and that her behaviour negatively impacts their life. Examples of these issues can be found in Aza's relationships with her best friend, Daisy, and her boyfriend, Davis. It becomes clear throughout the novel that they, at times, find it difficult to be close to someone who has such severe mental problems.[105] Daisy describes being friends with Aza, a mentally ill person, to be exhausting, a lot, and hard work.[106] Additionally, when Aza decides that she no longer can

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[99] Wigand, "Migration, Identity, and Threatened Mental Health," 1076.
[100] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 381.
[101] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* 222-229.
[102] Montagne, "Mass Media Representations as Drug Information for Patients,"1269-1272; Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 33.
[103] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down*, 231.
[104] Wappett & Arndt, "Handicapism," 25.
[105] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down*, 212-221.
[106] Ibid., 214-217.

live up to the idea of being 'normal' that she thinks Davis desires of her. She tells him she cannot be in the relationship anymore and "I don't know if I'll ever be able to. Like, I know you're waiting for me to get better, and I really appreciate all your texts and everything. It's … it's incredibly sweet, but, like, this is probably what better looks like for me."[107] Davis reacts in an understanding way and they try to figure out how to possibly make a relationship work between the two of them but they both have different wants and needs that the other cannot fulfil and therefore they break up.[108] Green's novel offers portrayals of how mental disorders can affect people close to the sufferers. These examples show that mental illness can cause friction and that being close to someone with a mental illness can be difficult at times. These depictions might appear harsh to the audience, especially since they might be rooting for the main character, but they are realistic. As Manutscheri explains, sufferers might view themselves as 'other' instead of 'normal' which can result in intense feelings of doubt about the ability to have a normal life and maintain normal relationships.[109] These depictions can further the stigma of people suffering from mental illnesses as they show the differences, struggles, and sense of othering that can come paired with mental health issues.[110]

In quite a similar way, Rooney's *Normal People* shows in several instances how ostensible able-bodied and able-minded people view Marianne and Connell. A striking example can be seen in the way that Alan, Marianne's brother, treats her and the way he talks about Connell. In chapter sixteen, when Marianne comes home from spending an evening at Connell's house, Alan expresses that he does not want Marianne hanging out with Connell. When Marianne asks why he does not like Connell anymore, Alan responds with: "how was I supposed to know he was fucked in the head? He's on medication and everything, did you

[107] Ibid., 252.
[108] Ibid., 252-254.
[109] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 33-36.
[110] Wappett & Arndt, "Handicapsim," 25.

know that?"[111] Alan proceeds to argue with Marianne up until the point he calls her an "absolute freak!"[112] After which he gets violent and hits her.[113] This excerpt highlights how Alan's opinion of Connell changed after finding out about Connell's mental health issues. This scene, thus, shows how ableist people have prejudiced, stereotyped, and discriminatory views about people with mental illness, embodied by Alan's reaction of disgust towards a boy who he previously quite liked. These types of portrayals can, according to Wappett and Arndt, result in furthering the stigma surrounding the topic of mental illness.[114] Rooney tackles these explicit expressions of aversion by using objectively dislikeable characters in the story to say these types of statements. The fact that questionable characters utter such statements, saying that people with mental illnesses are "freaks", "mental cases", or "fucked in the head"[115] makes the reader wonder about the credibility and accuracy of the statements. Through Rooney's scenes, it becomes clear that these are angry views of angry people rather than actual true statements.

2.3 Authentic and Realistic Representations

As was explained by Deshpande, authentic and realistic representations through literature allow readers to indirectly experience the human experience that is described and in doing this, readers can become more sensitive and open to others, allowing for a change in perspective.[116] Additionally, authentic and realistic representations create recognition which helps sufferers to feel seen and understood. An example of an authentic and realistic representation of mental illness in *Normal People* can be found in chapter fifteen when

[111] Rooney, *Normal People,* 239.
[112] Ibid., 240.
[113] Ibid., 239-241.
[114] Wappett & Arndt, "Handicapism," 25.
[115] Rooney, *Normal People*, 179; 239-241.
[116] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 383.

Connell goes to the psychology clinic on campus upon the recommendation of his friend and roommate Niall. During this intake, Connell has to fill in a questionnaire which poses him with confronting questions about his mental condition.[117] After filling out the questionnaire, Connell has a conversation with a counsellor, Gillian, who establishes that his answers put Connell "in the territory of very serious depression."[118] This observation is followed by Gillian saying "I'm seeing that you're feeling very negatively towards yourself, you're having some suicidal thoughts, things like that. So those are things we'd have to take very seriously."[119] This example in which Connell is no longer able to manage his depression and anxiety on his own and seeks help can be considered healing and strengthening for sufferers who read this novel.[120] It can help people see that having a mental illness does not mean that you are crazy, mad, beyond saving, or unable to live a normal life. It shows that seeking help is not something shameful and that others are struggling with similar issues.[121] Rooney confirms here that seeking help is important because mental illness has to be taken very seriously as is stated by Gillian in the book.[122]

Rooney directs her representation of mental illness away from being romanticised or glorified by showing that almost all of the characters in the novel are, in one way or another, flawed. The mental health issues of the main characters, Marianne and Connell, are elaborately described. However, several other characters such as Marianne's ex-boyfriend Jamie and Connell's school friend Rob have mental issues too. This becomes clear when Marianne explains that her boyfriend at the time, Jamie, is a sadist and violent when they are intimate.[123] Additionally, it is revealed that Rob struggled with depression too and, after

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[117] Rooney, *Normal People*, 200-203.
[118] Ibid., 208.
[119] Ibid., 208.
[120] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 383.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Rooney, *Normal People*, 208.
[123] Ibid., 131.

losing his mental battle, took his own life.[124] In showing that a diverse range of characters struggle with different mental issues, Rooney stresses the authentic and realistic rather than the glorified and romanticised. The prose of the novel is worded nicely, therefore creating a subjectively beautifully written story but by allowing the characters to make mistakes, grow, and change, the representation is realistic nonetheless. Furthermore, the fact that the ending of the story is not an all-is-well ending, because both Marianne and Connell go their separate ways, offers a realistic representation in which the future is undecided.[125] In addition to this, it is interesting that Rooney has decided to include male characters who are clearly struggling with mental illness. This is a somewhat unconventional choice as mental illness is often described as a condition for (white) women, according to Thelandersson.[126] By describing Connell's battle with anxiety and depression, Rooney contributes to an authentic and realistic representation of a group that, while also evidently dealing with mental illness, is often underrepresented in popular cultural products.[127]

Green contributes to destigmatising the topic of mental illness through his novel by solving the various conflicts that Aza has with people close to her, Daisy and Davis for example. When Aza and Daisy make up, Daisy says: "What I want to say to you, Holmsey, is that, yes, you are exhausting, and yes, being your friend is work. But you are also the most fascinating person I have ever known, and you are not like mustard. You are like pizza, which is the highest compliment I can give a person. … You are my favorite person."[128] Additionally, while Aza and Davis do not get back together, they do part as friends and Aza is grateful for him being her first love.[129] These resolutions between the characters provide an alternative for the wrongful beliefs about the mentally ill Aza that were created earlier in the

[124] Ibid., 205-206.
[125] Ibid., 264-266.
[126] Thelandersson, "Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture," 7.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down*, 238.
[129] Ibid., 282-284.

story and, according to Manutscheri, this alternative view is an important aspect of destigmatisation.[130] Green's novel also gives a voice to sufferers and creates a better understanding of mental illness and the thought process of sufferers, both important features of destigmatisation.[131] Furthermore, the novel contributes to destigmatisation by highlighting that people with a mental illness are 'normal' too. *Turtles All the Way Down* can also be considered to be destigmatising as Green concludes the story by explaining that Aza "got better without ever quite getting well."[132] She finds a way to live her life with ups and downs, falling down and getting back up again. Even though mental illness will always affect her, Aza learns how to live with it and she goes on to lead a fulfilling life.[133] As Hall explains, people with mental illness have lives similar to the lives that able-minded people would also live.[134] According to Monaghan, this way of coping with mental illness sets a positive example for real-life strugglers who are reading this novel as it can create a feeling of being seen, supported and strengthened, especially with an eye on the future.[135] Therefore, *Turtles All the Way Down* offers a realistic and authentic representation of mental illness, though with some glorified and romanticised aspects for storytelling purposes, that contributes to the destigmatisation of the topic since it takes mental illness out of the stigmatised corner as defined by Manutscheri and shows that people with mental illnesses are normal people too.

The two novels are fundamentally different, in the storyline, the mental illnesses represented, the different phases the characters are in, and the different treatment forms. However, it could be argued that both stories offer somewhat glorified representations of mental illness, mainly through the writing style and words used by the authors. An example of this can be found in Rooney's novel in chapter three where it is described that Connell felt

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[130] Manutscheri, "Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature," 33.
[131] Richmond, "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness," 19.
[132] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down*, 281.
[133] Ibid, 285.
[134] Hall, "Bibliotherapy and OCD," 12.
[135] Monaghan, "Evaluating Representation of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction," 33-34.

a “pleasurable” sorrow come over him, followed by stating “Moments of emotional pain arrived like this, meaningless or at least indecipherable.”[136] While this excerpt does not describe a happy feeling, by using the word “pleasurable” and continuing to use almost poetic language to further clarify how the character is feeling, a somewhat glorified and romanticised image originates. However, both novels allow their characters to be flawed and make mistakes. Additionally, the two books end in a bittersweet way, which is not necessarily a happy ending but realistic nonetheless. The main characters of the novel accept that while their mental illness is a part of who they are and will inevitably influence their lives, they learn that they are more than their mental illness and can live ‘normal’ and fulfilling lives which is ultimately a key factor in disability studies, authentic representation, and destigmatisation of the topic of mental illness.[137] The representations of mental illness in Green’s *Turtles All the Way Down* and Rooney’s *Normal People*, thus, contribute to the destigmatisation of the topic as they influence how sufferers perceive themselves as well as their opportunities in life. It gives a voice to people suffering from mental illness and it shows that they are not alone.

[136] Rooney, *Normal People*, 25.
[137] Manutscheri, “Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature,” 33.

Chapter 3: Exemplifying and Utilising Bibliotherapy through Green and Rooney

This chapter will look at treatment forms represented in the novels and, more generally, how the representation of mental illness through literature can offer support for both sufferers and people close to them. By offering examples of the mental as well as physical symptoms of mental illness and stressing the importance of seeking help, sufferers can feel strengthened and it can have healing effects, which is further explained to be one main goal of bibliotherapy. Furthermore, the support that literature can offer sufferers can explicitly be seen in an example of Aza's doctor using bibliotherapy in Aza's treatment in *Turtles All the Way Down*. Additionally, it will be highlighted how the two novels can be used as a form of therapeutic intervention for real-life sufferers.

Firstly, an interesting similarity that can be observed between the two novels is the fact that both Aza, from Green's novel, and Connell, from Rooney's novel, are in therapy. Furthermore, Aza is using medication to treat her mental illness from the start of the novel.[138] Similarly, when Connell goes for the intake at the campus clinic, the counsellor explains different treatment options to him and recommends he consults a general practitioner to discuss the option of medication for treating his depression.[139] The fact that both therapy and medication are mentioned as treatment options for mental illness can make the reader question whether these are usual and effective treatments. However, different types of treatment, therapy, and medication might or might not work for each individual.[140] While it is often recommended for people struggling with mental disorders to seek professional help, medication is often viewed as a last resort and it is usually not as easily and quickly mentioned as an option as happens in Rooney's *Normal People.*[141] This is one aspect that can

[138] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down*, 11.
[139] Rooney, *Normal People,* 208.
[140] APA Div. 12 (Society of Clinical Psychology), "How Do I Choose Between Medication and Therapy?" *PTSD Clinical Practice Guidelines*, 2017. https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/medication-or-therapy.pdf
[141] Ibid.

be considered to be a glorified or at least an unauthentic and unrealistic representation of mental illness as, realistically, medication would not be focussed on in an intake appointment. Counsellors would first try to establish more clarity about the issue that the patient is dealing with before even considering medication use.[142] However, it is interesting to note that the counsellor stresses that getting medication prescribed needs to be discussed with a general practitioner, as she, as a counsellor is "not in a position to make any prescriptions."[143] Even though this scene can be read as an inaccurate representation because of the quick jump to medication use, the fact that the counsellor cannot prescribe medication is in line with the guidelines surrounding prescribing medication for mood disorders and other mental illnesses, thus being realistic in that sense.[144] Green offers a different perspective and handles the topic of medication authentically and realistically as he highlights that medication does not magically cure mental illness. Rather than directly influencing depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses, medication such as antidepressants flatten out all emotions of the patient, both the negative and the positive.[145] This can be observed in *Turtles All the Way Down* as Aza, after her accident, explains to Dr Singh that she has not been taking her medication regularly because "I felt like it was making me worse."[146] This scene from Green's novel, thus, shows how medication use and mental illness treatment do not have the same effects for everyone and that every sufferer needs to find out which treatment form works for them.

As stated in the theoretical framework, bibliotherapy is a form of therapeutic intervention.[147] According to Hall, it is a method in which literary texts are utilised to better

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Rooney, *Normal People,* 208.
[144] APA Div. 12 (Society of Clinical Psychology), "How Do I Choose Between Medication and Therapy?" *PTSD Clinical Practice Guidelines*, 2017. https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/medication-or-therapy.pdf
[145] Montagne, "Mass Media Representations as Drug Information for Patients," 1264-1268.
[146] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* 233.
[147] Hall, "Bibliotherapy and OCD," 86-87.

understand psychological disorders, such as mental illness.[148] Additionally, it helps sufferers learn about their disorders and find relief.[149] Bibliotherapy allows readers to identify with characters with similar worldviews and experiences, therefore showing sufferers that they are not alone in their struggle.[150] As was mentioned earlier, both Green's and Rooney's novels are centred around characters with mental illness and in *Normal People* several characters deal with different mental illnesses and disorders. Green's Aza has severe anxiety and OCD while Rooney's Marianne and Connell deal with trauma, anxiety and depression. These authors have thus created several relatable characters showing readers and sufferers that their worldviews and experiences are more valid and common than they originally thought.[151] In addition, Carney and Robertson explain that reading literature, poetry, fiction, and drama, brings about cognitive effects that are very valuable in treating mental illnesses.[152] Bibliotherapy helps to relieve, restore and renew troubled minds.[153] As the case studies discussed in this thesis offer fiction and drama, these novels serve as examples of novels suitable for use in therapeutic intervention. They can, thus, contribute to relieving, restoring, and renewing the troubled minds of real-life sufferers.[154]

Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* offers a realistic and authentic portrayal of mental illness by showing to what lengths mental illness can go, how it can take over rationality, and make the sufferers spiral out of control, as was mentioned previously. The novel highlights that mental illness can be dangerous and that asking for help is important while, at the same time, showing that, with proper treatment, mental illness can be lived with.[155] Green uses his novel to give a voice to sufferers, exemplify the experience of living with mental illness and

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[148] Ibid., 74.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid., 86-87.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Carney & Robertson, "Five Studies Evaluating the Impact on Mental Health," 1-4.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* 231; 282-284.

create a better understanding of mental illness. This leads to the conclusion that Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* can serve as a piece of literature that can be used as a form of bibliotherapy. Similarly, Rooney's *Normal People* shows how it can be difficult to deal with mental illness alone. One example of this can be found in chapter fifteen. In this chapter, it is highlighted that after Connell has found out that Rob has taken his own life, Connell's mental health starts to deteriorate. "His anxiety, which was previously chronic and low-level, … has become severe."[156] Then all the physical effects of Connell's anxiety are highlighted, starting relatively mild with tingling hands and growing more severe, like having major panic attacks. Connell describes the symptoms: "hyperventilating, chest pains, pins and needles all over his body. A feeling of dissociating from his senses, an inability to think straight or interpret what he sees and hears. Things begin to look and sound different, slower, artificial, unreal. The first time it happened he thought he was losing his mind."[157] This scene shows how mental illness is not merely a mental condition but can affect sufferers physically as well and it additionally shows how mental illness can result in losing control which can be very difficult and scary to deal with alone. Therefore, it can be recommended to seek (professional) help, which Connell's friend Niall tells him to do by sending him to the campus clinic.[158] This exemplification of mental illness can be regarded to be healing and strengthening for sufferers who read this novel.[159] It shows that you, as a sufferer, are not alone and that your feelings and physical symptoms are valid. This results in a representation that steers away from the stigmatised terms of being "crazy" or "mad".[160] Additionally, Rooney shows that almost all of the characters in her novel are, in some way, flawed. This can be seen in the earlier given examples about Marianne's brother, Marianne's ex-boyfriend, and Connell's

[156] Rooney, *Normal People,* 206.
[157] Ibid., 206.
[158] Ibid., 200-208.
[159] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 383.
[160] Ibid.

high school friend, Rob.[161] From these representations and exemplifications of the experience of living with a mental illness, it can be deduced that Rooney's *Normal People* can also serve as a piece of literature that can be used as a form of bibliotherapy.

Interestingly, Green employs explicit examples of bibliotherapy in his novel. During her therapy sessions with Aza, Dr Singh mentions several writers and literary texts. One clear example of this can be found in chapter thirteen of the novel when Aza explains that she feels almost imprisoned in herself as she sometimes feels like her body is not really hers but rather that some outside force controls her body.[162] Dr Singh seems to recognise the feeling that Aza is describing and she explains to Aza that it is not such an uncommon feeling as it was described by others, in literature, too.[163] Dr Singh, then, proceeds to tell Aza about an excerpt from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "Near the end of *Ulysses* when the character Molly Bloom appears to speak directly to the author. She says, 'O Jamesy let me up out of this.' You're imprisoned within a self that doesn't feel wholly yours, like Molly Bloom. But also, to you that self often feels deeply contaminated."[164] Therefore, Green uses his novel to show how certain literary texts or excerpts from texts can help sufferers feel seen. This becomes clear through this quotation as Dr Singh uses an example of a character that Aza can directly relate to and that makes Aza feel more seen and understood. Ultimately, this is one of the main goals of bibliotherapy. In this way, *Turtles All the Way Down* is not only a novel that could be used for bibliotherapy for sufferers in real life, but the novel also exemplifies, in a fictional setting, how bibliotherapy can help sufferers.

In addition to this, the storytelling that is part of literature contributes to the survival of the human species by increasing cognitive fitness.[165] According to Troscianko, this is how

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[161] Rooney, *Normal People,* 131; 205-206.
[162] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* 165.
[163] Ibid., 166.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Troscianko, "Eating Disorders, Interpretation and the Case for Creative Bibliotherapy Research," 201.

mental illness and fiction reading can be linked as well due to the way that the fictional stories are created to exemplify the experience of mental illness which then can be interpreted by the patient and their caretaker.[166] A key aspect of bibliotherapy is thus exemplifying the experience of mental illness.[167] This is agreed upon by James Carney who explains that mental illness representation in literature can be used as a form of therapeutic intervention in the treatment of mental disorders such as anxiety and depression if the literature touches upon the topic realistically and authentically.[168] In addition to bibliotherapy being helpful to sufferers and their caretakers, it can also be a helpful tool to inform people about mental disorders and illnesses since reading about mental illness can offer an insight into what dealing with and recovering from mental illness might look like.[169] By offering a view of life with mental illness, a view that both *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Normal People* offer, a new perspective can be created in which mental illness can be viewed through a fictional character's eyes which shows readers, and more specifically sufferers, that they are not alone. Additionally, reading about this can help non-sufferers to better understand mental illness and the thought processes that go with that.[170] As can be observed in chapter two of this thesis, Green's Aza offers the perspective of a character dealing with mental illness and, additionally, this novel offers wonderful examples of how mental illness affects people close to the sufferer, i.e. Daisy, Davis, and Aza's mom.[171] In addition to this, chapter two also shows how Rooney's Marianne and Connell deal with their mental challenges and how people around them have their own issues and problems they suffer from as well, i.e. Rob.[172]

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[166] Ibid., 202.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Carney, "Culture and Mood Disorders," 430.
[169] Troscianko, "Eating Disorders, Interpretation and the Case for Creative Bibliotherapy Research," 207.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Green, *Turtles All the Way Down,* 212-221; 232-238; 250-254.
[172] Rooney, *Normal People,* 200-222.

While this chapter has shown that bibliotherapy can serve as a form of therapeutic intervention, it is imperative to stress that it is important for sufferers to get professional help and seek guidance from a therapist.[173] Furthermore, aside from reading literature, writing literature can also serve as a form of therapeutic intervention, as was highlighted by Deshpande.[174] Expressive writing, storytelling, and writing poetry can have positive therapeutic effects.[175] Bibliotherapy through writing can help better understand and reconstruct oneself as it allows for confronting emotions and feelings previously refused to look at.[176] However, this thesis is specifically focused on the reading aspect of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy can be seen as a very positive and important development in the treatment of mental illness but reading about struggles the reader might relate to can also serve as a trigger and, therefore, bring about negative effects.[177] While various studies have shown that reading literature brings about therapeutic changes for sufferers, those results cannot be generalised.[178] For some people struggling with mental illness reading about similar situations to theirs can be felt as a negative experience as it can be perceived as confronting and triggering, the opposite of what therapeutic interventions aim to achieve.[179] Carney and Robertson explain that bibliotherapy needs to be researched, tested, and evaluated further to find out how to best utilise this medium in a therapeutic setting while treating mental illness.[180] Therefore, bibliotherapy can be recognised as an official treatment method which is genuinely therapeutically valuable when the concept is further researched.

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[173] McArdle, "Expressive and Therapeutic Uses of Literature," 520.
[174] Deshpande, "A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health," 381-383.
[175] McArdle, "Expressive and Therapeutic Uses of Literature," 517.
[176] Rothenberg, "Creativity, Self Creation, and the Treatment of Mental Illness," 19.
[177] Troscianko, "Eating Disorders, Interpretation and the Case for Creative Bibliotherapy Research," 208.
[178] Carney & Robertson, "Five Studies Evaluating the Impact on Mental Health," 3.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to determine to what extent touching upon mental health issues in contemporary literature, specifically John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, offers readers realistic representations of mental illness, and whether these representations are authentic and relatable or romanticised and glorified. Additionally, this thesis aimed to show if the representation of mental illness through literature offers support through so-called "bibliotherapy". By analysing the two novels in relation to the literary research as discussed in the theoretical framework in chapter one, it can be argued that while these novels can be considered to be somewhat glorified and romanticised and could be considered to have harmful aspects, generally, Green's and Rooney's novels offer authentic and realistic representations of mental illness. Additionally, they contribute to the destigmatisation of this somewhat controversial topic. These findings are in line with the idea that these representations of mental illness through literature offer the perfect combination of authentic and relatable representations while at the same time being beautifully and engagingly written resulting in a story that can be considered to be somewhat glorified and romanticised for storytelling purposes. In addition to this, it can be concluded that representing mental illness through fictional characters in popular bestsellers such as *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Normal People* helps sufferers with their own experiences with mental illness through recognition as exemplifying the experience of mental illness is a key aspect of bibliotherapy. Novels like the ones discussed in this thesis can contribute to relieving, restoring, and renewing the troubled minds of real-life sufferers and therefore can be effectively used as a form of therapeutic intervention.

These findings are based on the critical analysis conducted in this thesis. As became clear in chapter two, Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* engages with key aspects of disability studies as the novel highlights that Aza is more than her mental illness and can be considered

to be normal while not being stereotypically able-minded. Additionally, this novel largely offers realistic and authentic portrayals of mental illness by showing that it can cause a sufferer to lose control and by stressing the importance of asking for help. However, the novel also offers some aspects that could be critiqued. For example, how Aza uses terms such as “crazy” or “mad” to define herself multiple times. These types of words can be damaging and negatively influence both the young audience to which this novel is aimed as well as the general view regarding mental illness. Green’s novel, thus, has various features that could be perceived as potentially harmful representations.

Similarly, Rooney’s *Normal People* engages with aspects of disability studies by showing how ableism can be experienced by sufferers. How the main characters, Marianne and Connell, are addressed and treated by other characters can further the stigma surrounding mental illness which results in narrative decisions that could be considered to be potentially harmful representations. However, Rooney tries to undermine the credibility of these statements by having unreliable characters utter them. Additionally, *Normal People* offers the possibility to indirectly experience what it is like to live with mental illness. Rooney stresses the importance of seeking help and highlights that mental illness has to be taken seriously. Another way in which Rooney offers an authentic and realistic representation is by showing that almost all of the characters in the novel are flawed in one way or another. Rooney, thus, stresses the authentic and realistic rather than the glorified and romanticised. Furthermore, Rooney, stresses that people with mental illnesses are ‘normal’ people too, both in the title and the story, which is in line with disability studies and contributes to destigmatisation.

This thesis has added to scholarship about the representation of mental illness in literature and how literature can serve as a tool to achieve the destigmatisation of a topic currently at the forefront of society. These insights can help sufferers and people close to them, as well as the general public, to better understand what it can be like to live a life with

mental illness. Additionally, new insights into the relatively new concept of bibliotherapy and the use of literature as a therapeutic intervention in treating mental illness came to light and were even exemplified in one of the case studies. While it was shown in chapter three that bibliotherapy can serve as a form of therapeutic intervention, it is a relatively new concept and can also be considered harmful as reading about relatable topics that are hard to deal with can be quite triggering for some. This is the opposite of the desired effect of a therapeutic intervention and therefore, for bibliotherapy to be recognised as an official treatment form that is safe, helpful and therapeutically valuable, it needs to be further researched, tested, and evaluated to establish the best way in which this medium can be used to treat mental illness.

In this thesis, two novels were used alongside each other as case studies. The benefit of this combined approach is that the representation of mental illness could be contrasted and compared in two different stories, through different characters in different settings. The same type of literary research regarding this topic could be conducted with different novels to establish if these findings can be duplicated. Additionally, it can be further explored which types of novels would be most suitable for therapeutic intervention, which types of mental illnesses can be most successfully treated by bibliotherapy and if there are specific target groups which could specifically benefit from bibliotherapy, for example, differentiated by age, gender or severity of mental illness. Furthermore, bibliotherapy can also be utilised through writing literature in addition to reading. Due to the scope of this thesis, this aspect was neglected but it can be recommended to further delve into the therapeutic effects of writing literature as well, by examining how writing serves a therapeutic purpose. Additionally, it could also be further examined whether reading and writing fiction would be more beneficial or if reading and writing about personal experiences in non-fiction pieces would carry a greater therapeutic value.

In conclusion, it can, thus, be argued that there is a fine line between the different ends of the representation spectrum that results in a "sweet spot" where mental illness is represented in an authentic and relatable way that is simultaneously beautifully and engagingly written and thus somewhat glorified or romanticised for storytelling purposes. Additionally, representations of mental illness through fictional characters in popular books, such as John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* can help sufferers deal with their own issues through recognition, by offering possible coping strategies, and by creating awareness and a better understanding. The main message communicated by the two novels discussed above is that people with mental illnesses are normal people too, even though they are not necessarily able-minded. As has become clear, reading about this topic helps to communicate this important message to the increasing amount of real-life mental illness sufferers in general society and contributes to the destigmatisation of the topic.

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