Review: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*
By Lauren Bull
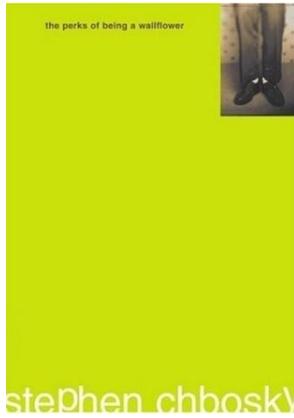
Charlie is a quiet, painfully introspective fifteen-year-old about to start high school. Naturally, he is terrified. So, the night before his first day, he begins writing letters to an anonymous recipient, and winds up chronicling the events and experiences that unfold over the next year. Encouraged by his English teacher to "participate" more, he becomes friends with Patrick and Sam; seniors and step-siblings who induct him into their world of indie music, house parties, love, sex, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, experimental drugs, and late nights at the Big Boy. In the process, Charlie learns that friendship, like life, is full of beauty and pain, and it is only by accepting both that one can truly learn to live.

Through his letters, readers are given a glimpse into Charlie's observant mind and sensitive heart, which often think and feel far beyond the confines of his adolescent frame. This narrative style is powerful in its potential to draw audience members into the personhood of its protagonist. Provided with insight into Charlie's rationale for the decisions he makes and the often raw emotions that fuel them, we are able to think and feel as he does, and in doing so, exercise our skills as empathizers.

While an excellent book in this sense for helping high school-age readers develop their own cognitive and affective empathic abilities, Charlie also demonstrates aspects of perspective taking and affective sharing through his interactions with other characters. In this way, his role is transformed from a recipient of his audience's empathy into a model of what empathy can look like in context, enhancing the book's potential to facilitate such practice.

Ever the thinker, the novel is rich with instances where Charlie documents his mental process of taking on different people's perspectives. Waiting for his sister in a doctor's office, he imagines what the lives of the models on the magazine covers are like, how having their picture taken that day might have affected them, and whether they think about the impact their photos have on others. A mix tape made for a friend prompts him to think about what the songs have meant to people at different times in their lives, while adopting the perspective of a bully and comparing it to his own experiences helps Charlie make sense of the other student's actions.

Charlie's inner world is also coloured by strong emotion, much of which comes from

sharing the feelings of people around him. This often manifests in his relationship with Sam, throughout which he actively experiences her pain and sadness, and uses them to guide his attempts to care for and support her, even if that means sacrificing his own interests. When visiting his dad's old home, Charlie describes being able to feel what his dad felt "on the night when he realized that if he didn't leave, it would never be his life," tapping into his capacity for affective sharing in order to better understand why his extended family functions the way it does.

Charlie is far from perfect. Repressed memories of childhood trauma, as well as a heavily-implied mental processing disorder, make it difficult for him to practice cognitive self-awareness and emotional regulation, without which his empathic concern sometimes devolves into personal distress (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011). Nevertheless, the portrayal of empathy in his character is all the more useful to readers for its imperfection, as it challenges us to consider our own shortcomings, while also recognizing the life-changing significance of developing this skill.

References

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Gerdes, K. E., Lietz, C. A., & Segal, E. A. (2011). Measuring empathy in the 21st century: Development of an empathy index rooted in social cognitive neuroscience and social justice. Social Work Research, 35(2), 83-93. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost. com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=c8h&AN=108239609&site=ehost-live