

Youth Theatre and Mental Health: A Booklist

Abstract: Due to the effects of discrimination and the related social determinants of health they experience, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ experience overall higher rates of mental health disorders. The rate increases in those under the age of 26. (LGBT Youthline 2021) As librarians, we have a responsibility to confront this reality in the ways that we can. Sometimes, something as “simple” as a book can help teens feel less alone. Theatre has often been a safe space and home for 2SLGBTQIA+ teens. Offering teens books that link theatre with a discussion of mental health can be a way to show teens that you see them, hear them, and care that they can see their lives and the things they care about reflected in fiction. This booklist offers resources to librarians who may make this booklist into a display or resource in their library.

Disclaimer: Theatre is not always a perfect space for those suffering from poor mental health. Several of the books below offer a discussion of how we can make these spaces better.

Will Grayson, Will Grayson by John Green and David Levithan

Will Grayson, Will Grayson teaches readers how to love in the face of discrimination, pain, and heartbreak. Set in the suburbs of present-day (2010) Chicago, the story swaps

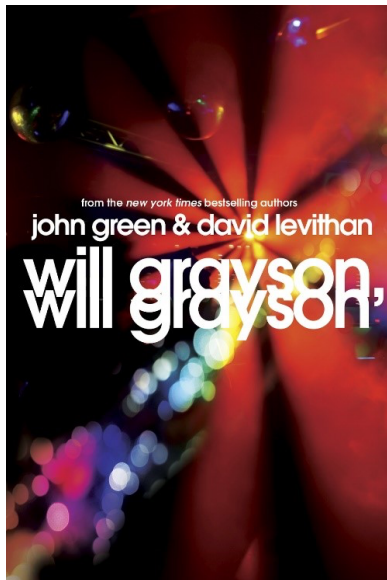


Figure 1

between the perspectives of two hilarious teenagers, both named Will Grayson, who despite sharing the same name come from very different socio-economic backgrounds. One Will is from north Chicago, and one is from Evanston, a wealthy suburb. While both Will’s struggle with their mental health and relationships, North Chicago Will is also gay and struggling with his identity. After they meet by chance at an adult bookstore, they discover that they have a lot to learn from one another, and their lives become intertwined. The backdrop of the story involves a gay love story between Evanston Will’s friend Tiny and North Chicago Will, as Tiny puts on a play that speaks to the book’s themes of humour, love and friendship. Will Grayson, Will Grayson was the first book starring gay characters to appear in the New York Times bestseller list for children’s chapter books.

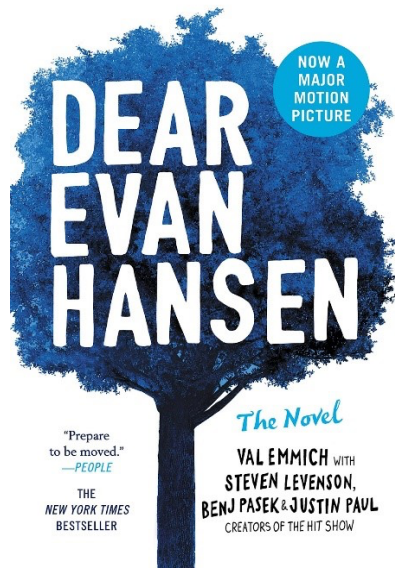
References

Green, J., & Levithan, D. (2010). *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Dutton Books for Young Readers

Figure 1: ThriftBooks. (2019, November 12). Will Grayson, Will Grayson book by John Green.

ThriftBooks. https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/will-grayson-will-grayson_john-green_david-levithan/253204/

Dear Evan Hansen: The Novel by Val Emmich, Steven Levenson, Benji Pasek and Justin Paul.



There's a reason this play has been adapted into countless iterations, including this wonderful novel version from Val Emmich, Steven Levenson, Benji Pasek, and Justin Paul. A passionate and loving description of one t

Figure 2

een's struggle with loneliness and depression, anxiety, and suicidality. As Evan gets caught up in a web of lies involving the death of a classmate and his family, he eventually learns how much better it is to simply accept himself than change himself and manipulate the truth in order to get others to like him. Adapting a Musical into a book is an extremely difficult task, but these authors did an excellent job evoking the emotion present in all the familiar songs from Dear Evan Hansen. While this character is not explicitly queer, this play nonetheless portrays what it might be like for teens to be in the closet, hiding and feeling invisible or like they don't

belong in the world surrounding them. The lead role has often been played by gay actors, and the LGBTQ community has often communicated that they believe this play to depict stories familiar to them.

References

Emmich, V., Levenson, S., Pasek, B., & Paul, J. (2018). *Dear Evan Hansen: THE NOVEL*. Poppy.

Figure 2: *Dear Evan Hansen: THE NOVEL* : Emmich, Val, Levenson, Steven, Pasek, Benj, Paul,

Justin: Amazon.ca: Books. (n.d.). Retrieved March 31, 2023, from

<https://www.amazon.ca/Dear-Evan-Hansen-Val-Emmich/dp/0316420239>

Drama by Raina Telgemeier, colored by Gurihiru

It will be impossible for you or your pre-teens to read this book without a goofy smile plastered to your faces. The main character, 8th grader Callie, is determined to make her middle school play set into something spectacular, despite her lack of technical skill and

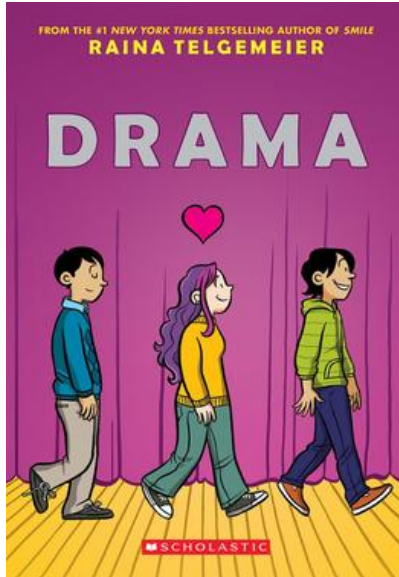


Figure 3

experience. Callie and her friends love theatre in that unabashed, borderline-obsessed way that young teens often do. This book is for any teen that can't help but sing (shout) entire musical theatre soundtracks in their entirety whenever they are ever so slightly prompted. It's a story about the role theatre can play in helping us explore who we are, especially in middle school age groups. It could be a lovely, gentle introduction to LGBTQ themes, as ideas around gender, sexuality, and coming out as you come of age, are explored. Telgemeier does a wonderful job of normalizing LGBTQ identity in the novel by not emphasizing these themes more than others, like toxic masculinity, which it also addresses. For this reason, it was the 7th most banned book between 2010 and 2019 (Wikipedia, 2023). Some critics have also accused the book of skipping over a discussion of race, despite the play that

the students put on being set in a white-washed antebellum south. (Wikipedia, 2023). As librarians, we should always be aware when the books we choose to display and discuss have faced this type of controversy, but it should not stop us from reading and discussing the book with the teens in our library. These topics need to be brought up with the teens in our lives, not ignored.

This book is joyfully illustrated and great for anyone looking for a quick read, or for reluctant readers. It is also a wonderful choice for those of us dipping our toes into graphic novels for the first time and is especially recommended for those ages-12 to 15, as it takes place in a middle school with middle school characters.

References

Telgemeier. (2014). *Drama* (ebook). Scholastic Inc.

Figure 1: *Drama* (graphic novel). (2023). In *Wikipedia*.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Drama_\(graphic_novel\)&oldid=1137088547](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Drama_(graphic_novel)&oldid=1137088547)

Echo After Echo by Amy Rose Capetta

Trigger warning for mention of eating disorders, rape and suicide.



Figure 4

18-year-old Zara arrives in New York to play her dream role at her dream theatre, directed by her dream director! She has dreamed of this role since she was a kid, and she quit her last year of high school for her big debut on the stage. Little does she know; the theatre is about to descend into chaos and drama after a murder turns into a mystery that the cast and crew believe is a long-standing curse on the theatre. On top of it all, Zara has to contend with a douche co-star and a director that insists she focus on nothing but the play. How is she supposed to do it all when one of the crew, Eli is becoming the only thing she can think about? A beautiful f/f romance takes place amidst the chaos of the lead-up to the show's debut. Can Zara sort it all out?

The writing in this book is poetic, almost lyrical. The reader will be swept away into the whirlwind of the theatre world while relating to Zara's struggles with her mental health, and it is revealed that many of the characters struggle with mental health as well. The characters are able to open up to one another about their mental health in a way that draws them closer together. This book will appeal to any teens with an interest in theatre, mental health, LGBTQ themes, or all three. Recommended for ages 15 and up for mature themes and some sexual content.

References

Capetta, A. R. (2021). *Echo After Echo*. Candlewick.

Figure 4: *Echo After Echo*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 9, 2023, from

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27258116-echo-after-echo>

The Backstagers Vol. 1 by James Tynion, Illustrated by Rian Sygh



Figure 5

In what might be the all-time sweetest graphic novel about theatre ever written, we meet and get to know Jory as he joins up with the stage crew at his new high school. Jory is a character many theatre teens might relate to- a bit awkward, coming into himself, and a social outcast, yet is secretly the coolest person you'll ever meet. We stay with Jory as he goes through all sorts of classic teenage coming of age moments- (making his first group of close friends, coming to terms with his sexual identity, and navigating some rocky mental health) and not-so-classic ones (discovering an entire underground universe beneath the school stage, and having adventures therein). James Tynion demonstrates that quality friendships can be made by bonding over shared interests, in this case theatre, and the power and impact of that friendship on the mental health of LGBTQ teens.

The illustrations are unique and adorable, and each character leaps out of the pages with their unique features and style. The writing is fun, upbeat and light. The language is clear and simple. Recommended for teens ages 13 and up.

References

Tynion, J. (2017). *The Backstagers Vol. 1* (Illustrated edition). BOOM! Box.

Figure 5: *Echo After Echo*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 9, 2023, from

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27258116-echo-after-echo>

Honourable Mention:

[Still/Falling by Greenthumb Theatre](#)

Not only does Ontario's Green Thumb Theatre offer this play online through a digital tour, they also offer an entire study guide for teens about the play, opening up discussions of mental health using theatre! The play follows teen Nina as her so-called "perfect" life becomes difficult to handle as her mental health slips away without anyone in her life really noticing. It's funny

and smart and it was written by a teen! The accompanying study guide is detailed, informative, and super helpful! Give it a try with your teens!