

MASSACHUSETTS LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2023

HONORS LEVEL III

Dear Ned Vizzini,

How did it become a funny story?

How did a book about crippling depression, and a teenager on the verge of committing suicide manage to make me laugh?

I had never read about mental health before. Fantasy books were all I knew until I read *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. Books where the protagonists fought dragons and goblins instead of the urge to hide in bathrooms. I would rather hide behind the hypothetical dilemmas of made-up worlds than a story that touches on something so tangible. And can you blame me? Reading was an escape; something that took me out of this world and into another. We already live in a dystopian society, why would I choose to stay in this one over one with magic?

It took me a few tries to get through this book. There was always something that scared me away. Your novel was just so real. I couldn't imagine that what happened in the setting of the book could never happen in real life. That the protagonist couldn't possibly remind me of myself. Nonetheless, the things that drew me away from your book are the same things that grabbed my attention. Craig Gilner felt more real to me than any character I've ever met. I recognized some of his traits in me.

Hiding in bathrooms? Check. Severe procrastination? Check. Constant "cycling?" Check. "Tentacles?" Check. I've been battling my anxiety and the person inside my head just like Craig has. Everyone's battle is a little different though. For me, the main opponent is anxiety. The person inside my head makes me doubt everything I do constantly. I check the same things again and again. I have lists to ensure I don't forget anything, but I still end up doubting if I put everything on the list. Craig had the man in his head tightening a rope around his stomach, and the person in my head tightens ropes around my throat. I want to speak, but I can't because the more I think about what I want to say, the angrier the person in my head gets, and the angrier he gets, the more he pulls. Every yank distorts the words even more, so when I'm finally able to get them out, they're in fragments. The stuttering triggers the cycling. If I can't talk in class, then I can't ask questions when I need to, which means I won't understand something and will probably get a question wrong on a test, which means my grade will be lower, which means my GPA will be lower, which means I won't get into the college I want, which means I won't be able to get the job I want, which means I won't have the life I want, which means I won't be happy. If I can't talk in class, then what's the point of living?

When the person in my head is pulling too much, I put on my headphones. Just like Craig made his maps. The music drowns out their voice and pries the rope loose. I didn't know how to put any of this into words until Craig did.

The more I realized these similarities, the harder it was to continue reading. Your hilarious book was probably the most terrifying thing I've ever read. Somehow though, I managed to finish it.

If you made Craig's life perfect at the end of the book, then that would contradict the real feelings you established. Books about mental health should not end with complete peace of mind, that would just be a lie. I don't think I could have handled an unrealistic ending after all the parts of myself I recognized in Craig.

Even though this book terrified me, I still found myself laughing somehow. Just like how everything that drew me away from your novel attracted me towards it, everything that scared me made me laugh. It was just so real. You somehow managed to intertwine pain and humor, because that's what real life is. I know things will not magically fix in my mind, but now I have hope that they will get a little better eventually. The person in my head is slowly starting to fade.

Sincerely,

Jane