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**Book Talk:** *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher

About the Author



* Jay Asher is an acclaimed author of Young Adult literature. He first got his inspiration for writing YA books in a Children’s Literature Appreciation class at San Luis Obispo High School. After graduating, he attended Cuesta Community College and later transferred to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo but dropped out his senior year to pursue writing.
* Asher got his inspiration to write his very first novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* while on a tour of a museum. He was given a Walkman where an unknown narrator described every exhibit on the tour through an audio recording. Around the same time, a relative of his attempted to commit suicide, which prompted him to write a novel to raise suicide awarness, so he merged the unique narrative format and complex social issue to create *Thirteen Reasons Why.*
* *Thirteen Reasons Why* was a major success, receiving praise from both critics and fellow YA authors and was later adapted into a Netflix original series in 2017. Asher continues to write novels aimed at teenagers; his second novel being *The Future of Us* written collaboratively with co-author Carolyn Macker. In his spare time, Asher enjoys spending time with his wife, Joan Marie, in their California home.

* Author Website: <http://jayasher.blogspot.com/>

Summary of Novel

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 *Thirteen Reasons Why* follows the stories of two main characters: Hannah Baker and Clay Jensen. Even though it’s difficult for him to admit, Clay was in love with Hannah. He feels as though she was the most beautiful, perfect girl he had ever met in his entire life, but his dreams of ever really getting to know her are shattered when Hannah commits suicide by swallowing a handful of pills. One day, when Clay returns home from school, he finds a mysterious package propped up against his front door. After opening it, he finds it is filled with seven cassette tapes, each one with a number painted in blue nail polish on both sides, accumulating into thirteen different recordings Clay must listen to. With the help of his friend’s Walkman, Clay listens to the tapes, which happen to be recordings left behind by Hannah, each narrative targeting a different person responsible for why Hannah decided to end her life. The more Clay listens to the tapes, the more he learns about Hannah and how she wasn’t the girl he thought he knew.

Significant Quotes

““ Betrayal. It’s one of the worst feelings. I know you didn’t mean to let me down. In fact, most of you listening probably had no idea what you were doing-what you were truly doing (13).”

* This quote is very significant to the story as a whole because it provides a prominent reason as to why Hannah took her own life. Throughout each tape, Hannah elaborates on the novel’s numerous supporting characters and how she felt herself becoming either a friend or a love interest to them. However, as the stories unfold, Hannah reveals how each of these characters betrayed her in some way and ultimately lead her to the fatal decision of suicide through a snowball effect, meaning each and every betrayal only made her feel worse about herself until her will to live vanishes. This message is not only crucially appropriate to the novel’s theme, but also helps raise awareness amongst the teen readers of how friends are very important in everybody’s life but if you choose to hurt them emotionally, it will take a grave effect on their mental health and lead to serious repercussions.

““ For the longest time, from almost day one at this school, it seemed that I was the only one who cared about me. Put all of your heart into getting that first kiss… only to have it thrown back in your face. Have the only two people you truly trust turn against you. Have one of them use you to get back at the other, and then be accused of betrayal. Are you getting it now? Am I going too fast? (144).”

* This essential excerpt supplies more insight to Hannah’s suicidal choice and more overall feeling to somebody who is feeling as though they should just give up. Hannah was not only new to her high school, but she was also knew in town and it took her awhile before she was able to make any friends. However, all of the people she gets to know eventually push her aside, accusing her of being an ugly person on the inside. Hannah gradually starts to feel alone with no one to turn to, which is an issue a lot of young adults face in their lives. When they begin to feel alone and outcasted, their mental stability begins to drastically alter, leading most of them to self-harm and suicide to cope with their depressed feelings. Not only does this passage elaborate more on Hannah’s reason for suicide, but it also helps readers understand how someone who is depressed truly feels.

““ For everyone listening, let me be clear. I did not say no or push his hands away. All I did was turn my head, clench my teeth, and fight back tears. And he saw that. He even told me to relax. “Just relax,” he said. “Everything will be okay.” As if letting him finger me was going to cure all my problems. But in the end, I never told you to get away… and you didn’t. You stopped rubbing circles on my stomach. Instead, you rubbed back and forth, gently, along my waist. Your pinky made its way under the top of my panties and rolled back and forth, from hip to hip. Then another finger slipped below, pushing your pinky further down, brushing it through my hair (265).”

* This passage represents some of the most important messages from this novel. To clarify, Hannah was in a hot tub with Bryce Walker, a boy from her school, at this moment. Bryce took advantage of the situation and raped Hannah. Due to her already melancholy attitude, Hannah felt as though this was the “cherry” on top of all the problems she was experiencing in her teenage life. Hannah felt as though Bryce raping her took away her will to live and how from this point on, she would never be able to see the good in things and would live the rest of her life in torment and mental pain. Not only does this quote state what action really finalized Hannah’s decision to kill herself, it also promotes how rape is quite prevalent amongst teenagers and really destroys their mental health. Rape is a very serious issue in the lives of young adult but most people tell victims to just “move on” and not let it cloud thier judgement, but this is far more worse than the act of rape itself. By including this scene in the novel, Asher makes it abundantly clear how rape does occur in the teenage population and can lead to horrendous outcomes for the victims.

Why Teens Should Read This

* **This book raises suicide awareness for teens.**

The teenage years are notorious for being the time where people struggle with mental instabilities and depression. Those who choose not to seek help for their negative, brooding emotions often do attempt suicide and some do not survive. By reading this book, teens could perhaps try not to follow the same path Hannah takes and instead try to seek help from family, friends, and professionals so they may continue to live their lives without the interference of depression and suicidal tendencies.

* **Teens can learn how to cope with the loss of a loved one.**

 Clay really does mourn Hannah after her death and feels bad he never got to tell her

How he felt about her (at least not while sober). However, after finishing the tapes, he learns not to take anything for granted and pursues Skye, a crush from his early childhood. Mourning the loss of a loved one is very difficult, but teens could use Clay as an example to not let anything stand in the way of you any longer, as life is very short and can be taken away very easily. As a method of their own emotional healing, teens can promise themselves not to let life just pass them by and they will try to accomplish whatever it is they wish to accomplish.

* **The book correlates with “Real-Life Experiences.”**

 The book touches on some very serious issues all involving teens, including

 suicide, betrayal, social isolation, bullying, stalking, and rape. Not many people choose to

 discuss these heavy subjects with teens because they are still considered “taboo” and much

 too sensitive for adults to discuss with teens. By reading this book, teens who may be

 struggling with these or similar issues may find themselves able to connect with

 Hannah and attempt to bring light back into their dark times. Teens could surround

 themselves with friends who like them for who they are, take an interest in creative outlets

 so they may be able to cope with their inner turmoil, or even seek those who specialize in

 assisting people with their conflicts (and hopefully receive better advice than what Hannah

received from Mr. Porter, the guidance counselor).

Text Complexity

* **Quantitative**

\*Lexile Score: HL550L \*ATOS Book Level: 3.9

\*Age Range: 13 to 17 \*Interest Level: 6th Grade and Up

 Both of these sites determine *Thirteen Reasons Why* is most suitable for teenage students. The narration and plot are easy to follow but the content needs to be age restricted. As previously mentioned, the book touches on serious social issues threatening the lives of teenagers everyday and may be too intense for young readers so it’s best they read the book when they get older and more mature.

* **Qualitative**

 The book fits well with Exeter qualities #1, #2, and #6. The book works perfectly with the first Exeter quality because it follows a unique narrative formation. There are technically two narrators, Clay, who is a first-person narrator directly telling the reader what is happening, and then Hannah, who adds plot detail through the use of flashback with her audio recordings. This can allow students how there is more than one way to tell a story and they can incorporate as many different narrative styles as they wish.

 The second Exeter quality works well with this book as well because the book does keep the reader at the edge of their seat, wanting to know what has happened. Based off of my own experience, I read the whole book in one sitting, as the plot was very intriguing and just made me want to read all the way to the very end to learn of what happened to Hannah while she was alive. Along the way, many serious conflicts occur, leading the reader to finish as soon as possible so they may see how the conflict is resolved (if resolved at all).

 The sixth Exeter quality also correlates with this book very well because it’s main plotpoint focuses on a theme often disregarded when teaching high school students real life experiences: mental instability and suicide. By reading this book, the students will learn how they may not be the only ones struggling with suicidal thoughts and it could help educate them about when it is the right time to talk to somebody else about personal difficulties.

Teaching Ideas

* Teachers could use this book as a basis for poetry writing lessons. Hannah turns to poetry in order to express all of the melancholy she feels so teachers could designate a day for a poetry lesson where students can think of something that has been on their mind for quite awhile and write a poem to get this feeling(s) off their chest.
* This book would be a good companion novel for *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, a canonical text often read by high school students. Both novels center on two female characters who find themselves rejected by everybody around them and both characters commit suicide in the end, so *Thirteen Reasons Why* could be offered as a modern take on *The Awakening.*
* The book has a unique narrative format where there are two narrators. Teachers could have a lesson on creative writing and have students write their own story where two characters tell the story, so they may try to learn more than just the conventional singular narrator structure.
* The only characters who the plot follows are Hannah and Clay. All other supporting characters only appear briefly or are mentioned sporadically. As a method of teaching students the power of perspective, they could break up into small groups, choose a supporting character, and write about the plot through the perspective of their chosen supporting character.
* Students could hold a mock trial centered on a crime related to the plot. Students could be reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, another canonical text, and many scenes in this novel are set in a courtroom. To give students an idea of how a trial should be handled, students could perform a mock trial where they argue Bryce Walker is either guilty or not guilty of raping both Hannah and Jessica Davis.

**Adolescents in the Search for Meaning**

 In regards to *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning,* the book fits well with “Books about Real-Life Experiences.” These types of books follow young adults as they struggle with overall life, whether it be not having any friends, overcoming rape, bullying by peers, etc. *Thirteen Reasons Why* follows Hannah through her first couple years of high school where she undergoes both emotional and physical abuse. Even though adults try to ignore these issues, they are extremely prevalent within the teenage population and suicide rates raise drastically when teenagers do not learn how to overcome both emotinal and physical abuses. This book, as well as the other books in this category, can educate both the teenage and adult population about how serious these issues are and how crucial it is to do whatever it is to be done to avoid teenagers from harming themselves to escape torment.