

# AMHERST BULLETIN

GUEST COLUMN

## How '13 Reasons Why' gets it right

By MIKE ALVAREZ

Since its premiere, and with the recent announcement of a second season, the Netflix original series "13 Reasons Why" has been criticized by mental health professionals and educators for failing to address mental illness and for sensationalistic and triggering depictions of suicide.

Despite arguments that the show is irresponsible and that teens shouldn't be allowed to watch it, "13 Reasons Why" is a much-needed catalyst for starting conversations between parents and teens about the complex reality of suicide.

Based on the 2007 novel by Jay Asher, "13 Reasons Why" tells the story of Hannah Baker (played by Katherine Langford), who leaves behind 13 cassette tapes in which she explains her decision to end her life. The series jumps back and forth in time, between frank depictions of Hannah's painful life circumstances and the subsequent impact of her suicide on the people she left behind, including those whom she holds responsible.

One of the show's alleged failings is that it doesn't acknowledge what many critics feel to be the root cause of suicide: mental illness. However, if we step outside the medical frame of psychiatry and take the subjective view of the deceased into account, as the show does, we find that the human causes of suicide are manifold. From Hannah's perspective, the reasons for her suicide include bullying, cyberbullying, defamation and harassment, inadequate social support, rape, betrayal, slut shaming — the list goes on.

Clinical psychologist and Rutgers professor emeritus George Atwood wrote in "The Abyss of Madness" that people are depressed because depressing things happen in life. But because we are so frightened by the thought that suicide is a door through which any of us could walk, we place its keys in the hands of select individuals, whom we mark as mentally ill.

When a verdict of death by suicide is reached, we use the verdict to retroactively diagnose a mental illness, which in turn serves as the explanation for the suicide. The consequence, however, is that de-

pression and suicide are stripped of their human contexts.

As someone who has been diagnosed with a mood, anxiety, and thought disorder, and who has been admitted to a mental hospital after a failed suicide attempt, I do not dispute the reality of mental illness. Rather, I dispute simplistic attempts to medicalize and attribute suicide to a singular cause, whatever that cause may be.

My own struggles with suicidal-ity and ethnographic work with suicidal individuals has taught me that suicide is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon — as the show's title suggests and as the show itself powerfully illustrates.

Because "13 Reasons Why" takes the decedent's point of view, it also opens itself to the charge of glamorizing and sensationalizing suicide. As the argument goes, the dead girl is valorized and her tormentors vilified. Her suicide becomes a force of good for the community, bringing the troubles of her classmates to light.

Such charges grossly oversimplify, however, ignoring the show's portrayal of the lasting pain suicide leaves in its wake. Viewers witness an array of other characters, including and especially Hannah Baker's parents, who unravel in the wake of her suicide as they are beset by guilt, anger, confusion and remorse.

Such criticisms also ignore that Hannah blames herself for others' misfortune as much as she blames others for her misfortunes. She is as human and as flawed as the people who tormented her in life. Furthermore, there is nothing at all glamorous about the way her suicide is depicted in a tight scene that is harrowing to witness.

According to Michele Aaron, senior lecturer in film studies at the University of Birmingham and author of "Death and the Moving Image," female victims of suicide are typically "necromanticized" in popular media. Like the Lisbon sisters in Sofia Coppola's 1999 film "The Virgin Suicides," they are rendered beautiful in death, their bodies unblemished by the means of their demise.

But "13 Reasons Why" does away with this trope by showing Hannah's death to be both messy and painful. Gone is the soft-playing

music that ordinarily accompanies female suicides in fictional media. Instead, viewers are confronted with the stark reality of suicide, with Hannah's dying gasps as life slowly and painfully bleeds out of her.

Understandably, the show's graphic depiction of suicide has given rise to concerns that it may be triggering for vulnerable youth. In a review of 47 studies exploring the relationship between the representation of suicide in entertainment media and actual suicidal behavior, professors Jane Pirkis and Warwick Blood from the universities of Melbourne and Canberra, respectively, found equivocal support for viewer imitation of on-screen suicide. While some studies found little or no correlation, they urge readers to err on the side of caution.

Having said that, as professors Pirkis and Blood note, studies tend to focus on the potential for harm rather than the potential for good. Moreover, studies of the media's effects on vulnerable populations often fail to take into account characteristics of audiences and their social environments.

As communication scholars (myself included) will point out, viewers are not passive recipients of media messages but active interpreters and makers of meaning. Audience reception of media isn't uniform, and content alone doesn't determine human behavior.

Forbidding teenagers from watching "13 Reasons Why" not only perpetuates the societal taboo surrounding suicide, it precludes meaningful dialogue between teens and their parents. Moreover, it guarantees that teens will seek out the show without the benefit of a parent providing guidance and context.

It's important that we not succumb to the panic surrounding suicide's depiction in media, but use it as an opportunity to discuss suicide openly, in all of its human complexity.

*Mike Alvarez, of Northampton, is a Paul & Daisy Soros Fellow and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His forthcoming book is titled, "The Paradox of Suicide and Creativity."*