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## **Mental Health Themes in Australia's 'Prized' Books: Implications for School Library Collections**

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### **Introduction to the Research Problem**

According to Reynolds (2010), mental health themes have been increasingly incorporated into contemporary young adult literature in recent years. At the same time, research has explored mental health in young adult literature as a means of understanding mental health in adolescence (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2020; Richmond, 2019) and improving mental health literacy and student wellbeing through reading (O'Brien, 2022; Shephard, 2023) and particularly in school libraries (Kirkland, 2022; Merga, 2021; 2022; Raffaele, 2021). Due to the links between prize-winners and collection development (Cable & Tian, 2022), this research examines the presence of mental health concerns in Australia's premier prize for children's literature, the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA). This study reports on a sub-set of data taken from



11 years of CBCA shortlisted award-winners to understand whether mental health is a theme in these narratives. The research reported explores this through the research question:

What are the recurring themes of mental health in the CBCA Shortlisted titles in the Book of the Year: Older Readers category from 2013-2024?

## **Literature Review**

While studies have examined the CBCA prize-winners for diversity and representation (Brown, 2023; Caple & Tian, 2021; Garrison, 2019a; 2019b; Garrison et al., 2021), they have not focused on mental health themes. As young adult literature is known to help develop empathy and pro-social behaviours in readers (Guarisco et al., 2017; Johnson, 2012), scholars have argued that texts that allow adolescent readers greater exposure to characters with a diverse range of experiences, including those with mental health concerns, should be readily available (Collins & Lazard, 2020; Hatley, 2014).

The connection between adolescent literature and wellbeing through reading is recognised in the field (e.g., Johnson, 2017; O'Brien, 2022) with calls for schools to include contemporary young adult literature (Jewkes, 2019), particularly texts that tell “diverse stories” (Fitzsimmons & Wilson, 2021). Schools may limit their collection development due to individual preferences (Merga & Mason, 2019), budget restraints or censorship (Tudor et al, 2023), and links with curriculum (Booth & Narayan, 2020), and therefore may exclude controversial texts such as those with challenging themes such as suicide. Yet there is often little issue with incorporating prize-winning titles. This research, therefore, addressed this divide by identifying a range of texts highly regarded for their literary merit as acknowledged through their ‘prize-winning’ status, and include recognised and realistic portrayals of mental health in adolescence.

## **Methodology**

The sample of 72 titles was collated from the CBCA Shortlist, honours and winning titles in the Book of the Year: Older Readers category between 2013 and 2024. Data on social issues and mental health themes in the texts was collected across several levels. Initially, the researchers used the catalogue records from the Schools Cataloguing Information Service (SCIS), which is

used by 85% of Australian schools (A. Shaw, personal communication, May 6, 2024). Researchers identified mental health concerns and/or social or personal issues by examining language used in the summary text on the SCIS catalogue record of each title. Book reviews from publisher websites and the crowd-sourced platform Goodreads were then scanned for more detail. Two authors had also read many of these books for previous research (e.g., Garrison, 2019a, 2019b; Garrison et al., 2021; Shephard, 2016, 2018, 2023; Shephard & Garrison, 2024). Data was then inductively coded by each researcher and descriptively analysed to describe the data set. In a second coding phase, the categories in our sample were compared to the ten categories based on the DSM-V used in Richmond's (2019) text, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Struggles through Fictional Characters*, shown in Table 1 with findings.

## Findings

Within the 72 titles in this sample, each year in the study period included at least one text identified as including mental health concerns. (See titles in Appendix A.) Further, researchers found that the development of the protagonist's mental health concern was often preceded by a social or personal issue. These included domestic and family violence, grief, intergenerational trauma, bullying, negative self-image, homelessness, terminal illness, and issues around gender, racism or the experiences of refugees. Exactly one-third (24) of the 72 titles were identified as fitting within Richmond's (2019) categories, and some in several categories as detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Texts and Mental Health Concerns linked to Richmond's (2019) Categories**

Richmond theme	Mental health concerns	Texts
Anxiety disorder and related disorders	Anxiety, panic attacks, social anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Creepy and Maud</i> (Touchell, 2012)</li> <li>• <i>Wildlife</i> (Wood, 2013)</li> <li>• <i>The Pause</i> (Larkin, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>The Secret Science of Magic</i> (Keil, 2017)</li> <li>• <i>This is How We Change the Ending</i> (Wakefield, 2019)</li> <li>• <i>Where We Begin</i> (Nieman, 2020)</li> <li>• <i>The Greatest Thing</i> (Searle, 2022)</li> </ul>

Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity disorder and related disorders	ADHD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Peta Lyre's Rating Normal</i> (Whateley, 2020)</li> </ul>
Depressive disorders	Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Pause</i> (Larkin, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>Yellow</i> (Jacobson, 2016)</li> <li>• <i>Between Us</i> (Atkins, 2018)</li> <li>• <i>The Other Side of Tomorrow</i> (Lawrence, 2022)</li> <li>• <i>The Quiet and the Loud</i> (Fox, 2023)</li> </ul>
Feeding and eating disorders	Eating disorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Greatest Thing</i> (Searle, 2022)</li> </ul>
Nonsuicidal self-injury and suicidal behavior disorders	Self-harm, suicidal ideation, suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Inbetween Days</i> (Wakefield, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>The Bone Sparrow</i> (Fraillon, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>The Pause</i> (Larkin, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>The End of the World is Bigger than Love</i> (Bell, 2020)</li> <li>• <i>When Rain Turns to Snow</i> (Godwin, 2020)</li> <li>• <i>Tiger Daughter</i> (Lim, 2021)</li> </ul>
Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders	Psychiatric illness, psychosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Shiny Guys</i> (MacLeod, 2012)</li> <li>• <i>Ballad for a Mad Girl</i> (Wakefield, 2017)</li> <li>• <i>How It Feels to Float</i> (Fox, 2019)</li> </ul>
Substance-related and addictive disorders	Substance abuse, alcoholism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Shiny Guys</i> (MacLeod, 2012)</li> </ul>
Trauma- and stressor-related disorders	PTSD, self-mutism, intergenerational trauma,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Ink Bridge</i> (Grant, 2012)</li> <li>• <i>The Protected</i> (Zorn, 2014)</li> <li>• <i>The Minnow</i> (Sweeney, 2014)</li> <li>• <i>The Pause</i> (Larkin, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>The Bone Sparrow</i> (Fraillon, 2015)</li> <li>• <i>Ballad for a Mad Girl</i> (Wakefield, 2017)</li> <li>• <i>Small Spaces</i> (Epstein, 2018)</li> <li>• <i>The Quiet and the Loud</i> (Fox, 2023)</li> </ul>

All but two of Richmond's ten categories – Bipolar Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and their related disorders – were recognised in the prize-winning texts. While other titles contained references to mental illness, some were hard to place in Richmond's categories. For example, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)\_often found co-occurring with mental health concerns such as anxiety, depressive disorders, and OCD (Amaze, 2021)\_is not captured by Richmond. ASD appears in four of the texts in this study.



## **Discussion and Implications**

Earlier research has noted that access to diverse literature is important to support young readers in understanding themselves, others, and their world (Rawson, 2011). The key finding of this study that one-third of the CBCA prize-winners from the past decade address mental health concerns mirrors contemporary concerns of adolescent readers and allows them to see themselves and their peers in the pages of a book (Shephard, 2023). Reflecting the increasingly complicated society our adolescents experience, this study shows that more recently published texts tended to portray multiple issues, providing a more realistic view of the complexity of mental health. When collections include these prize-winning narratives focused on mental health concerns, teacher librarians are better able to support the wellbeing of adolescents which previous research has shown is a key role for school libraries (Merga, 2021; 2022).

## **Conclusion**

With the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns in young people globally, providing access to texts that show the characteristics and behaviours associated with mental health concerns and how they affect adolescents is vital for supporting mental health literacy. Where limited budgets or a lack of time to fully explore options come into play, this research suggests that teacher librarians can use the CBCA Awards as a selection tool.



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## Appendix A. CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers Shortlists 2023-2024

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