

Can “You” Help Me Understand?

Second-Person Narratives and the Depiction of Depression in A.M. Jenkins’s *Damage* and Chris Lynch’s *Freewill*

About a year ago, an adolescent who is very close to me swallowed a bottle full of pills. Thankfully, she lived and was able to begin treatment for depression—a disease that she has been battling, unbeknownst to me, for years. She isn’t alone. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately four percent of adolescents suffer from major depression each year (“Let’s Talk”). David Hartman, a Virginia psychiatrist, explains that depression in adolescence is brought on by “the moves from childhood to adolescence and adulthood” (Moore 154):

“Adolescence is so turbulent; everything seems exaggerated; the smallest things can become overwhelming. When a boyfriend and a girlfriend break up or when there’s a bad report card which angers parents, some teens cannot cope” (Moore 155-156).

Parents and other adults who care about an adolescent suffering from depression may wonder what they can do to help. I knew to seek out medical help for my friend and to listen to her, but I wanted to do more than help her; I wanted to understand her. While reading about the symptoms associated with major depression and talking with my friend about her feelings was helpful in trying to understand what she was going through, I didn’t feel like I could really comprehend this illness. Then I read a journal entry from one of my twelfth-grade creative writing students. Unlike a mere list of symptoms, his description helped me to grasp the feelings associated with depression and, in some sense, experience the disease myself:

The feeling of depression . . . The sinking feeling of the world becoming too much to handle. Like quicksand it pulls you down and down. The harder you try and fight the faster you sink and the harder it pulls. The feeling that makes you just want to lay in your bed and never get out. Don’t want to watch TV, can’t sleep, and my stomach is full but you still feel as though the black hole in you sucks everything inside of you into nothingness. You sit staring . . . at nothing and everything all at the same time, but you stay silent as a mouse, because you are fine. Everyone probably feels this way. It will pass. But still it stays like a stain on a white shirt that won’t come out, but if you bleach then the shirt might ruin. Like there is nothing to live for but for the sake that you can’t die, but still you are silent, because it is a dirty secret that will make people look at you different, funny. But you hope, wish, pray for it to just go away. You just want to feel happy, energized, alive. Not the dead feeling that drags you down deep into the darker side of life that most don’t like to talk about . . .

After reading my student’s journal entry, I realized that other narratives about depression might be helpful to me in better understanding the disease. As Michael Cart has said, statistical reports may capably describe adolescent issues, “but to emotionally comprehend the problem, to understand how it *feels* to be trapped in that skin, we turn to [a] . . . *novel*” (269; emphasis Cart’s).

Several months later, I happened across Chris Lynch’s *Freewill*. I was struck by Lynch’s use of the second person to depict the disease, and then I remembered that a year earlier I’d picked up (though hadn’t read) A.M. Jenkins’s *Damage*, which also uses second-person narration in a novel where the adolescent protagonist suffers from depression. Both novels

are award winners¹ and were released the same year—*Freewill* in March, and *Damage* in October, 2001. That both authors chose such a unique narrative form to depict depression impressed me, particularly because so many young adult novels employ the first person. Reading these books made me wonder whether second-person narration might be uniquely capable of portraying the disease—and if so, why? I also wondered if I could better grasp my friend’s feelings by reading these two novels.

What is Second-Person Narration?

In trying to answer these questions, I was interested to see the authors’ insights into their choice of narrative style. Though Jenkins hasn’t spoken publicly, that I know of, about her choice of narration, Lynch says that “second person was the only way to get at it all the way I wanted to” (Interview). His emphasis on the exclusive rhetorical capabilities of the form is supported by narrative theory and helps to explain why second-person narration may be uniquely suited for the depiction of depression. In his seminal article on second-person narration, Bruce Morissette suggests that it is “a mode of curiously varied psychological resonances, capable, in the proper hands, of producing effects in the fictional field that are unobtainable by other modes or persons” (Morrisette 2).

Before considering these distinctive effects in regard to the depiction of depression in Jenkins’s and Lynch’s novels, it is worth noting that when talking about second-person narration, we mean what Monika Fludernik calls “real” second person (284). Fludernik, in her introduction to a special issue of *Style* devoted entirely to second-person narrative,² points out the difference between uses of the second person pronoun in a text “which keep[s] addressing a narratee,” such as dramatic monologues and epistolary novels, and “true and proper instance[s] of second-person narrative” in which “the *you* . . . exclusively refers to the protagonist” (282-283). Both *Freewill* and *Damage* are examples of Fludernik’s “real” second person (284).

Recognizing, then, that the narratee (the “you” being addressed) is the protagonist, it is important to understand the relationship of the narrator to the narratee. As Matt DelConte has shown, though the narrator differs from the narratee in some instances of second-person narration, often they are the same

person, creating what he calls “completely-coincident narration” (211). *Damage* and *Freewill* are examples of this. Essentially, these novels are self-addressed: Will and Austin are telling their stories to themselves using the present-tense and the second-person pronoun. However, the novels do not exemplify interior monologue. The case is less clear with *Freewill*,⁴ as Will is clearly questioning himself throughout the novel; but, because of his depression, the narrator is obtrusive and foreign. Instead of presenting his own comfortable thoughts, they are the thoughts of someone he doesn’t recognize, like an invasive presence in his mind.

Reviewers of these novels picked up on the unique capacity of second-person narrative to depict depression—especially this idea of an invasive and foreign voice in the protagonists’ minds, noting that the second person in *Damage* “adroitly pull[s] the reader into Austin’s mind” (Moning) and “effectively conveys the hero’s distance from himself and others” (Publishers Weekly 60). *The Horn Book’s* Peter Sieruta suggests that in both novels, “the second-person voice simultaneously conveys immediacy and distance—getting deep inside a teenager’s head to reveal both emotional torment and dissociation” (587).³ Discussing *Freewill*, reviewers mention that the second person “distanc[es] [Will] from his own existence and giv[es] a dreamlike flavor to the bizarre sequence of events” (Stevenson 270), revealing “to those willing to understand how grief and despair can drive someone deep within themselves” (Lesesne 73).

While these are two very different novels, with two very different protagonists, both utilize second-person narration to portray similar effects of depression on their protagonists—in particular, the feeling of living separated from oneself. Both also successfully harness the ability of second person to transmit this feeling to readers. A closer look at each book, starting with *Damage*, will highlight the ways in which second-person narration accomplishes this.

Damage

Of the two novels, *Damage* is the easier read, partly because it is on familiar adolescent territory with its characters: a high school football star dating the most-sought-after girl in the school—though Jenkins’s use of these characters is hardly cliché. Austin Reid, the “Pride of the Parkersville Panthers” football team begins his senior year inexplicably

suffering deep depression. He begins to feel somewhat better in the company of Heather Mackenzie—the above-mentioned gorgeous classmate. As their relationship progresses, Heather’s companionship eases Austin’s distress—though he does not share with her what he has been feeling. Austin almost attempts suicide, but the novel concludes with him on the path to healing, opening up to his closest friend Curtis, also a teammate and neighbor, about his depression and thoughts of suicide.

Throughout the novel, Jenkins utilizes one of second-person narration’s key attributes—the form’s ability to “manifest [. . .] in narrative technique the notion that someone or something outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions” (DelConte 205). The “you” pronoun forcibly asserts itself so that readers can’t help but feel put upon. Despite a particular reader’s desire not to think the thoughts he or she is told “you” are thinking, or do the things “you” are doing, there is no escaping the intrusiveness of the pronoun. For sufferers of depression, the feeling is the same—that someone outside oneself is dictating thoughts and actions. Dr. Gawain Wells, clinical child psychologist and professor of psychology at Brigham Young University, explained to me that particularly depletion depression—depression that comes from “being worn to the nubs” physically and emotionally—can bring the feeling of watching oneself go through life. In other words, depression sufferers feel as if they are observing someone else move and act, living a life that they aren’t controlling.

Jenkins depicts this phenomenon of self-duality by describing images that her protagonist sees of himself, but hardly recognizes. Austin refers to a newspaper picture of himself from last year’s state semifinals, noting the differences between that Austin and his present self: “Shoot, that guy in the picture there wouldn’t lie around on a Saturday night. He wouldn’t think how it’s too much trouble to *breathe*” (2; emphasis original). He also uses the newspaper article’s headline “Austin Reid: Pride of the Parkersville Panthers” to refer to himself in the third person: “Girls are another thing that’s not right anymore. The Pride of the Panthers has always had a girlfriend—but you haven’t had one in a while” (6). Later, Austin again compares his previous persona to his current self: “You know what the Pride of the Panthers would say . . . But you say nothing” (85). A

final image that Austin doesn’t recognize is his football self. While watching game film with his teammates, he is surprised to see his image on the television: “Your eyes stay on the screen now, on number 83. He’s physical proof that you were there last night” (50).

Mirrors also play a key role in Austin’s duality of self. As he contemplates committing suicide, he stands in front of the bathroom mirror: “You don’t bother to look at the reflection. You know what he looks like, eyes flat and muddy. Everything twisted.

“‘Oh, God,’ you hear *the guy in the mirror whisper*” (131-2; emphasis mine).

In addition to these descriptions of self-duality, several times Austin makes even more explicit the sense of depersonalization Dr. Wells described: “You watch yourself walk away and get in line with everybody else” (113); “You’ve become disconnected from your own body, you feel like you’re slipping away, even though you know you’re right there in plain sight” (147); and “In a flash the world shifts and you see yourself from some weird, outside angle” (171).

In addition to the depersonalization characteristic of depletion depression, Dr. Wells explained that sufferers of depression can also experience destructive self-talk. Depressants often talk about their sense of “I” and “me.” The “I” part watches the “me” part act and often poses critical questions—“Why did you do that?”; “Why don’t you get out of bed?”; “Why can’t you enjoy what you used to enjoy?” The “I” part of the depressant believes that if it goes on being critical of the “me” part, then the “me” will change. In fact, in therapy, Dr. Wells mentioned that one of the questions he often asks adolescents suffering depression is “What do you say to yourself?” This is a way to get at the kind of self-talk that his patients are employing.

Austin poses a few self-questions during the novel, but for the most part Jenkins does not depict this phenomenon: “You can’t feel it tonight, but surely it’s there. Isn’t it? Way underneath?” (44); and “It’s scary to feel nothing. What if you never feel anything again?” (44).

Freewill

Freewill includes these same techniques to depict self-duality, though the novel is a more disturbing and challenging read than *Damage*, particularly because its narrator peppers “you” with uncomfortable questions

throughout the narrative. Will, the protagonist, is a seventeen-year-old living with his grandparents because his father apparently killed himself and Will's stepmother by driving off the road. Will attends a vocational school where he spends his days carving wood; there he creates strange monuments that he places at the sites of several teen suicides that occur in his small town. He starts to believe he is a "carrier pigeon of death" and, like Austin, nearly attempts suicide before believing that he can be healed (105).

Will's dual image of himself is made clear as he refers at one point to watching "it" pace in his room. As we saw with Austin, mirrors also play a key role in Will's self-duality:

You catch a half-length vision of yourself in the dresser mirror. Look at you.

Skinny. Naked. Creased.

Killer. Mystic monster. Cult icon.

Panic.

Don't. Will. Don't.

Panic. You retreat, from the mirror, from the *image* with the fifty ribs ready to launch like arrows straight out of the torso. (100; emphasis mine)

Earlier, Will describes his own facial expression in mirror terms when spending time with a classmate: "She cannot see you biting your lip, can she? She cannot see the way your face is now folded into that singular arrangement of conflicting lines that amount to something closer to a fractured mirror image than one coherent expression" (35).

In addition to images of self-duality, Lynch utilizes an abundance of negative self-talk in order to portray Will's depression:

Why is it that you should do the shopping? . . . Do you have some kind of cosmic debt because you have been stuck with them? Isn't that, isn't this, life? You are theirs, are you not? Theirs? *You* didn't kill anybody. Did you? Did you, Will, kill anybody?

Of course not. So why do you owe them? Why should it be that you are treated like an imposition? What does it mean? That you don't belong? That you don't belong there? That you don't belong to them? (13)

This constant questioning is perhaps the most disconcerting element of Lynch's novel. Halfway through my first reading of *Freewill*, I wanted to put it down because the questions were so intrusive as to

give me a headache. It occurred to me that this is precisely Lynch's point—he wants to drive the voices that are in Will's head into the reader's head. For the most part he leaves any reference to Will's name out of the questions (though there is an exception in the above passage). These are questions that could be addressed to any "you," because they generally lack a specific addressee. For this reason, the reader may feel that he or she is the target of the questions, an effect both disconcerting and uniquely capable of forcing the reader to feel the depression along with Will.

How Do *You* Feel?: Second-Person Narrative's Effects on the Reader

Perhaps even more interesting than the feeling the reader gets of being put upon by the intrusive "you" is the unique feeling a reader gets of separating from oneself during the reading of second-person narrative texts like *Damage* and *Freewill*. This feeling comes, theorists argue, because the narrative perspective offers two roles for the reader to assume: observer and addressee. The observer role is the standard role that readers take while reading first- and third-person fictional texts: we do not participate in the fictional world we are reading about; instead, we watch it from afar. The addressee role is unique to second-person narration. Because the text constantly addresses "you," readers may sometimes take on the role of the addressee, participating in the fictional world instead of merely observing it. The extent of this participatory role can vary, as James Phelan notes: "the greater the characterization of the 'you,' the more like a standard protagonist the 'you' becomes, and, consequently, the more actual readers can employ their standard strategies for reading narrative" (Phelan 351). But while there is a general move in any reading toward the observer role with fuller characterization, the reader can move back and forth between these roles: "As readers, we oscillate in complex ways between being participants in the fictional world and in the literary world" (DelConte 206).

As Dennis Schofield has observed, this oscillation causes readers to "experience some of the second person's instances as both forcefully compelling and alienating" (96). It is this compelling alienation that most causes readers to feel what it is like to have depression while reading *Damage* and *Freewill*;

readers are, in actuality, being pulled apart and put back together—enduring the same feeling of duality as people who are clinically depressed. I asked my friend if this oscillation accurately described her feelings while moving in and out of depression. She responded that she'd never considered it that way, but indeed my description of my feelings while reading these novels—that I was losing control of myself, then sometimes gaining it back, only to lose it again—was genuine to her experience.

In short, “the second person has a Protean, shape-shifting quality that can defeat our willful attempts to specify and identify” (Schofield 105). We can lose our identities while reading second-person narration, just as depressants lose their identities to the disease. James Phelan notes that “most writers who employ this technique take advantage of the opportunity to move readers between the positions of observer and addressee and, indeed, to blur the boundaries between these positions. In short, it is not easy to say who you are” (Phelan 351). Both Lynch and Jenkins do take opportunities to swing the reader between the addressee and observer roles. We've already discussed one way in which Lynch does that—by taking out specific references to Will in his constant questioning. Jenkins is subtler. While her story may cover common ground for many teenagers, Jenkins understands that not every reader will relate to Austin's athletic experience, to his sexual encounters with Heather, to his small-town life, or to his depression; therefore, she includes descriptions of events that will include other readers. One example is Austin's waking up for the first day of school:

The alarm clock has been going off for a while. It rasps the air, nagging, insistent.

Today is the first day of school.

You manage to pull the pillow away but can't get the energy to sit up.

Through bleary eyes you see the alarm on the nightstand and reach out, clamp down on it till it shuts up. (21)

Any current or former student can relate to the awful sound of the alarm clock on the first day of school. With this narrative, Jenkins draws the reader into the addressee role. She does it again with this simple paragraph about the weather: “One of the windows is open a little. You can smell the rain outside. It's

afternoon, but dark because of the clouds, and the thunder rumbles like something is coming loose way up in the sky” (84).

In addition to these specific passages, the setting and characters that both Lynch and Jenkins include—adolescents attending school—are clearly meant to draw readers in. By engaging readers in this way, the authors make it easier for “one of the more prominent emotional effects of second-person narration: namely, its decidedly involving quality, which provokes much greater initial empathy with second-person protagonists than with first- or third-person characters,” to further allow the reader to sense the depression that these novels' protagonists feel (Fludernik 286).

Can You Help Me Connect?: Hope for Adolescents with Depression

Although I have focused on the ways Lynch's and Jenkins's texts can serve readers who would like to be able to understand the symptoms of depression, these two novels would also be ideal to share with adolescents struggling with depression themselves.⁵ As Chris Crutcher has said,

I believe stories can help.

Stories can help teenagers look at their feelings, or come to emotional resolution, from a safe distance. If, as an author, I can make an emotional connection with my reader, I have already started to help him or her heal. I have never met a depressed person . . . who was not encouraged by the knowledge that others feel the same way they do. *I am not alone* is powerful medicine. If others feel this way, and they have survived, then I can survive too. (39; emphasis original)

Freewill and *Damage* are uniquely capable of passing on this hope for survival because of their conclusions. Both books end closely following near suicide attempts by their protagonists, and in neither case is there a neat, everything's-better ending. Still, we know that Will and Austin are on their way to healing.

In his Printz Award speech for *Freewill*, Chris Lynch expressed the desire that his novel would offer hope to struggling adolescents:

I hope the books, difficult books like these, . . . help [readers] to believe in things a little bit that they didn't previously believe in. And I don't mean wizards and fairies. I mean, the possibility of life, where maybe life didn't seem like the natural, obvious outcome” (27-28).

For my friend suffering from depression, and for my

creative writing student (who wrote the journal entry that first suggested to me that narrative could help me to understand depression), life was not the “natural, obvious outcome.” Yet, months after I’d read his first journal entry, that same creative writing student included, in his journal, a description of coming out of the darkness of depression and into the light. Like the first entry, the second is in second person. Actually, I realized while working on this article that many of my students write papers in the second person, and I often have to steer them away from using it improperly. As BYU Professor of English Chris Crowe pointed out to me, this isn’t unique to my students: “it’s nearly a universal conversation teen voice;” which led me to wonder why that’s so. My conclusion: it has to do with adolescents calling out to others: “You feel this, too, don’t you?” They use the second person because they want to connect to their peers and to the world around them. They want to know that they’re not alone. The true voice of teen connection, then, is not first person, so often utilized in young adult novels, but second person, which automatically extends beyond the speaker and reaches out to the world. And in the end, perhaps it is not its intrusiveness that makes second person ideal for the depiction of adolescent depression, but its inclusiveness.

Because the second-person narrative in *Damage* and *Freewill* allows both narrator and reader to participate in some of the feelings of depression, these novels made it possible for me to better understand my friend’s disease and would also hopefully make it possible for her—and young adults like her—to connect with someone else who has been in the depths of depression and found a way out. Norma Klein pleads for books to be used to make these kinds of connections:

“I’d like as many [books] as possible to somehow make life easier for adolescents, to make them aware that even their deepest and most private feelings are not freakish or strange but are shared by others, have been experienced not only by their peers, but by us, the older generation, as well” (26).

Fortunately, A.M. Jenkins and Chris Lynch understand this. *Damage* and *Freewill* are complex second-person responses to that adolescent second-person question—“You feel this, too, don’t you?”—that not only affirm that the feelings of depression have been shared by

others, but also seek to share them with those who haven’t been there.

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Notes

- ¹ *Freewill*: Printz Honor Book, ALA Best Book for Young Adults
Damage: New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age, ALA Top 10 Best Books for Young Adults, *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, Bulletin Blue Ribbon (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books), ALA *Booklist* Editors' Choice
- ² For more on second-person narration, see the special *Style* issue (28.3); Dennis Schofield's "Beyond *The Brain of Katherine Mansfield*: The Radical Potentials and Recuperations of Second-Person Narrative" (*Style* 31.1); and

DelConte's recent "Why *You* Can't Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative" (*Style* 37.2).

- ³ Sieruta, as far as I know, is the only other person to connect these two novels because of their second-person narration. He mentions both in his review of *Damage*. I read the review only after making the connection myself.
- ⁴ Teri Lesesne, in her review of *Freewill*, calls the narration "internal dialogue" (73), while the *Publishers Weekly* review calls it "interior monologue" (90). Lewis Turco's *The Book of Literary Terms* defines interior monologue as "personal thoughts verbalized" (78). My point here is that the thoughts aren't personal, they're foreign and invasive.
- ⁵ For more on the possibilities of using literature to help adolescents with depression, see Sharon Stringer's chapter "I Must Be Going Crazy" in *Conflict and Connection: The Psychology of Young Adult Literature*; the rest of Crutcher's essay, "Healing Through Literature" in *Authors' Insights*; Moore and Hartman's "The Craziness Within and the Craziness Without: Depression and Anger in *Ironman*" in *Using Literature to Help Troubled Teenagers Cope with Health Issues*; and Lauren Myracle's "Molding the Minds of the Young: The History of Bibliotherapy as Applied to Children and Adolescents" in *ALAN Review*.

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