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An Examination of Mental Illness, Stigma, and Language in My *Friend Dahmer*

My Friend Dahmer (Backderf, 2012), a young adult graphic novel memoir about the life of Revere High School student Jeffrey Dahmer, is told from Derf Backderf's point of view as Dahmer's classmate in the mid-seventies in rural Ohio. Emotions and perspectives of young adults are at the center of the black-and-white text, which moves quickly from their sophomore year to just beyond their senior year. Though no story about a brutal serial killer should be optimistic, *My Friend Dahmer* offers readers the powerful perspective of insight. Backderf indicates throughout the work that if anyone had paid attention to Dahmer's rampant alcohol use, erratic behavior and emotions, or deteriorating home life, Dahmer might not have become a serial killer. However, the author also uses stigmatizing language to characterize Dahmer as a person with mental illness(es), perpetuating stereotypes of such persons as outsiders who are at least partially responsible for their own mistreatment by others.

Literature Review

I position mental illness as both a medical and social issue, relying on the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*), which offers a "classification of mental disorders with associated criteria designed to facilitate more reliable diagnoses" (Kupfer & Regier, 2012, p. xli). Additionally, in my analysis and interpretation of *My Friend Dahmer*, I include research from both young adult literature (YAL)

and the social sciences, considering how language signifies and contributes to perceptions of mental illness. As I have argued previously (Richmond, 2017), language used in young adult literature has an effect on our treatment of ourselves and others. Through my research for a forthcoming book, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Problems through Fictional Characters* (in press, 2018), I have found that many terms used to describe mental illness in YAL are authentic in that they note symptoms classified by the *DSM-5*. However, other language reflects negative labels and stereotypes about individuals with mental illness and contributes to the continued stigmatization of persons with mental disorders.

Psychology researchers report that Americans and Western Europeans share some commonly held misconceptions about and stigmatizing attitudes toward people with mental illness. Corrigan and Watson (2002) note that such misconceptions include the belief that individuals with mental illness are dangerous and should be feared and that they are exclusively responsible for their illnesses and/or are undependable (p. 17). Stereotypes of individuals with mental disorders contribute to stigmatizing behaviors. Rose, Thornicroft, Pinfold, and Kassam (2007) describe 250 different stigmatizing labels that adolescents employed toward individuals with mental illness, including derogatory terms such as "nuts," "psycho," "crazy," "weird," and "freak" (p. 97). The authors also point to the prevalence of pejorative language in news, film, and television.

Scholarship on mental illness in YAL has been on the rise over the past five years. Such research has focused on mental illness in YAL as a whole, as well as on specific issues of bullying, suicide, autism, and eating disorders. Freeman (2015) offers an analysis of J. K. Rowling's sympathetic rendering of characters with mental illness in the Harry Potter series (1997–2007) and suggests that the novels can be used as educational and therapeutic tools for young adults dealing with trauma. Thaller (2015) considers how characters in the classic young adult novel *Go Ask Alice* (Sparks, 1971/2006) and the contemporary text *Liar* (Larbalestier, 2009) are portrayed and points to the dangers of criminalizing and animalizing those with mental illness. Parsons (2016) uses critical discourse analysis to examine how fat, female protagonists in eight young adult novels are (re)presented. Her findings suggest that the protagonists are portrayed as "obsessed with and/or addicted to food," which perpetuates the stigma associated with fat females and contributes to the (single) mythic construct of an ideal female body (p. 11). Similarly, Rozema (2014) notes that novels related to young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder seem to lack diversity in how characters are portrayed. Scrofano (2015) focuses on stylistic trends (e.g., novels in verse or graphic novels) as well as thematic trends in recent texts featuring characters with mental illness. Her essay helps shine a light on some of the realistic problems associated with mental illness (e.g., financial concerns and difficulties with medication compliance) included in novels such as *A Blue So Dark* (Schindler, 2010) and *Get Well Soon* (Halpern, 2009). Wickham (2018) examines how mental illness is portrayed in Neal Shusterman's *Challenger Deep* (2015) and Susan Vaught's *Freaks like Us* (2012). She argues that the authors effectively portray the protagonists' symptoms of schizophrenia and suggests that such depictions help to challenge the stigma of mental illness.

My own research (Richmond, 2014, 2017) and that of Pytash (2013) discusses the benefits of using YAL with preservice teachers. I argue that using YAL featuring characters with mental illness can help reduce the stigma associated with psychological disorders. Moreover, by examining language, teachers can help youth interrogate social beliefs, the marginalization of individuals and social groups, and their own use of language and its (potential) connection to

perpetuating stereotypes. Similarly, Pytash describes teacher candidates' development of compassion and empathy for characters who are bullied or who consider suicide in *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2011) and *Hate List* (Brown, 2009).

Taken together, this scholarship points to a growing interest in analyses of young adult texts that feature mental illness issues. Little research, however, has focused on *My Friend Dahmer*. Two recent scholarly articles that do include research on Backderf's book are by Harriet Earle. Her (2014) essay in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* focuses on Backderf's use of Dahmer's eyes and glasses as tools to, among other things, dehumanize the character; it also positions the book as a *bildungsroman*. Earle's (2017) article examines framing techniques used in *My Friend Dahmer* and *Green River Killer* (Jensen & Case, 2011), offering readers insight into how artistic strategies used by the authors shape how readers experience the stories. Additional scholarship addressing *My Friend Dahmer* can be found in chapters in *Documentary Comics* (Mickwitz, 2016) and in *They Hurt, They Scar, They Shoot, They Kill: Toxic Characters in Young Adult Fiction* (Bodart, 2016). In these texts, researchers examine Backderf's use of visual elements to construct Jeffrey Dahmer's character; little scholarship has focused specifically on the language elements of the memoir.

While *My Friend Dahmer* is a graphic novel, readers gain information about Jeffrey's behaviors, thought processes, relationships, and actions through Backderf's language in speech bubbles and captions, the novel's introduction, and the commentary within the "Sources" and "Notes." As Kukkonen (2013) notes, "The dialogue in the speech bubbles anchors the image we see at a particular time and space, namely when the words are spoken" (p. 34). This is especially important given that Backderf moves readers back and forth in time throughout the novel. The words in the panels, along with supplementary information shared in the "Notes," help readers make

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sense of what Backderf knew about Dahmer and when. Thus, my attention in this research is specifically on the words rather than the images used in *My Friend Dahmer*.

This study aims to expand the scope of research in YAL by focusing on how an examination of the language used in *My Friend Dahmer* can help us understand Dahmer's behaviors, actions, emotions, and positioning within his community, as well as how stereotypes about mental illness might have mitigated Backderf's characterization of his "friend" Dahmer. My goal is to build on the work of Rose et al. (2007), as well as Parsons (2016), Thaller (2015), and others, to bring readers' focus to how language reflects and constructs reality, even in a graphic novel where images are the emphasis.

> In this study, I focus attention specifically on how Backderf's language choices shape readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer and whether the terms the author uses are stereotypical (reflecting stigma), are authentic as defined by the DSM-5, are a combination of these, or are something else.

Critical Framework

In this study, I engage in critical content analysis, which focuses on a "critical examination of issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation in literature" and which "makes the researcher's stance explicit and public" (Short, 2017, p. 5–6). When conducting a critical content analysis, the researcher typically begins with a focus on an issue (e.g., mental illness); however, specific research questions are informed by data and the researcher's theoretical frame (Short, 2017). I consider Backderf's positioning of Dahmer in relation to his peers, family, and others in the small Midwestern town in which they live. I also reflect on the social mores of the period in which the story is set (1970s) and how Backderf's use of language might reflect the beliefs about mental illness of that time. As Short (2017) states, using critical content analysis requires the researcher to take on a "questioning stance"

focused on social issues and the "ways that language is used to shape representations of others" (p. 5). The researcher typically identifies a set of tenets related to the theoretical lens of focus, which in turn shapes the research questions. In this study, I focus attention specifically on how Backderf's language choices shape readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer and whether the terms the author uses are stereotypical (reflecting stigma), are authentic as defined by the *DSM-5*, are a combination of these, or are something else.

I have consistently aimed to challenge and change the stigma associated with mental illness in our schools and communities (Richmond, 2014, 2017). Moreover, I engage in this research with an eye toward social change, both as a teacher educator and community member. Aligned with this position, Short (2017) argues that researchers should seek ways that texts "position characters as resistant to existing stereotypes and representations in order to develop counter-narratives, and to offer new possibilities for how to position ourselves in the world" (p. 6). Using a frame of critical content analysis fits with my intention to "transform conditions of inequity" (Short, 2017, p. 4). By scrutinizing how specific language is used by Backderf in describing Dahmer's behaviors and emotions (and his interactions with peers, family, and others), I highlight how the author's positioning of Dahmer is consistent with bias and stereotyping commonly associated with mental illness. My aim is to call attention to the ongoing problem of stigmatization of those who have psychological disorders.

Methodology

I examine *My Friend Dahmer* using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework and as a methodology of analysis. In their discussion of CDA as a conceptual framework, Sriwimon and Zilli (2017) explain that CDA's purpose is to demonstrate how ideological assumptions are concealed beneath language in text (p. 137). They note that though researchers working with CDA might be working with varied theories and attending to different issues, they are "bound by a concern for the investigation of the reproduction of ideology in language," examining how "certain social groups may be ill-represented or misrepresented in various types of discourse" (p. 137).

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) argue that CDA views itself not as unbiased, but "as a critical approach which is politically committed to social change" (p. 64). The goal of CDA is to "uncover the role of discursive practice in the name of emancipation"; it "takes the side of oppressed social groups" with the aim of "harnessing the results" for "radical social change" (p. 64). This fits with Fairclough's (2013) explanation of CDA, which focuses primarily on the "effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs," which includes the questioning of ideology (p. 8).

Therefore, by using CDA, I consider specifically whether language used by the author *stigmatizes* (*oppresses*) members of a specific social group such as those with mental illness(es). At the root of CDA as a theoretical framework is the idea that human beings socially construct the world—and language, as a part of that world, is also socially constructed. CDA as a theoretical framework, therefore, is grounded in social constructivism, which posits that human beings, through interaction (including dialogue), construct reality (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

I use also use critical discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) to analyze and categorize how mental illness is represented in *My Friend Dahmer*. Critical discourse analysis has been used successfully as a research methodology in recent scholarship in YAL (Curwood, 2013; Glenn, 2008; Parsons, 2016). In this study, I engage in thematic analysis, a form of discourse analysis in which the researcher examines a text while considering whether specific repeated themes can be identified from the words included (Mogashoa, 2014). Specifically, I follow the approaches of Glenn (2008) and Parsons (2016) to develop "a broad understanding of the context" and probe for key themes related to portrayals of mental illness.

I read *My Friend Dahmer* three times for this study. During the first reading, I focused on understanding the images and language used by Backderf to tell the story of his experiences with Jeffrey Dahmer as a high school student in rural Ohio. Obtaining a sense of the narrative helps a researcher stay steeped in the data. During the second reading, I examined more closely the written language included in the graphic novel, creating a list of words used to describe Dahmer's behaviors, emotions, and actions, employing *in vivo* codes, as Strauss (1987) recommends, when-

ever possible. I attended especially to words used not only in the panels with images (e.g., speech bubbles and captions), but also in Backderf's commentary in the "Preface" and "Notes." Subsequently, I categorized the codes as having negative connotations, positive connotations, or neutral connotations (informational purpose).

Finally, reading the text a third time, I considered the *DSM-5* and relevant research related to stigma and mental illness, then classified the terms in the negative category according to three emergent themes: *stereotypes of mental illness, alcohol use, and sexual urges* (*paraphilia/necrophilia*). I also identified several subthemes, including derogatory terms, Dahmer as outcast, Dahmer as non-human, Dahmer as obsessed with animal corpses.

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Findings

In this study, I discuss three themes identified during the analysis of language used by Backderf in *My Friend Dahmer*. The first focuses on stereotypes of mental illness. As mentioned previously, stereotypes are often grounded in common misconceptions about people with mental illness. For example, in a (2001) "Community Guide" provided by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, readers learn that some frequently held misunderstandings include the ideas that people with mental illness are "all potentially violent and dangerous," "responsible for their condition," and "have nothing positive to contribute" (p. 6). Fitting this misconception, Backderf characterizes Dahmer as someone to fear, as someone who decided to use alcohol to make himself numb, and as someone who could not control his urge to have sex with corpses. Portraying Dahmer in these ways allows Backderf to scrutinize his motives and paint for readers—through words—a portrait of an adolescent whose behaviors are stigmatized and whose fate, *without intervention*, seemed inevitable.

Stereotypes of Mental Illness

Several common stereotypes of mental illness can be identified in Backderf's language in *My Friend Dahmer*, including derogatory terms and references to Dahmer as an outcast, a non-human, and as obsessed with dead animals. Backderf's use of these terms and positioning of Dahmer demonstrate the author's stigmatizing attitude toward his classmate. Stigma, as Overton and Medina (2008) remind readers, comes from the judgment of a person by himself or herself (self-stigma) or from a group of individuals who determine whether or not a person fits within accepted social standards (p. 144). Backderf's use of pejorative terms in describing Dahmer's behaviors establishes his stigmatizing stance toward those with mental illness. When combined with his situating of Dahmer as someone who was considered an outsider, even by the marginal group of "band nerds and advanced-placement brains" in which Backderf maintained membership (p. 47), and as someone whose mother was known to have been sent to a "mental ward" (p. 64), Backderf's stereotyping of Dahmer is almost predictable if not for his positioning of Dahmer as "my friend" in the title of the book.

> **Backderf's language is a conscientious choice, one he made after reflecting upon his own memories of interacting with Dahmer and after interviewing "dozens of former classmates" and "several teachers who worked at Revere High" (p. 200).**

Derogatory Terms

In the memoir, Backderf uses many derogatory terms associated with stereotypes of mental illness. These include references to Dahmer's behaviors (e.g., "struggling" [p. 10], "stalking strangers" [p. 162], "crazy spaz shtick" [p. 64], "cruel laugh" [p. 89]), labels meaning not of sound mind (e.g., "twisted" [p. 11], "depraved" [p. 37], "tortured" [p. 83], "crazy" [p. 64], "sick and twisted" [p. 81], "strange" [p. 47], "truly scary" [p. 132]), movement (e.g., "plunged off the brink" and "descent" [p. 10]), or an alternate reality (e.g., "living hell" [p. 168] and "horror show" [p. 123]). Many of the terms used in the book match the most commonly occurring terms identified by Rose et al. (2007), including the following (from their Table 1, p. 97): *spastic, crazy, insane, freak, odd, scary, loneliness (lonely), and psycho.* Given that the author had access to authentic terminology in interview transcripts in which FBI agents and psychologists spoke with Dahmer (p. 200), Backderf's choice to employ derogatory terms associated with stereotypes seems intentional.

In the same way that Backderf as a graphic artist chose how to present Dahmer's character through specific artistic techniques, Backderf as a writer chose the specific words he uses to describe Dahmer. Backderf's language is a conscientious choice, one he made *after* reflecting upon his own memories of interacting with Dahmer and *after* interviewing "dozens of former classmates" and "several teachers who worked at Revere High" (p. 200). The author explains that he also researched news accounts, FBI files, and Dahmer's father's book for supplemental information (p. 201). Whether Backderf is aware of how his language is stigmatizing is not really relevant; the outcome, the othering of Dahmer, is accomplished through the derogatory terms he uses.

Dahmer as Outcast

Backderf includes language throughout *My Friend Dahmer* that reproduces stereotypes and categorizes Dahmer as an *outcast* or *other*. Backderf includes the following phrases specifically about Dahmer: "nobody" (p. 30), "ignored" (p. 84), "loneliest kid" (p. 33), "shy geek" (p. 51), "oddball" (p. 10), "lost" (p. 123), "alone" (p. 165), "twisted wretch" (p. 11), "creepy" (p. 60), and several versions of "freak" (pp. 26, 49, 51, 111, 198). Situating Jeffrey Dahmer as an outsider both at school and at home, Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was "invisible" and that it took him "months to notice him" when they started at Revere High (p. 30). Backderf also mentions Dahmer's connection to other students who existed on the periphery of the social community within the high school; he refers to these students as "social invalids," "psycho wretches," and a "leper colony" (pp. 30, 150).

Backderf contrasts Dahmer's "bizarre behavior" with that of another classmate, Lloyd Figg, whom

the author considered a "maniac" (p. 49). Despite Dahmer's flat affect—a "stony mask of a face devoid of any emotion" (p. 50), Backderf considered Dahmer more "normal" than Figg (p. 49). In the book's "Notes" section, Backderf explains that Figg was regularly regarded as the "class psycho" and was reported to enjoy "running over animals in his car" (p. 211). The author's categorizing of individuals based on their mental illness status fits with what Parcesepe and Cabassa (2013) found in their research on public stigma: "Children and adults endorsed stigmatizing beliefs of people with mental illness, especially the belief that such individuals are prone to violent behaviors, and stigmatizing actions [. . .] in the form of social distance" (p. 12).

Backderf also illustrates the social distance between Dahmer, himself, and his friends when he says in a caption, "We weren't putting him down. After all, we weren't a whole lot higher up the social ladder" (p. 51). Despite his protest that they were not belittling Dahmer, Backderf's comment demonstrates that he viewed himself and his friends as more advanced members of the social hierarchy of Revere High School. The author's decision to characterize Dahmer as an outcast fits with research on stigmatizing behavior, such as that reported by Corrigan, Green, Lundin, Kubiak, and Penn (2001), who note that people who "perpetuate stigma are likely to socially distance themselves from persons with mental illness" (p. 953). Backderf states that he specifically didn't ask Dahmer to join him while he and his friends were joy-riding around town, despite the fact that Backderf "drove right past his house on the way to pick up some of the other guys" (p. 60). He states, "Some instinct warned me off. I was always wary of Dahmer" (p. 60). In making this statement, and others in which he distances himself from Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf protects himself from being associated too closely with a person with mental illness. This action fits with Overton and Medina's (2008) explanation of "avoidance" as a form of social distancing that contributes to the maintenance of an "ideal identity" and allows the author and friends to exploit Dahmer as a member of a "subordinate" group (p. 145).

Dahmer as Non-human

Twice in *My Friend Dahmer*, Backderf refers to Dahmer as non-human. In the Preface, Dahmer is called

a "monster" (p. 11) because of his decision to murder. Later, in Part 3 ("The Dahmer Fan Club"), the author says Dahmer "didn't register as a real person. He moved through the day unnoticed" (p. 119). Backderf's descriptions are colored by his knowledge of Dahmer as a serial killer in his adulthood. They also reinforce the stigma historically associated with mental illness. Foucault (1988/1965) explains that until the 1800s, "madmen remained monsters—that is, etymologically, beings or things to be shown" (p. 70).

When individuals are not viewed as human, acts of prejudice and "bias-motivated violence" can become easier to justify (e.g., the Anti-Defamation League's [ADL] 2018 "Pyramid of Hate"). Backderf's inclusion of a scene in which he and his friends discuss Dahmer's differences seems to follow this pattern. For example, one of Backderf's friends asks, "What's the deal with Dahmer? Is he insane?" (p. 48). By labeling him this way, the author's friend calls attention to the possibility of Dahmer's mental illness and positions him as other.

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Moreover, Dahmer is more easily manipulated by the group because as someone who is a monster, he is not entitled to the sympathetic treatment afforded other members of the group. Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was "more mascot than pal" in their group of friends (p. 56). As the mascot (of the "Dahmer Fan Club," of which Backderf was self-appointed President, then Minister of Propaganda," p. 205), Dahmer is a caricature. Backderf tells readers he frequently drew sketches of Dahmer as "a bag of groceries" or "a telephone pole" (p. 57). By labeling Dahmer a monster, as insane, and by associating him with inanimate objects (even under the pretense of a joke), Backderf succeeds in stigmatizing Dahmer as someone to be avoided.

Dahmer as Obsessed with Animal Corpses

Backderf also draws readers' attention to the main

character's obsession with animal corpses. In one set of panels in Part 1 ("The Strange Boy"), Backderf shows images of Dahmer stealing a preserved specimen of a fetal pig from school. Likewise, in Part 2 ("A Secret Life"), the image of Dahmer stabbing a just-caught fish, chopping its macerated body into pieces in order to "see what it looked like," is included (p. 78).

The author also uses specific language to describe Dahmer's collection of animal bodies. In Part 1, Backderf describes an interaction between Dahmer and neighborhood youth. Dahmer, carrying the carcass of a deceased cat, is confronted by some boys in the woods near his home. One says, "Hey! Why are you carrying around a . . . EW! . . . DEAD CAT!?!" (p. 20). After Dahmer shows them his collection of specimens of decomposing animals in his "hut," explaining that he likes to "study . . . the bones" (p. 23), the boys run away gagging before saying, "Gawd, Dahmer, you are such a freak!" (p. 26). In another scene in Part 2, Backderf shows several panels in which Dahmer catches and plans to kill a neighborhood dog. In the "Notes," the author tells readers that Dahmer described the incident to the FBI in an interview (p. 209). Though Dahmer decided to let the dog go without killing it, Backderf says it was the "first time Jeff considered butchering not just roadkill or small animals but a creature large enough to feel fear and pain" (p. 106).

Backderf, in choosing to highlight Dahmer's obsession with corpses and the intention to kill and mutilate animals, sets him up as a character with the capacity to murder human beings. In fact, the author tells readers that letting the dog go without killing it was the "last time" that Dahmer would "show . . . mercy" (p. 106), despite the fact that it would be several years before Dahmer would kill his first victim, Steven Hicks, a hitchhiker he picked up "on a whim" (p. 213).

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Alcohol Use Disorder

Backderf's portrayal of teenage Dahmer features multiple symptoms of Alcohol Use Disorder, which is defined by the *DSM-5* as a "problematic pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress" (p. 490). To be diagnosed with the disorder, individuals must demonstrate having at least two of the following symptoms during a one-year period: drinking more frequently or in larger amounts than previously customary; a persistent desire or unsuccessful attempts to "cut down or control alcohol usage" (p. 490); significant time spent obtaining or using alcohol, or recovering from its effects; experiencing cravings for alcohol; repeated use of alcohol, leading to a failure to accomplish duties at work, school, or home; continued use of alcohol despite social problems caused or worsened by alcohol's effects; the giving up or reduction of important work or social activities because of alcohol use; use of alcohol in situations that are dangerous physically; and continued use of alcohol in spite of having "a physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by alcohol" (p. 491). Additionally, individuals said to possess Alcohol Use Disorder either have a need for an increasing amount of alcohol to attain intoxication or a "markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of alcohol" (p. 491). Note also that withdrawal is listed as a criterion of Alcohol Use Disorder.

Backderf tells readers that Dahmer's "solution" to having "constant thoughts of corpses and entrails [that] titillated him" and "filled him with revulsion and a growing sense of panic" was alcohol (p. 81). Dahmer used alcohol to make himself "numb" (p. 82). Backderf notes that other than one week of his junior year—when Dahmer "laid off the sauce" during a school trip to Washington, DC (p. 95)—Dahmer drank daily at school, sinking into an "alcoholic fog" (p. 98). Dahmer drank increasingly more alcohol, hiding bottles at school so that he could slip out to drink during "study hall, lunch period, or a class run by a teacher with a lax attendance policy" (p. 98). During their senior year, Backderf explains that Dahmer's "need for liquor was now so great" that he carried a briefcase each day to have access to alcohol (p. 124).

Dahmer never drank at home out of "fear of being caught in the act by his family"; therefore, he typically arrived at Revere High School "well before the morning bell" and stayed "long past dismissal late into

the evening" (p. 125). The author notes, "[E]very kid knew what Dahmer was doing . . . but not a single teacher or school administrator noticed a thing. Not one" (p. 84). Backderf asks multiple times in the text where the adults in Dahmer's life were. The teenaged Dahmer "reeked of booze" as early as 7:45 in the morning, yet not one teacher or other adult "stepped up and said, 'Whoa, this kid needs help'" (p. 87). A guidance counselor from the school, who was interviewed later by the *Akron Beacon Journal*, said that she didn't see "any signs that [Dahmer] was different or strange" (p. 85).

Readers are given a glimpse into Dahmer's tumultuous home life, one in which his parents argued constantly, especially during his last year of high school when they were divorcing and Joyce Dahmer (Jeffrey's mother) acquired a "restraining order against Lionel [his father]" (p. 128). Though we do not see Dahmer going through withdrawal, Backderf tells readers that nights for teenage Dahmer "must have been the hardest after the numbing effect of the booze wore off" (p. 128). In the next scene, Backderf and his friends pick up Dahmer to take him for his "command performance" at the local mall, during which he would pretend to have a fit and imitate his mother's interior decorator, Mr. Burlman, with exaggerated jerky movements and gasps of "Baaaaa!!" as he "waylaid unsuspecting shoppers" (pp. 129–139). During their 10-minute drive to the mall, Dahmer guzzles a six-pack of beer, a sight that Backderf had never seen before. It was at this point that Backderf says the "aura of doom that surrounded Dahmer finally came into focus for [him], with startling clarity" (p. 133). After this interaction with Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf and his friends "excluded" him from their group (stigma), which left Dahmer with "only the voices in his head" as they "grew louder and louder" (p. 143).

Backderf's portrayal of Dahmer as a teenager with alcohol use problems supports the premise that Dahmer had at least one mental illness that negatively affected his relationships with peers. Silva, Ferrari, and Leong (2002) report that Dahmer's problems with alcohol developed during adolescence; moreover, he was "discharged from the Army due to alcohol-associated difficulties in occupational performance" (p. 3). While Dahmer's excessive alcohol use was detected by Backderf and other peers during high school, his attraction to dead (or unconscious) male bodies was

not discernable at that time. Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was "tortured every waking hour by ghastly sexual fantasies" and "urges that were growing stronger and stronger, urges he could only dull with alcohol" (p. 83).

Paraphilia/Necrophilia

The author's characterization of Jeffrey Dahmer includes language that fits with symptoms of necrophilia, which is classified under Paraphilic Disorders in the *DSM-5*. Paraphilia signifies an "intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physically mature, consenting human partners" (*DSM-5*, 2013, p. 685). A paraphilic disorder is identified in an individual for whom paraphilia causes "distress or impairment to the individual" or whose "satisfaction has entailed personal harm, or risk of harm, to others" (p. 685). Necrophilia, specifically, involves a recurring and intense sexual arousal by corpses.

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Dahmer's attraction to dead bodies is included in several parts of Backderf's narrative. Readers are told that Dahmer had a "terrible secret": in his fantasies, "his lovers . . . were dead. Dead men. Corpses" (p. 54). Backderf asks readers what might have "spawned this perverse sexual hunger? What deep fetid part of his psyche gurgled up this miscreant desire, so powerfully voracious it immediately devoured him whole?" (p. 55). Dahmer was "obsessed" with a jogger who ran past his rural home each day; he had fantasies about lying next to the man's "unconscious body, about fondling him and having 'total control' over him" (p. 58). He laid in wait for the jogger one afternoon during ninth or tenth grade, ready to knock him out with a baseball bat; however, the man did not happen to run by that day. Dahmer then "wrested back control from the dark urges that churned in his head. At least, for a while . . ." (p. 59). In the detailed

author's notes following the text, Backderf shares that Dahmer repeatedly expressed a desire for "complete control" or "total dominance" over his victims (pp. 205, 213).

Just before *My Friend Dahmer*'s last section, "Part 5: Fade to Black," readers learn that Dahmer's mother decided to take his younger brother and relocate to Wisconsin, leaving Jeffrey alone in the house until his father moved back in. After he graduated from Revere High, Dahmer's "life essentially ended" (p. 167). A month later (June 1978), Dahmer got drunk, then drove around before picking up a hitchhiker. Backderf's author notes identify the hitchhiker as Steven Hicks, who Dahmer knocked unconscious, strangled, and fondled before masturbating repeatedly while standing over the body. When Backderf shares with readers at the end of the book that his classmate had been discovered in 1991 in an "apartment full of bodies" and that the murderer had had "sex with the corpses" and "ate some of them," he first thought it was Figg, another Revere High student. His second guess was correct, however, and his response was, "Oh my God, Dahmer. . . . What have you done?" (p. 224).

> These demonstrations of Dahmer's anguish and guilt related to his sexual urges and actions fit with the distress associated with a paraphilic disorder (necrophilia).

The language Backderf uses to describe Dahmer's tendencies and sexual attraction to corpses fits the *DSM-5*'s definition of necrophilia. The author's use of terms such as "perverse" (p. 55), "depravity" (p. 11), and "bizarre desire" (p. 58) clearly denotes the stigma generally associated with sexual attractions that are outside of the social norm. Note that to be a paraphilic disorder, the disorder must cause "marked distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (DSM-5, 2013, p. 686). Backderf says that Dahmer could not explain why his "fantasies" included "lovers [who were] dead. Dead men. Corpses" (p. 54). In one panel when he is fantasizing alone, Dahmer says, "AAAAARG," and the caption states that he says, "I don't know where it came from [. . . .] But I never dreamed it would become a real-ity" (p. 55). In the last section of the book, Dahmer is pulled over by the police and given a sobriety test. Grateful that the officers did not find the body of Steven Hicks that he had contained in trash bags in the back of his car, Dahmer says, "UUUNGH! Gulp! Choke! Sob! Wheeze! Gasp! Sob!" (p. 184). These demonstrations of Dahmer's anguish and guilt related to his sexual urges and actions fit with the distress associated with a paraphilic disorder (necrophilia).

It is relevant to note, however, that at least one researcher (as noted in Silva et al., 2002) argues that Dahmer did not "suffer from primary necrophilia because he preferred live sexual partners" (p. 3). Rosman and Resnick's (1989) research on individuals with necrophilia found that 80% of those with what they termed "pseudonecrophilia" had a "transient attraction to a corpse" but a preference for "sexual contact with living partners" (pp. 154–155) and consumed alcohol before committing their acts, compared to 60% of those who killed to obtain a corpse for sexual purposes (p. 158). Dahmer is shown drinking before he picks up Steven Hicks (p. 172), but the author does not include any details of Dahmer's other murders. Since the main focus of *My Friend Dahmer* is specifically on a period in high school and just after, Backderf chooses to discuss the other murders in his "Notes" section.

Conclusion

Backderf's language choices certainly influence readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer. And while most of the terms used are reflective of frequently used stereotypes about those with mental illness (e.g., that they are dangerous, responsible for their disorders, should be feared and ostracized), some of Backderf's phrases fit with those used in the *DSM-5*, especially with regard to alcohol use disorder and paraphilia.

Multiple times throughout the book, Backderf contends that Dahmer did not have to end up a "monster" who took the lives of multiple victims. The author blames the "adults in his life" who were "inexplicably, unforgivably, incomprehensibly clueless and/or indifferent" (p. 11) and who ignored Dahmer's extensive alcohol use, erratic behavior and emotions, and appalling home life; in fact, he argues that perhaps Dahmer's destiny as a serial killer could

have been averted. He tells readers that some people view Dahmer as "some kind of anti-hero, a bullied kid who lashed back at the society that rejected him" (p. 11). However, he also identifies Dahmer as "a twisted wretch" who is deserving of pity but not empathy. Backderf places the blame squarely on Dahmer's head once he kills.

The author includes a list of "The Players," and on it, he calls Dahmer a "coward" because he was "afraid to confess to his dad [. . .] about what was going on in his head" (p. 221). This accusation positions Backderf as a person who does not recognize the self-stigma associated with mental illness for many individuals. Research (Corrigan et al., 2010) suggests that self-stigma can negatively affect individuals (decreased self-esteem and self-efficacy); moreover, disclosing one's status as having a mental illness could expose the individual to more shame or prejudice. Additionally, Backderf states that the "only tragedy" after Dahmer killed Hicks in 1978 is that "Dahmer didn't have the courage to put a gun to his head and end it" (p. 221). This statement—that Dahmer should have committed suicide—also seems to position Backderf as flippant and takes away from his ethos. While it is understandable for Backderf to express righteous indignation about the loss of 17 lives (Dahmer's victims), young adult readers could misunderstand Backderf's dismissive attitude toward suicide as condoning the act.

In a systematic review of literature about public stigma toward mental illness in the US, Parcesepe and Cabassa (2013) found that stigmatizing beliefs about the dangerousness of individuals with mental illness have risen over time, and that beliefs of "shame, blame, incompetency, punishment, and criminality of people with mental illness are common." The language used in *My Friend Dahmer* reflects these beliefs. Even when he considers what might have happened to Dahmer if adults *had* intervened, Backderf says, "He probably would have spent the rest of his days doped up on antidepressants and living in his dad's spare room. A sad, lonely life that Dahmer would have gladly accepted over the hellish future that awaited him" (p. 87). In this depiction of Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf's assumptions about persons with mental illness are clearly tied to commonly held stereotypes: these individuals are isolated and miser-

able, sedated and dependent on others, incapable of providing for their own basic needs.

Strategies for Educators

Educators who want to use *My Friend Dahmer* should be cognizant of Backderf's use of language, which consistently replicates stereotypes about mental illness. To help student readers consider connections between language and stigma, teachers might bring in supporting texts while asking students to examine Backderf's choices of terms and their connotations. For instance, the Anti-Defamation League's (2018) "Pyramid of Hate" illustrates biased behaviors that increase in complexity, with more life-threatening concerns displayed at the top of the pyramid. Two of the categories at the bottom of the pyramid include "Biased Attitudes"—which involve behaviors such as stereotyping or accepting negative information or misinformation—and "Biased Acts"—which include "name-calling," "slurs/ epithets," and "de-humanization." Students might examine how Backderf's use of language fits within the pyramid's description of biased attitudes and acts.

In this depiction of Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf's assumptions about persons with mental illness are clearly tied to commonly held stereotypes: these individuals are isolated and miserable, sedated and dependent on others, incapable of providing for their own basic needs.

Lea Winerman (2014), in an article in the APA-sponsored *Monitor on Psychology* ("Words Matter"), offers educators a way to start a discussion about media representations of those with mental illness. Students could talk about why the use of person-first language (e.g., "She is a person with schizophrenia") and the avoidance of "derogatory language" (e.g., "psycho" or "junkie") are important in news reports. Teachers might also have students investigate how a particular mental illness has been represented in newspaper articles, television news, or online reports. A 2012 National Public Radio (NPR) blog written by

Edward Schumacher-Matos is one such report. The blog posting focuses on a reporter's use of the term "nutcase" when asking a lawyer about a client's mental illness status. Examining the NPR posting could help students discuss ethical, legal, and moral issues related to language use in the media and extend that conversation to the relationship between language and stigma.

While *My Friend Dahmer* does include authentic representations of alcohol use disorder and paraphilic disorder (necrophilia) as defined by the *DSM-5*, the author characterizes Jeffrey Dahmer and Lloyd Figg in some ways as outcasts. Backderf maintains that Dahmer was a "tragic figure" (p. 88 and p. 221) but not "entirely sympathetic" (p. 88). Educators might ask readers to consider whether Dahmer's representation fits with the characteristics of a Byronic hero, "a boldly defiant but bitterly self-tormenting outcast, proudly contemptuous of social norms but suffering for some unnamed sin" (Baldick, 2008). At ReadWriteThink.org, Joyce Bruett provides a high school lesson plan sequence entitled "Looking for the Byronic Hero Using *Twilight's* Edward Cullen" that might prove useful.

Additional young adult texts about serial killers include Dia Reeves's (2011) *Slice of Cherry*, Barry Lyga's (2012) *I Hunt Killers*, Stefan Petrucha's (2012) *Ripper*, and Dan Wells's (2010) *I Am Not a Serial Killer*—all of which are fiction. Three adult texts that might interest mature readers include Joyce Carol Oates's (1995) fiction novel *Zombie*, Ann Rule's (1980) memoir, *The Stranger beside Me*, and Claudia Rowe's (2017) memoir, *The Spider and the Fly*.

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