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IDS2935: The Anatomy of a Story

Dr. Reynolds

A Taxidermized Racoon Can Cure any Cocktail of Mental Disorders

1. Introduction and Overview

The novel by Jennifer Lawson called *Furiously Happy*, is one of the most interesting, unique, and hilarious memoirs about mental illness. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “a mental disorder is characterized by a clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotional regulation, or behavior” (“Mental Disorders”). Also, WHO reports “1 in every 8 people in the world live with a mental disorder” (“Mental Disorders”). This data suggests that mental illness is common and 12.5% of people in the world are having to live with their illness while simultaneously performing their day-to-day responsibilities. Many people with mental illness do not have the appropriate resources or information needed to lead a fulfilling life. Stories told by people like Lawson enable others who feel alone in their illness to feel a little less alone. This is done by using illness narratives. An illness narrative is a concept created by Arthur W. Frank where he states it is “an interactive experience that the ill person enters…from within this story, the patient then finds others” (Costello). While Lawson has written a memoir where she is humorous and sarcastic about how mental illness shapes events in her life, her story considers the idea that a fulfilling life can be lived even with an illness through the lens of a quest narrative, community, and humor.

*Furiously Happy* details Lawson’s life where she embraces all the ups and downs that she faces due to her mental illness. This novel does not follow a particular plot line, but instead acts like Lawson’s diary. She sections the book based on funny moments she has experienced, which also convey a lesson that she has learnt. She starts off the novel by stating that she is crazy, and she is willing to embrace it. She states she has anxiety, depression, a form of social anxiety, a sleeping disorder, and a few other illnesses. She looks at being crazy in a unique way where her mental illness makes her experience emotions different compared to “normal” people so she “might also be able experience extreme joy in a way that ‘normal’ people also might never understand” (16). Lawson details how she got a taxidermized raccoon which clearly embodied the furiously happy movement she is trying to start. She also explains how her love for taxidermy clearly weirds out her husband, Victor. Her sleep disorders cause her to be tired a lot of the time, but she makes the most out of it by having fun when the world is sleeping. She also inserts small life lessons such as “pretend you’re good at it” (61) to motivate people to do things they are bad at. Her trip to Australia was portrayed as a very interesting expedition where she tried things that most people would consider weird, but to Lawson these things were enjoyable. Thus, this novel conveys that her mental illness leads her to live her life differently but is just as fun and fulfilling as someone’s life without a mental illness.

1. Quest Narrative

As mentioned in the summary above, Lawson conveys her life with mental illness and her narration can be seen through the lens of an illness narrative. Illness narratives enable the author to share their story and work through their emotions similar to journaling. This permits the author to meet other people who may be going through the same things as her. The illness narrative adopted by Lawson is the quest narrative, which is when “the ill person meets suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it” (Costello). Lawson accepts her illness as she states “*Mentally ill.* It’s a phrase that once scared me, but now I wear it like an old jacket, comfortable but ugly” (58). Lawson has quite a few mental disorders, but she does not let that stop her from living her life. She still spends time with her daughter, husband, and friends. Although she may need an extra push to do certain things, such as when her friend begs her to go with her to Australia, she still pushes past her comfort zone. This is one of the main things she indirectly encourages in her novel, where she pushes people to be random and do things that truly make you happy. She even suggests that “don’t just be some random person. Be the MOST random person” (35). Her forms of enjoyment may differ from most people; however, when she dresses her cats up or puts on a koala costume, she feels happy and that is the whole point.

1. Accepting the Illness

Lawson’s ability to accept mental illness and live a furiously happy life despite it, is the main idea of a quest narrative. She also helps others accept their illness by creating an identity where one does not let the illness define them and instead it is just considered another trait. Lawson states in her mock interview with Victor that “sometimes being crazy is a demon. And sometimes the demon is me…but it’s always with me” (138). She describes illness as being an entity that is part of her life no matter what, sometimes like an overbearing shadow and other times like a silent shadow. Specifically, she is talking about depression and through her words she is helping others who feel overpowered by their mental illness to accept their illness as a part of their identity. Lawson states “there can’t be me without my demon” (139), which emphasizes the notion that she is willing to go through the ups and downs that accompanies mental illness because she would not be the funny, most random, and quirky person she is without her illness. She does not shy away from relating the lows of her illness as seen in her blog post “I feel successful 3-4 days a month…I have imposter syndrome…I feel the worst when I get so paralyzed by fear that I end up huddled in bed” (281). Lawson is completely transparent about her illness and throughout the whole novel she never states that her way of dealing with her problems is the correct way or that there even is a correct way. She instead offers bits of wisdom that she has realized along her journey. Her life seems perfect, and people find it hard to understand why she is unhappy sometimes when she has everything she needs to be happy. She even poses the rhetorical question, “if everything is perfect and I’m miserable, then is this as good as it gets” (244). To answer this question she offers some wisdom, “you learn to appreciate the fact that what drives *you* is very different from what you’re *told* should make you happy” (244). Her advice highlights the idea that people are different and an event that makes someone ecstatic might be another person’s norm. She suggests that there is nothing that one has or achieves in life that conveys they do not have the right to feel sad, depressed, or alone. A mental illness is caused by a chemical imbalance as stated by Lawson in the novel, and this chemical imbalance will occur regardless of what is happening in one’s life. Therefore, it is crucial to accept that a mental illness causes certain aspects of one’s life to differ in ways that others cannot understand. Furthermore, it is important to also accept that the illness is a part of oneself. By accepting these two ideas the path to leading a fulfilling life would become much easier.

1. Not Feeling Alone

In addition to detailing her journey of accepting her illness, Lawson conveys that one of the major benefits of telling her story has been that she has found people that are just like her. Illness narratives, like those told by Lawson, facilitate the ability for a story to reach a large group of people and allow those people to feel confident to share their story too. This process is seen when Lawson states “I think telling my stories helps to encourage putting other stories out there…we realize that the things we were ashamed of are the same things everyone deals with” (147). When Lawson shares her life dealing with depression, anxiety, sleep apnea, etc., she reduces the stigma around these illnesses. She is able to do so by making her problems seem common and emphasizing that it is normal to struggle with those problems. This enables others to feel as though they are not alone in their problems since they are able to read about a person who is going through the same things as them. It is easy for a person to feel their mental illness is rare or that they are the only ones who has had to change their entire life due to a diagnosis; however, after reading stories like *Furiously Happy* people can see that there are in fact people out there who are struggling with the same things. One of the main mediums to share stories is the internet. Lawson is an avid blogger and is active on social media since she states “*that* is why I love the Internet. Because they turned a really horrific moment into a memory I could laugh about later” (250). By Lawson sharing her story, she not only helps others feel less alone, but she also feels like she has a group of people who can relate or at least understand her problems. Sharing one’s story also helps the person with the illness, by helping them feel less alone as more and more people connect with their story.

1. Humor as a Method of Coping

Along with helping people feel less alone, illness narratives enable authors to provide wisdom for others on managing their illness based on their own experiences. Lawson’s talent of utilizing humor to explain situations that seem painful or stressful suggests that there is a way of looking at mental illness through a more lighthearted lens. She highlights her capability to live a fulfilling life by introducing a humorous perspective to her problems, such as when she states, “I’m so hardworking that I’m awake even when my body is still partially unconscious” (46). Lawson has a unique gift of looking at events with the glass half full approach where she is positive and optimistic. She jokes with Victor about her sleep paralysis as seen in the previous quote and that is how she deals with an illness that is quite serious. Although, she is not cured of her mental illness she indirectly offers ways for how she deals with the rough patches of her life. Almost always, she employs humor to look at the bright side of the situation. This can be seen when Lawson believes that she accidentally threw something away but cannot find it in the trash, so she states, “your husband mumbles that maybe it was your dignity, and he has a point but you explain that you remember it being heavy and substantial so it was obviously *not* your dignity” (121). Even though she had to lose a bit of her dignity to scavenge through a trash can in a public place to find her car keys that she thought she lost, instead of being completely overwhelmed with embarrassment she looks at the situation comedically. Comedy is Lawson’s way of reducing the gravity of her problems. By others reading and knowing her story, they could also try implementing her approach to dealing with their illness. Any wisdom that she offers throughout the novel is from her experiences and struggles as she continues to live with mental illness.

1. Conclusion

Lawson’s novel called *Furiously Happy* is an illness narrative, specifically a quest narrative, where the author accepts her illness and shares her story and wisdom. Lawson has numerous mental and physical illnesses; however, she lives a fulfilling life even with the highs and lows caused by her illnesses. She is unapologetic and raw throughout the novel. She shares her story and employs humor to display how she looks at rough situations through a comedic lens as her way of dealing with her illness. Lawson shares her story and emphasizes the impact of sharing her story by suggesting that it enables people to feel less alone in their illness and encourages others to share their own stories. She offers advice and motivation throughout the novel while highlighting the fact that nobody is truly alone in their illness. This is especially seen in the epilogue when she states “and in the deepest, night-blind fathoms you’re certain that you’re alone. You aren’t. I’m there with you. And I’m not alone” (316). Lawson portrays moments in her life where she is extremely sad and moments where she is extremely happy. She conveys that it is crucial to be furiously happy despite the illness and having the illness is what enables people to reach that heightened state of being furiously happy.

Works Cited

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Reflection

This course has provided me with a great deal of knowledge on the bridge between medicine and humanities. I used to disregard the humanities as having no major role in day-to-day events; however, this course has made me realize that humanities play a crucial role in everyone’s life, mainly through broadening people’s knowledge. Through both big and small group discussions I have realized that people’s backgrounds and identity shape the way we think. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I believe the woman was treated poorly and the lack of care from her husband is what caused her eventual psychotic break. As a fellow woman and someone who comes from a culture where mental illness is still regarded with a particularly high level of stigma I felt as though I could empathize with the woman, and I wished that her husband would pay more attention to her instead of telling her to basically just sit and be pretty. However, I noticed in class that another one of the perspectives that some of my peers had adopted was that the time in which this work was set, mental illness had not yet become a common thing. Thus, her husband was not necessarily dismissive, but he was instead just doing what he thought was right for his wife. Therefore, by listening to other’s views on *The Yellow Wallpaper* I believed my understanding of this work was broadened. I started to consider the story from both the wife’s perspective and the husband’s perspective. I believe this is one of the most useful things this course has taught me, which is the idea that hearing other’s perspective on topics enriches my own understanding of that topic.

Another lesson that I have learned in this course is the importance of stories. Sharing stories about people’s struggles is critical to helping others deal with their illness while also making more people aware of illnesses that people are dealing with. One of the facts stated by the professor was that breast cancer was the most funded cancer, not because it was the most common cancer, but because it was the cancer that had the most attention surrounding it. I think this fact highlights the importance of sharing one’s stories so that more people become aware of the things people struggle with. Also, in one of the TED Talks we listened to in class called “Failing at Normal” by McCabe, the speaker talks about how she had struggled with learning how to live her life with ADHD since she always considered herself to be failing at regular things she was not supposed to be struggling with. She had created a YouTube channel to discuss ADHD and help others navigate ADHD. Through this channel she ended up realizing that she had a whole ADHD tribe and knowing this enabled her to see that she was not failing at life when in reality she had a very real mental illness. Thus, by taking the initiative to share her story, she was able to find people going through the same things as her and arguing against the notion that having ADHD means that one is failing at life. Therefore, this course made me realize that sharing one’s story not only benefits the author/speaker to feel less alone, but it also helps others struggling to live with an illness to take comfort in the fact that there are others in the world struggling just like them.