

A Boy Broken: Reflection

Scary, violent, volatile, psycho, deranged . All words in which I have heard used when describing the mental disorder schizophrenia. Perhaps the 2019 film *Joker* is responsible for putting these ideas into my head. At the time, I would have only been 15 years old when I watched it. *Joker* is a psychological thriller in which the main character, Arthur, suffers from delusions and social neglect as a result of a broken mental health system. I recall watching a YouTube video after the film, in which it broke down all the ways Arthur's character was schizophrenic. Though it was never explicitly said in the movie, the connections being made between the character and the disorder were evident. This depiction of schizophrenia is the only one that the media and pop culture display. I had never heard of a positive or even normal depiction of schizophrenia until I read *A Boy Broken*.

I experienced many emotions when reading *A Boy Broken*. At times, I felt sadness, sympathy, frustration, and more. What I felt most, though, was a sense of realness and authenticity, hearing the story of a real individual's struggle with schizophrenia. I felt the reality of this disorder. Rather than schizophrenia being an otherworldly affliction, I felt the pain, confusion, and a father's dedication to his son. Through this reflection, I'd like to explore the realities of schizophrenia through Doug's experiences, the stigmatization surrounding mental disorders, and my own personal connection with mental disorders through my experiences with OCD.

I can only imagine what being in the position of having schizophrenia would feel like. I imagine it is very lonely and confusing. What I've never thought of, though, until I read this book, is how it would feel to be the loved one of an individual with schizophrenia. I imagine these same emotions of loneliness and confusion are felt, but in a very different way. At the beginning of the book, before Doug truly knew what was affecting his son, they were on their way to McDonald's. While Doug is trying to comprehend and make sense of what Doug Jr. is going

through, he learns of his son's hallucinations, named Dave and Wendy. "They can put their hands inside me-stop them Dad, please make them stop (p.g. 14)". Reading the story in this moment, I could feel the absolute terror a father must have felt hearing his son beg for his help but knowing there is nothing he can do. Throughout the book, I found myself placing myself in the author's shoes, imagining that Doug Jr. was my child or perhaps more appropriately for this time in my life, my parent or sibling.

As I continued through the book, there were many moments in which I felt like Doug's story was allowing me to get a glimpse into the reality of this disorder. Many moments where I felt I was gaining insight about schizophrenia came during the caregiving parts of the book. In the past, it hadn't occurred to me the emotional and practical strain that having a loved one with a mental disorder can put on a family. These moments stood out to me when tough love was needed. It's never easy to tell someone you love no but it was important for Doug to tell his son, even though it may have been difficult. In one instance, Doug jr lost or had his money stolen on multiple occasions. When reading this, I can recall thinking how difficult it would be to have to wonder if Doug Jr.'s money was truly being stolen, if he was lying, or if this was a hallucination.

Another moment I felt that I was gaining a new perspective on schizophrenia and the way in which it impacts the individual and those around them was when Doug Jr. went missing for weeks. During this period, Doug was calling and searching shelters in hopes of finding his son. He writes in the book how he was unable to focus on work or anything really without the constant wonder of where his son may be. The fear and helplessness a parent must feel when knowing their mentally disordered child is on the streets, not knowing if he's alive or safe, is unimaginable. This part of Doug's story highlighted to me how this disorder affects not only the individual living with it but also those around them. The disorder consumes those who care most for the individual. It really made me think about how emotionally exhausting and draining it must be to care for a loved one going through this.

Due to my own personal experiences, which I will touch on later, I've understood the stigma that surrounds mental disorders for a few years. However, while reading *A Boy Broken*, I realized just how deeply these stigmas affect the lives of those experiencing mental disorders and those around them. One part that stood out to me most was Doug's choice to refrain from telling his neighbors and friends about Doug Jr.'s schizophrenia diagnosis. It seems Doug believed telling those around him about his son's reality would shatter the image of a perfect, normal, put-together life he had worked hard to build. When neighbors would ask about Doug Jr., he would often make up stories saying his son was still at school, even though in reality he was in a treatment facility. Though Doug would go on to tell some of his extended family, like his parents, it saddened me to read that he was surprised by how supportive they were. Due to the stigma that surrounds schizophrenia and other mental disorders, Doug was fearful of a negative reaction from his family. Perhaps they would think differently of him and his son, or judge them? This is a completely substantiated fear due to the stigma that surrounds mental disorders and one that can only be stopped through the destigmatization of mental disorders. Doug's fear and uncertainty regarding how his family would react to his son's diagnosis showed the isolation those caring for a loved one with a mental disorder experience due to the rejection and judgment that may come if they are open.

As mentioned above, I have had my own struggles and experiences with mental disorders. I do not wish to compare or take away from the severity of the disorder spoken of in the book, but to relate my own experiences to the stigmatization that was experienced. I was officially diagnosed with OCD when I was 16 or 17, though I had always had a sense I may be suffering from some form of mental disorder. I suffer from intrusive thoughts and compulsions. These compulsions often involved touching objects with both hands to feel equal, avoiding certain numbers, opening and closing things until it felt right, and so on. Needing a sense of relief, I would often engage in these compulsions at work or school. Though I tried to be

discreet, sometimes I would catch someone looking at me or asking, "What are you doing?". When people caught me doing these things, I would feel very embarrassed and like I was different from those around me. Though I knew what I was suffering from, I did not tell those around me my diagnosis of OCD, even when I was seen engaging in odd behavior. I was so fearful of how people would react or view me if I told them. The stigmatization surrounding mental disorders greatly affected my choice to refrain from telling people of my diagnosis. Stigma, though I did not realize it at the time, made me extremely fearful to tell my parents what I was going through. I remember the night I broke down to my parents and confessed how much I was struggling with symptoms of OCD. I was terrified they'd think I was weird or lying. Much like Doug, I was met with nothing but complete support and love from my parents. Looking back now, it's clear to me that the stigmatization that surrounds mental disorders is what made me so fearful of telling people. I had always known my parents to be loving and caring, yet the stigmatization of mental disorders had put fear in me that I would be met with rejection or thoughts that I was crazy. This thought came to me several times whilst reading the story, as I felt many parallels in Doug's reluctance to tell people about his son's schizophrenia to my fear of telling my loved ones about my OCD behaviors.

Before reading *A Boy Broken*, the limited knowledge I had of schizophrenia was shaped by fear and stereotypes. Reading and reflecting on this book has allowed me to see the difficulties that affect an individual suffering from schizophrenia and those who love and care for them. Through Doug's experiences, I learned what caring for an individual with schizophrenia looks like and how stigma surrounding mental disorders creates fear and isolation for those suffering and those caring for them. In connecting the book to my own experiences, I felt I was able to relate to the book and understand Doug's story.

References:

Engelman, D. J. (2023). *A boy broken*. Independently published.