The Boy Who Lived: Harry Potter, Suicide, and an Opportunity for Mental Health Literacy

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Of course this is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?
– Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows[1(p579)]

It has been 20 years since the first of the Harry Potter books was published. In the interim, they have been translated into 73 languages and sold more than 450 million copies. It seems everyone knows Harry, even within the notoriously restrictive Guantanamo Bay prison.[2] When I first read the books, I thought I knew Harry too, but I was missing something important that has significance for our field.

As our group recently published in *JAACAP Connect*, the third book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, presents Harry metaphorically overcoming depression using cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) skills mirroring J.K. Rowling's own experiences in real life.[3-4] In the book, Harry's de facto CBT therapist, Professor Lupin, deploys cognitive restructuring, fear hierarchies, behavioral activation, and core belief work to help Harry overcome the dementors and his symptoms of depression.[4] *Azkaban* is arguably the most fulsome depiction of psychotherapy skills in children's literature.[4] Yet, despite the book's ubiquity for nearly two decades, it has remained an untapped resource for teaching CBT skills to youth. A framework for implementing a mental health literacy program based on the book is outlined in our previous paper, and more than 500 middle school students in Ontario, Canada are receiving a pilot curriculum in which they learn CBT skills along with Harry.

When I noticed that J.K. Rowling had embedded depression in her books, I wondered whether she might have done the same for the suicidal thoughts she has said she experienced while depressed.[3] As a suicide researcher, the most surprising aspect of the series for me is its hidden function as a meditation on suicide from the perspective of someone with lived experience. Viewing the books with this in mind, it quickly becomes apparent that suicide not only appears in the Harry Potter books but could be considered a major theme in the series. I'd like to focus the rest of this article on the theme of suicide in Harry Potter, which may be just as important and similarly unrecognized as the themes of depression and therapy.

Rowling has said that her books "are largely about death."[5] On a superficial level, this is self-evident, as many characters die in the series, while those who survive, most importantly Harry, are left to manage their grief and loss. Given that Harry spends most of the series fighting an evil antagonist, Lord Voldemort, to stay alive, one may rightly ask where suicide comes into play. A literal reading of the text points to Voldemort, and Harry's other antagonists, as an external evil that has been compared to the Nazis.[6] But what if we were to take a more interpretive stance and imagine the death impulse represented by Voldemort as existing within Harry himself? That is, if Harry embodies Rowling's depression as she has stated, it seems fair to question whether his character also contains an allegory for suicidal ideation. There is at least some evidence to support this notion. As the story progresses, the boundaries between Harry and Voldemort become increasingly blurry, and Voldemort is presented as a kind of alter ego for Harry. In the final book, Professor Dumbledore reveals that "In the case of Harry and Lord Voldemort, to speak of one is to speak of the other…Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry."[1(pp549-551)] In this conceptualization, Voldemort can be viewed not only as perpetrator but also as residue of Harry's original trauma. Harry is, quite literally, scarred by the childhood loss of his parents, an important risk factor for eventual death

by suicide.[7] One potential interpretation of his struggle against Voldemort could be as a metaphorical struggle to determine whether he will be able to overcome his past trauma or if it will set him on a path to destruction.

A careful read reveals numerous pieces of evidence supporting this interpretation. For example, Voldemort's school house of Slytherin is connected to suicide. The Bloody Barron, house ghost and mascot of Slytherin, dies in a murder-suicide.[1] Voldemort's gift of a silver hand to one of his devoted followers is ultimately used by its owner to choke himself to death.[1] Voldemort's return to power and deepening connection with Harry in the fifth book coincides with Harry experiencing what appears to be suicidal ideation. In one scene, Voldemort enters Harry's mind directly, and he reacts with a desire to be dead: "Let the pain stop, thought Harry … Let him kill us."[8(p720)] In another, Harry discovers a stone archway that represents a boundary between the living world and death and feels "a very strong inclination to climb up…and walk through it."[8(p682)] When instead his godfather dies by falling through the archway, Harry finds the suffering unbearable, yelling "I'VE HAD ENOUGH, I'VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON'T CARE ANYMORE."[8(p726)] He fantasizes about being dead so that he can join his godfather. These suicidal impulses are resolved in *The Deathly Hallows*, the final book in the series. It introduces the resurrection stone, a "hallow" that Harry most covets since it has the power to reunite him with his dead parents. The legend of the resurrection stone, however, is that it led its original owner to an ill-fated reunion with his dead lover after which, "driven mad with hopeless longing, [he] killed himself so as truly to join her."[1(p332)] The implicit question is whether Harry will suffer a similar fate. The novel culminates in a final battle between Harry and Voldemort. Notably, the entire penultimate chapter and arguable centerpiece of that struggle takes place as an internal dialogue within Harry's head between himself and his dead mentor, Albus Dumbledore.[1] The discussion is set in a train station where Harry is given the option to go one way or the other: he can return to his body and continue fighting or take a train away from life.[1] In French, Voldemort means "flight of death." The fundamental question of this chapter is in which direction Harry will fly, towards death or away from it. Summoning strength from his bond with Dumbledore, his teachers, friends, and parents, he chooses to affirm life and in so doing, Rowling makes a powerful statement about the ability of love and comradery to overcome what at times has seemed like intolerable pain.

Schools have a rich tradition of using popular fiction, novels like *Animal Farm*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Lord of the Flies*, to teach youth about history and fundamental truths of the human condition. Fantasy novels are often dismissed as offering little educational value. However, *The Lord of the Rings*, the quintessential work in this genre, was a parable for J.R.R. Tolkien's experiences in the trenches of World War I.[9] The core message of that series was that the friendship and bravery exhibited by his soldier comrades was the only foil against the human impulse for power that threatened to destroy the world. From wise old wizards to Dark Lords to dangerous magical objects, J.K. Rowling borrowed liberally from Tolkien.[10] In my view, the genius of Rowling, generally overlooked, is that she coopted many of the tropes Tolkien used to convey his geopolitical message and repurposed them to deliver a highly personal reflection on how someone suffering from depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation can find a path to resilience.

When I speak to the middle school students who are learning CBT skills by studying Harry Potter, a few notable themes emerge: they strongly identify with Harry, and they are able to see how his struggles are similar to theirs and their peers'. They are also universally surprised that the books have something to teach them about mental wellbeing. An emerging scholarly literature suggests that mental health literacy, taught in schools, has the potential to improve knowledge, decrease stigma, and even diminish suicidal ideation and behavior.[11] Examples of resilience in the face of mental illness are an important component of these efforts. In 2010, my colleague Thomas Niederkrotenthaler and his group demonstrated that media reports emphasizing "mastery" of suicidal crises, that is suicidal ideation followed by positive outcomes such as help

seeking rather than suicidal behavior, were associated with fewer subsequent suicide deaths in Austria.[12] While we know that suicide can be contagious through the well-known "Werther effect," put simply, resilience may be contagious too. We need both youth and adult role models to teach positive coping strategies, and in Harry Potter and J.K. Rowling, we have one of each. When Rowling herself was depressed and contemplated suicide, she has told reporters that "the thing that made me go for help was probably my daughter."[4] Clearly, Rowling was able to draw on her own strengths and reasons for living to overcome her illness, and that is an important message for readers. By failing to highlight her story and its commonality with Harry's, our field and youth educators are missing an opportunity to teach mental health literacy.

It is a misconception that primary prevention of suicide entails education about suicide. To the contrary, school-based suicide prevention should focus on *resilience* education. However, in an era when youth may be exposed to graphic portrayals of suicide such as in the show *13 Reasons Why*,[13-14] teachers need better tools to communicate more realistic and helpful messages about suicide. Schools, especially those struggling to manage questions about suicide, could create literature units specifically asking students to think about Harry Potter as an allegory about suicide and to teach J.K. Rowling's personal story of resilience as a model to be emulated.

The Harry Potter books and Rowling's accompanying story are a largely untapped resource for teaching mental health literacy, positive coping skills, and resilience in the face of trauma, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. After 20 years, the Harry Potter novels have rightfully earned their status as literary classics. Teachers and schools should give them the attention they deserve and, like all great books, use them to teach children about life.

Take Home Summary

- Suicide may be an under-recognized theme in the Harry Potter novels.
- The series can be read to convey a powerful message of hope and resilience in the face of trauma and suicidal impulses mirroring the author's lived experience.

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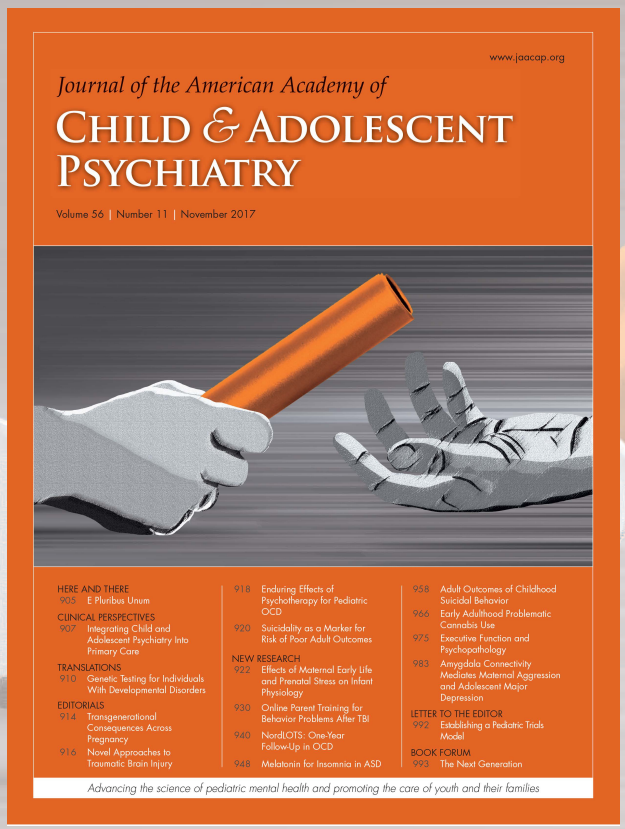

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It is November of 2017, and the *Journal* has nearly finished what is, at this point, a year-long transition in editorial leadership. Editor-Elect Douglas K. Novins fully assumes the responsibilities of outgoing Editor-in-Chief Andrés Martin with the January 2018 issue, although this handoff has been in the works for some months now. Dr. Martin's tenure has been marked by his dedication to mentorship, and to building a pipeline of future editors, reviewers, and authors, not to mention record impact factors and the expansion of features such as cover art, podcasting, and continuing medical education opportunities. In his editor's report from December 2016, Dr. Martin wrote of his successor, "Doug is a stellar scholar, clinician, educator, and administrator, and he is a kind, fair, and wise man…a truly inspired choice in a field of so many talented and worthy applicants. Doug is the perfect person for the job and will be superb at it" (2016;55:1099). As Dr. Martin passes the baton to Dr. Novins, readers of the Journal can look for the hallmarks of the publication to remain the same—continued coverage of groundbreaking science and incisive research, clinical, and policy translation—while also noting the advent of exciting new content and features. The flagship publication of AACAP is in good hands.