PART ONE

A Response to Netflix' *Th1rteen R3asons Why:*

An Important Story and an Impertinent Public Response

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Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which was published in 2006 and produced as a Netflix series in 2017, is unique because the main character is dead. In turn, she's static through the storyline. The character who proves most dynamic then is Clay Jensen: a mild, easy-going high school student who spends an entire night listening to 13 cassette tapes recorded by his friend Hannah Baker, who recently committed suicide. Each tape explains a reason why Hannah felt driven to end her own life, and each reason is associated with a person. Hannah didn't feel like she could regain control of her life, so she took control of vengeance after her death: each of the reasons must listen to his or her own tape, knowing that all the other reasons have also listened to the tapes and, in turn, know what horrible thing each reason did that severed any semblance of hope Hannah had managed to hold during her time at Liberty High.

This novel offers a raw glimpse into the mind of a high school student whose hurt is so overpowering that she struggles to live day by day. The novel is convicting, emphasizing that nobody can know everything happening in a person's life, that nobody can predict how far his or her mistreatment of another will extend. Even though my first reading wasn't my first encounter with this theme, it was certainly the most gripping. When a concept is attached to a narrative, it takes on so much more weight; it's significantly more compelling, so much so that it keeps you up all night. Asher explained:

> As far as responsibility, with this subject matter I felt the most responsible thing I could do was write the book as raw and honest as I could. No one reaches out for help if they feel no one will understand. And I've heard over and over that this book was the first time people felt understood. (Diaz)

In pushing this empathetic understanding, the novel demands a serious, somber response. As my friends noted, it's not the type of novel that one "loves." This novel did not gain popularity because readers gushed about how "awesome" it is. Asher noted that word of mouth has been key

in popularizing the book (Diaz), but those word-of-mouth conversations describe the story's truth, the way the story forces readers to face hurt forthrightly and respond genuinely.

I imagine this sense of conviction is precisely why Netflix wanted rights to the story. By adapting the same story to a different platform, more people would be irrevocably changed by Hannah's recordings. However, all stories must unavoidably undergo some plot and character alterations when adapted for a new medium. Netflix writers found that Clay passively listening to Hannah's voiceover worked well on the page, but didn't create enough action to serve the screen well. In turn, they manufactured more character interaction than found in the book, which greatly affected the story. In giving each character a fully-fledged backstory and enough screen time to show how that backstory affected each character's actions and interactions, the screenwriter and director allowed viewers to empathize with the reasons in a way that readers weren't. As a result, a new theme emerged: the complexity of human interaction and the impossibility of untangling a web of blame. This aspect of the book-to-screen alterations proved positive.

Though these alterations for the sake of adaptation were necessary, and though they enhanced the story thematically, the nature of these alterations also had tremendous negative consequences – arguably so tremendous as to negate positive byproducts. Most changes were hot-topic, high-drama exaggerations of scenarios originally found in Asher's book. As a result, viewers were gripped by the thrill more than the truth of the piece, which is precisely why public response to the Netflix series proved more widespread than that of the book. However, this overwhelming public response was entirely inappropriate.

Many people – primarily teenagers and young adults – binge watched the show because they just couldn't get enough. The phrase, "Oh, you're watching *Thirteen Reasons Why*? I LOVE that show!" became prevalent. In fact, *Thirteen Reasons Why* broke a Netflix record: more people tweeted about the series during its first week of streaming than any other Netflix content,

culminating in a whopping total of 3,585,110 tweets in 168 hours ('13 Reasons Why Just Broke…'). It's no surprise that this surplus in tweets soon evolved into a surplus of Internet memes that made light of the show, of Hannah's hurt, and of any attempt at productive conversation surrounding the show's thematic content.

Netflix itself contributed to the problem. The most popular meme featured Hannah's line, "Welcome to your tape." In context, this line is harsh; it's undergirded by Hannah's pain and consequent vengeance, and it should spur guilt and fear in listeners, both fictional reasons and nonfictional readers/viewers. When used as an Internet meme, though, the statement was stripped of its weight entirely. For example, one popular tweet read, "Chipotle employee told me guac was extra. Welcome to your tape" ("Netflix Used a '13 Reasons Why' Joke").

Netflix found this funny. As the meme was gaining in popularity, Hulu posted a snarky tweet about all the content available for streaming exclusively on Hulu, not on Netflix. Netflix responded with a tweet reading, "Welcome to your tape," which received 422,235 likes and 232,088 retweets (Netflix US). Evidently, not only did viewers misunderstand the point of the show, but Netflix itself didn't understand that suicide – whether fictional or nonfictional – is not something to be joked about. It's certainly difficult to approach a heavy issue face-on, and it's certainly easier to laugh about what hurts than feel the hurt, but in life-or-death cases, it is never permissible to cope through memes.

Public response proved so immature because Netflix' overwhelming inclusions of taboo subject matter made the story more "adult" by treating audience member as juveniles, incapable of being gripped by a single element of mature subject matter, in need of more and more social hot-topic issues to keep their attention. For example, in the book, Courtney and Hannah's prank on Tyler is mildly risqué, but primarily innocent: they merely give each other back massages to lure peeping-Tom Tyler into snapping a photo. In the Netflix series, though, Courtney and Hannah are

drunk and have a full-blown make out session. Tyler then captures a photo of the girls mid-kiss, and Courtney's overly fearful reaction reveals that she's gay.

Later, Courtney is seen with her parents, who are both male. Courtney is uncomfortable sharing her sexual orientation with anyone – including her fathers – for fear of judgment, for fear that conversations surrounding the "blame" for her sexual identity would be put on her upbringing. This addition to the storyline is expansive, as it grants Courtney a backstory that she lacked in the book. It rounds her out, and it enables the audience to empathize with her. It also heightens the drama, pulling attention away from the severity of the suicide at hand to grapple with another, important issue in a context where both issues cannot be given adequate attention.

The Netflix series also creates more drama by giving the parents bigger roles. In the book, Hannah's parents are minor characters. They're depicted in a positive light, but not given much attention or detailed character development: they loved their daughter, could not have anticipated her suicide, and chose to move after the tragedy to heal in a location separate from the visceral memories. In the Netflix series, though, Hannah's parents are primary characters featured heavily in each episode. The series follows their grieving process intimately, primarily giving them space for anger phase of the Kubler-Ross model. In fact, Hannah's parents chose to sue the school for negligence, for allowing the bullying that contributed to Hannah's suicide. This furthers the drama and furthers the audience-intrigue, as viewers want to know the outcome of the lawsuit.

Clay's parents are also given more depth, more rounding out. Most notably, Clay's mom is the lawyer defending the school against Hannah's parents. This would likely never happen in real life, as Clay's mother has a clear conflict of interest. But in the fictional realm, this conflict of interest contributes to the overarching conflict. The entire plot is a blame game: Hannah blaming thirteen people, Clay blaming Tony for keeping secrets, Bryce blaming Hannah for "wanting it," Hannah's parents blaming the school for negligence, etc. By creating more of a blame-based

conflict between Hannah and Clay's parents, and by creating a riff between Clay and his mom as they blame different people/institutions, the drama is heightened. The web becomes a little tighter, a little more impossible to untangle.

Still further, the Netflix series creates more conflict between Clay and Tony than found in the book. For some reason unknown to Clay, Hannah chose Tony as her alibi. Tony didn't know Hannah was going to kill herself, but before she did, she left a second set of her tapes with Tony, giving him instructions to follow each reason and insure that they comply. If a reason refused to listen to the tapes or refused to pass them on, Tony was to release that second set to the entire community, allowing everyone to hear the details of each reason's mistake.

Because Clay is always aware of Tony rolling along in his bright red sports car not too far behind Clay's bike, Clay doesn't trust Tony entirely. This is true in both the book and the show, but it's heightened in the show because Tony is played so cryptically. His physical appearance fits the non-trustworthy stereotype: clad in leather, hair slicked back, tattoos lining the space behind his ears and down his neck, maintaining eye contact for just a little bit too long, saying enough to be conversational but not enough to offer any satisfying information, etc.

It's this last point that particularly aggravates Clay. Each episode features at least one confrontation between the two, always underscored with dramatic music. Clay wants to know what is going on, why he is on the tapes, whether Tony is on the tapes too, why all the other reasons are altering between hostility and friendliness towards Clay, why Mr. Porter keeps calling students into his office, etc. Tony's answer is always the same: "Listen to the tapes, Clay." This non-answer further propels the suspense, the mystery. It keeps viewers watching, waiting for the answers that might come in the next episode, or maybe the next, or maybe the next. The Tony from the book didn't give Clay all the answers up front, but he wasn't evading Clay's questions as

suspiciously as the Tony from the show; rather, the Tony from the book was empathetic, encouraging Clay to keep listening through the all night escapade.

In fact, the most overt difference between the book and the movie is the length of time Clay spent listening to the tapes. In the book, Clay listened to them back to back, staying up all night to take in Hannah's full story. In the series, though, Clay spends many days – possibly many weeks, though it's difficult to determine an exact timeline – listening to the tapes, going the slowest of any reason because he finds listening too emotionally draining to forego breaks. By extending the time between tapes, Netflix grants time for this further character interaction, these further developed backstories that the book lacked. The more time in between tapes, the more screen time for Tony to make cryptic comments, for Jessica to struggle with Justin, for Bryce to deny his part in the incident, and for the rest of the characters to alternate between befriending and threatening Clay in hopes that he'll keep his mouth shut. The extended timeline then contributes significantly to the suspense, the mystery, the thrill of the wait.

Asher himself noted that the story lent itself well to a suspense/thriller genre (Diaz), but the Netflix creative team – particularly those in charge of editing and music – latched on to this idea entirely. At the end of the first episode, Clay is sitting at his desk holding the first tape in his hands. Through voiceover, Hannah says, "Turn the tape over for more." The music swells as Clay hesitantly presses the play button on Tony's Walkman, breathes heavily, and shifts his gaze to look directly into the camera for another heavy-breathing moment before the cut to the credits. This is the exact format any suspense scene follows, even ending on a cliffhanger that deters viewers from closing their browser and instead spurs them towards the passivity of watching the next episode – which "will play automatically in ten seconds."

These are just a few examples of alterations, of moments that glamorized the character's situations by appealing to viewers' thrill factors. These examples aren't one-time instances,

though. They are plot alterations that extend through each episode for the sake of cohesion; one alteration requires another, which requires another. Similarly, one step towards a thriller requires another, which requires another, which requires another. For a suspense/thriller, the stakes must continue to rise with each episode, and when a series runs just shy of thirteen hours, those stakes will inevitably rise beyond control by the end. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*'s case, those stakes skyrocketed so much that another character attempted suicide in the final minutes of the final episode, leaving a cliffhanger large enough that the public demanded a second season.

This insistence further proves that the general public misunderstood the point of the series. Why would anyone request an extension of a story that is difficult to watch, difficult to grapple with? Why would anyone desire more heartbreak, especially so soon after being exposed to season one? Asher hoped that the story would spur conversation:

> A discussion about any sensitive issue can be helped with literature. For most people, being involved in an honest and open discussion about these things does not come easily. By using books, we can talk about situations that happen to fictional characters and explore their decisions and repercussions without talking about real people. It feels safer. (Diaz)

Thus, a proper response to Hannah's story would require time: time to process, time to heal, time to discuss, and time to change.

Perhaps a second season would prove beneficial after the first season had been processed and produced a positive social outcome, as it was intended to do. Then, a second season would be appropriate to revive similar conversations, to refresh the importance of *Thirteen Reasons Why*'s themes in the public eye. But by immediately demanding a second season, the public proved that they didn't grasp the original intent.

However, Netflix might have realized this need for processing, and they might be seeking to meet both the public's desire and the public's underlying needs after all. Netflix officially announced that *Thirteen Reasons Why* has indeed been renewed for a second season to premier spring 2018, just one year after the first installment of Liberty High's story. In an interview with E! News, Producer Brian Yorkey explained:

> For those that Hannah left behind, that story is just beginning. Their stories of recovery are just beginning. Clay and Olivia Baker are two people with the most amount of healing to do, and it was just in its very beginning stages when season one ended. Season two is also about healing and how we go on, because people always say you have to go on but how do we after something like that? (Nilles)

In telling the story of recovery, perhaps Netflix will more fully address the most severe thematic at hand: the hopelessness of suicide, the severity of bullying, the importance of thoughtfulness in human interaction, and the need to take ownership of one's mistakes. One can hope that the second season will be less dramatic and more pertinent. Based of Yorkey's comments, the refocusing on what's pertinent seems likely.

Ultimately, the deviations Netflix producers made from Asher's original book proved necessary, as a single boy listening to a single girl's voice would not transfer from page to screen effectively. Many of the changes also proved positive, as granting characters backstories added complexity to the story that the book didn't offer. Now, we know why each student treated Hannah the way he/she did, which convolutes the blame game and reveals the futility of placing fault in the face of interwoven trauma. However, the nature of those deviations took focus off of Hannah's story and placed emphasis on the drama, on the suspense, on the parts of the story that one could "love" rather than the parts one must grapple with. These changes then resulted in the public's insensitive response to the show, a response that the book did not generate.

Regardless, Hannah's story – whether on a page or on a screen – is an important one, a story that needs to be told. Apart from story, we – as in humanity – are not able to empathize. So by creating a raw, honest semblance of many teens' experiences in a narrative form, Asher grants others the opportunity to understand in a way that an explanatory presentation – as if often the approach in school systems nowadays – isn't capable of. When this content is brought to the public eye, and when it's handled responsibly, conversations will result. Social conceptions will change. Empathy will develop. Good, important things will happen.

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PART TWO

Netflix' *Thirteen Reasons Why*:

Not a Question of Power or Popularity, But of Responsibility

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In the nineteen days after *Thirteen Reasons Why* premiered on Netflix, internet searches containing the term "suicide" increased by nineteen percent, which reflects 900,000 to 1.5 million more searches than usual (Schrobsdorff). Though correlation does not always equal causation, it surely does in this case.

Jay Asher's best-selling novel thoroughly covers suicide, specifically high school sophomore Hannah Baker's suicide. The Netflix adaptation graphically depicts that suicide in nauseating detail. Viewers watch Hannah Baker steal razor blades from her parents' drug store, come home to her bathroom, begin running bathwater, stand in front of a mirror to watch herself pass the point of no return, gasp in pain as she digs the blades into her forearms, continue to pant as she slices towards her wrists, climb into the running tub fully clothed, and bleed out, clouding the overflowing bathwater with a copious volume of blood. Viewers also watch Hannah's mother find Hannah's dead body.

Based on social-volume studies, these viewers prove the majority of Netflix users. In fact, *Thirteen Reasons Why* is Netflix' most popular production to date: 3,585,110 Twitter-users tweeted about the show during its first week of streaming. This statistic is particularly startling because *Chasing Cameron*, Netflix' second most tweeted about show, incurred only 1,326,010 during its first week of streaming (Demaria). If it's possible to quantify popularity, *Thirteen Reasons Why* proves triply more popular than any other Netflix' series.

These statistics do not reflect the nature of these internet searches or tweets. Likely not all tweets about the series were affirming. Similarly, not all Google searches were alarming. Likely, some read "how to commit suicide, " but it's equally as likely that others read "how to help a suicidal friend" or "resources for suicide prevention." Regardless, the series brought the possibility of suicide to the forefront of the general populous' minds. There's no question that the

show is powerful. However, many are questioning whether the show was responsible with its power.

Not only did *Thirteen Reasons Why* increase suicide searches, but it also increased suicide attempts. Quantifiable data on these attempts has yet to be published, but specific instances of specific individuals have become front-page stories. For example, just two short months after the series began streaming, a twenty-three year old Peruvian man committed suicide and left behind several audio recordings, each addressed to a specific person who influenced him to jump from a four-story building (Joyce). Further, two California families are publically blaming *Thirteen Reasons Why* for being the final trigger that compelled their daughters to kill themselves. Bella Herndon and Priscilla Chui did not know each other, but they shared many similarities: both were fifteen, both battled depression, both struggled in school, and both died within four days of one another, not long after each girl watched the final episode ("Families Blame…"). Still further, the Mesa County Valley School District in Colorado pulled the novel from library shelves after seven students in the district committed suicide in a single school year. Though there is no evidence that those deaths were tied to Asher's story, this district's educators felt the precaution was essential (Raven).

Other educators agree, as do mental health professionals. The show first sparked a comprehensive response from teens and young adults, which then demanded an equally comprehensive response from those who care for those teens and young adults. Slate Magazine's editor Marissa Martinelli wrote, "It would be irresponsible for parents and educators to let the show's messaging stand on its own. *Thirteen Reasons Why* dropped a bombshell into homes and schools, and it now has mental health and suicide prevention professionals doing damage control" ('13'). This cleanup has primarily involved addressing four fundamental problems with the Netflix series portrayal of Hannah's death.

The most prevalent argument against *Thirteen Reasons Why* is it's romanticized view of suicide. Because Hannah is a primary character with arguably the most page/screen time, it's easy to forget that Hannah is not a present character. She's dead, and dead people don't get to watch the action unfold. Hannah doesn't get to see how her reasons respond to her tapes. Hannah doesn't get to know whether they experience regret or whether they allow that regret to change their future interactions. She doesn't hear the speeches given on her behalf, she doesn't see the selfies taken in front of her memorial, and she doesn't get to revel in her popularity. Suicide is final, and it's a profound lie to romanticize killing oneself as a means of attaining the attention, the verbal affirmation, the gestures of care that one lacked while alive. In turn, professionals fear that Hannah's cry for attention, fulfilled in her death, will encourage other socially disconnected teens towards the same tactic (Martinelli, "Netflix").

However, Hannah's suicide was not a cry for attention. Hannah didn't kill herself because she felt unnoticed. In fact, Hannah would have hated most of the attention she received following her death because most of that attention was superficial, a point that the screenwriter is sure to emphasize. The student leadership group hung colorful, hand-painted suicide awareness and prevention posters around the school, which both Clay and Alex criticized. The staff put together a surface-level presentation for parents detailing warning signs preceding suicide, which Mrs. Baker was livid about. Courtney Crimson – who maintained a deep-seeded anger towards Hannah when Hannah was alive – goes to great lengths to set up and maintain a memorial in front of Hannah's locker complete with photos, cards, candles, stuffed animals, and flowers. In episode three, Hannah's mother passes this memorial and says "Anyone who knew Hannah would know that she hated roses. She thought they were cliché." As Mrs. Baker notes, none of these means of "attention" would have pleased Hannah because they weren't about Hannah or her hurt; they were about those who outlived her.

For Hannah, post-suicide attention would not have been satisfying. Nonetheless, this characterization may not be overt enough for all viewers to catch, particularly teen viewers. For a young, impressionable student grappling with loneliness, the allure of attention following a suicide is problematic. It might be enough to push a struggling student over the edge, which is why this romanticized, life-after-death portrayal of suicide is a valid concern for those who work with youth. Victor Schwartz, the clinical director of the Jed Foundation, said, "With teens and even young adults, sometimes that line between fiction and reality can be somewhat blurred, especially with people struggling with mental health issues." Schwartz thinks this line could become clearer if counselors, educators, and parents made sure to speak with their teenagers about the show, emphasizing that *Thirteen Reasons Why* is "intended as a cautionary tale, not a typical way of handling problems" (Martinelli, "13"). If care providers can help students work through complex character dynamics, perhaps the show can be helpful. But as it stands, the show's depiction of suicide as a romantic solution to loneliness proves dangerous.

Though Hannah's post-suicide satisfaction was not found in attention, it was found in her idea of vengeance, a second topic of concern amongst educators and health care providers. Hopelessness is certainly the primary reason Hannah kills herself, but anger is also a key factor. Hannah blames thirteen people for driving her towards hopelessness, and in her anger, she wants those thirteen people to feel overwhelming guilt. Netflix writers, producers, designers, and actors all see the story holistically: each reason's guilt spurs them to a new understanding of others and consequent new lifestyle. The Netflix team chose to tell this story because watching these reasons reevaluate the way they treated Hannah will encourage viewers to reevaluate their own social interactions. Nobody wants to be a reason; nobody wants to feel the guilt those characters feel. Further, as school counselor Phyllis Fagell explained, "What a show does, what a book does, is it gives you an easy way to tackle very personal topics with some distance" (Martinelli "13"). As a

result, Fagell has used the story to have conversations with her students about bullying, depression, and ways to show compassion. In this sense, *Thirteen Reasons Why* allows viewers to vicariously experience the consequences of another's actions before the viewer's own actions yield similar consequences.

However, Hannah's motives are not so charitable. Hannah shares her experience to cripple those thirteen. Mistreatment begets mistreatment, it seems – an idea that is reinforced through the acts of vengeance Clay takes on Hannah's behalf against the other twelve. For a young, naïve individual being bullied, watching the bullies suffer as a result of Hannah's suicide could easily spark unhealthy ideas. If the bullied individual believes that they are too weak to overcome the bullies in life, Hannah's story may encourage them to overcome the bullies in death. Hannah's suicide is portrayed as a power play, a means of turning the tables to control those who seemed uncontrollable. Again, it is a dangerous lie to portray suicide as a means of getting back at those who abuse others rather than a culminating, permanent act of deep despair.

Thirdly, educators are wary of *Thirteen Reasons Why* because adults are not depicted positively. In the book, Hannah's parents, though well intentioned, are oblivious to her suffering. In the television show, Courtney's parents have unrealistic standards. Justin's mother is a drug addict. Bryce's parents are absorbed in their wealth. Alex's police officer father fails to adhere to sound discipline. Tyler's parents are quick to criticize others without considering their son's own shortcomings. Zach's mother swoops in to fix all of his problems. Clay's relationship with his parents is rocky at best, primarily due to Clay's standoffish demeanor. His parents do everything they can to maintain a genuine connection with their son, sometimes to the point of helicopter-parenting. Though Clay's parents express genuine interest in Clay's wellbeing, Clay chooses to disengage, to maintain secrets. His parents are unable to crack his hard exterior.

Truly, all of the characters keep secrets from their parents, most pertinently the secret of the tapes and their content. The students believe that the adults are incapable of understanding what it is to be in high school. Even if a student were to explain their situation to an adult, the students hold that the adult would only exacerbate the situation. Likely, the students are right in their judgment of these fictional adults, as all are flawed to the point of incompetence.

Even Mr. Porter, the school's guidance counselor, is portrayed as incompetent. In fact, he's Hannah's thirteenth reason for killing herself, a plot point that deeply concerns mental health professionals not because Hannah was unjustified in blaming Mr. Porter, but because Mr. Porter's means of handling student concerns deviate from everything a licensed counselor is taught to do. Mr. Porter is a fictional example of the worst type of counselor, which will deter nonfictional students from seeking any type of nonfictional counselor.

Mr. Porter first adds insult to injury in episode five when Tyler – the peeping Tom who took the photo that started horrible rumors about Hannah's unconventional, loose sexuality – approaches Mr. Porter after being seriously bullied. In Clay's first act of revenge on Hannah's behalf, Clay sits outside Tyler's window and snaps a photo of Tyler while he's changing. The photo of Tyler's bare backside is sent around the school, and bullying results. Students give Tyler knowing looks, call him names, and make snide comments about his physical appearance. Some go as far as to "pants" him in the middle of the hallway, at which point Tyler decides to seek Mr. Porter's professional help.

When handling a bullying situation, a good counselor would first seek to express sympathy, to validate the student's experience, to assure that the student feels heard. Once the student feels safe with this hypothetical counselor, the continued conversation surrounding a confrontation plan can be productive. Mr. Porter, however, immediately places the blame on Tyler: "Well, let's start with, what is it that you can do to protect yourself? What is anything that

you're doing that might provoke it?" This is a blatant case of victim shaming, which Mr. Porter also does with Hannah.

Hannah comes to Mr. Porter in episode thirteen, after Bryce has raped her. It takes a few moments for Hannah to open up about the party, and even once she starts to offer glimpses into the traumatic event, she understandably has a hard time getting the words out. This difficulty in fluid communication is aggravated by Mr. Porter's phone, which continually buzzes throughout the scene and disrupts Hannah's thought process. Mr. Porter never glances at his phone. He never answers it. He even forcefully shoves it into his drawer so that he can focus on Hannah. Nonetheless, it's presence reminds Hannah that she is taking up Mr. Porter's valuable time, that she is distracting him from other aspects of his job, that she is a burden. Its presence makes it difficult for Hannah to share.

Because Hannah isn't totally comfortable or forthcoming, Mr. Porter has to ask a lot of short questions to get short answers from Hannah. This means of conversation could prove an effective means of counseling if the nature of Mr. Porter's questions weren't injurious, if the questions didn't come at a rapid-fire pace accompanied by a firm tone that Hannah interpreted as accusatory: "Did anything happen at the party that night that you regret? Maybe you made a decision—a decision to do something with a boy that now you regret? Did anything happen at the party that was illegal? Alcohol? Drugs? Did he force himself on you? You think so? But you're not sure? Did you tell him to stop? Did you tell him no? Maybe you consented then you changed your mind? Should we involve your parents or the police? Hannah, who's the boy?"

Licensed school psychologist Rachel Hodas explained, "[Mr. Porter] could have slowed things down, gotten a sense of how she was feeling and what she needed from him in that moment, and then explored options...and then have her help guide the next steps. Whenever a student comes in with a crisis like that, we're making a game-time decision. So I generally try to

slow things down as much as possible" (Williams). Instead, Mr. Porter escalated the pace and escalated the situation, leaving barely enough time between questions for Hannah to squeak out a barely-heard, one-word response. Mr. Porter doesn't listen to Hannah's recounting of the events; he asks questions to confirm the understanding of an event he has preconceived without basis. In his questioning, he denies Hannah's experience.

Moreover, Mr. Porter disregards Hannah's experience. Just before Hannah storms out of Mr. Porter's office – heading home to promptly kill herself – Mr. Porter notes that, if the boy is a senior, Hannah won't have to see him anymore if she can endure a few short months. Hannah is incredulous, and Mr. Porter says, "If you don't want to press charges against this boy, if you're not even sure you can press charges, then there's really only one option. I'm not trying to be blunt here Hannah, but you can move on."

At this point, Hannah has said as clearly as she could that she intends to kill herself. Through tears, she tells Mr. Porter, "I need it to stop. I need everything to stop. People. Life." Mr. Porter repeats Hannah's thoughts, confirming that he has heard her: "What did you mean when you said that you needed life to stop? That seems like a very serious thing to say." Mr. Porter has heard Hannah admit that she's considering suicide. Though Hannah didn't use the terms "suicide" or "rape" during her counseling session, Mr. Porter knew what Hannah was alluding to, which meant he was legally bound to report her case to her parents (Williams). Phyllis Alongi, the clinical director of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, noted that Mr. Porter's failure to act "looks like a dead end for someone who's struggling, like, *Oh yeah, that's what happens when you go to a counselor.* Which is not true… I think that depiction of him was a big disservice to the mission and the quality of school counseling" (Martinelli, "13").

Even if Mr. Porter is a bad stereotype of a school counselor, and even if the majority of counselors are far more in tune with their students' lives than Mr. Porter is, this portrayal is what

will stick with teens and young adults, especially those who may have been considering reaching out for help. And if the school counselor, if the person trained to support hurting high school students cannot offer any hope, then the only remaining option is suicide. *Thirteen Reasons Why* presents no possible alternatives, which – even more so than any negative portrayal of mental health professionals – is what experts find most disturbing.

Fourthly and perhaps most importantly, *Thirteen Reasons Why* fails to factor a mental health condition into Hannah's experience, though diagnosable and diagnosed illnesses play a role in 90% of all suicides ("Facts About…"). Suicide is often tied to bullying, but not all bullying results in suicide. Many individuals are able to find support systems to carry them through periods of bullying. It's easier to be courageous when one isn't alone, so finding those people who care is often enough to overcome oppression within the realm of teenagers.

Depression, however, is something separate from bullying, separate from any individual's experience. 2-15% of all cases of depression end in suicide ("Facts About…"), a statistic that should be more startling today than it was ten years ago because the number of individuals suffering from diagnosed mental health conditions has been rising steadily. Between 2008 and 2015, the number of 5-17 year olds hospitalized for self-harm more than doubled. This statistic only reflects the extreme cases, the ones that follow from thought to action. Less extreme cases, such as the 17.7% of teens who reported seriously considering suicide in 2015, are just as important (Schrobsdorff). Based on these statistics, it's logical to conclude that many of *Thirteen Reasons Why*'s viewers are grappling with mental illness themselves. Netflix choose this story because it was pertinent, because it would hit a wide range of viewers. Knowing that those viewers were sick and, in turn, more sensitive to influence than their healthy peers, perhaps Netflix should have been more careful in their portrayal of suicide.

Netflix producers argue that they included trigger warnings before the opening credits of each episode containing particularly graphic content (i.e. rape and suicide). They argue that the series is rated MA. They argue that their website offers phone numbers for crisis hotlines and links to other sites with information for friends and family members who want to help someone struggling with suicidal thoughts. They argue that they produced a 30-minute documentary featuring discussion between the production team, the author, and psychologists in an effort to spur further discussion (Martinelli "Netflix…"). These precautions were well intentioned, but they were merely the start. Evidently, more is required.

School counselor Phyllis Alongi suggests incorporating bits of the documentary into each episode, as it's likely young students will not be driven to watch a separate documentary on their own. She also suggests creating more resources for parents, educators, and mental health professionals to use alongside the series; in her estimation, a website with links to other websites does not constitute a reliable resource (Martinelli "13…").

I suggest that some sort of accountability system be put into place surrounding the show. I realize this would be difficult to institute and monitor, but I think it would be worth looking into. Maybe for underage users, or users who share an account with their parents, some sort of web-blocker would pop up each time the student hit play, requiring the parent to enter a password before the child could continue watching. This would require that students talk to their parents about the show's content as they move through the series. Perhaps adults who share accounts could receive a notification every time their other user viewed an episode. Perhaps Netflix could include additional "trigger" warnings before each episode, encouraging viewers to not watch alone. Perhaps all of these precautions would ruin *Thirteen Reasons Why*'s marketability and, in turn, negate any positive conversation the story would spur. I'm not sure, but I am sure that those who are mentally ill are sometimes incapable of taking care of themselves, of making decisions

that will be best for their health. If Netflix truly does want to help those who are struggling, perhaps they need to take more control of their content rather than releasing it to the world and hoping that those they are trying to help will help themselves. Perhaps Netflix will do so in producing season two.

As mental health issues are becoming more and more prevalent, it's important to tell stories that reflect the growing trends in culture, as difficult as they may be to talk about. However, it's important to tell those stories carefully, seeking to present stories that validate struggling teens experience, spark conversations about the consequences of bullying, and enable the general populous to better understand suicide in today's culture. To the extent that conversations regarding this heavy subject matter have skyrocketed since the series' release, Netflix succeeded.

However, through romanticizing suicide as a means of gaining attention, through validating suicide as a means of vengeance, through portraying adults as incapable of offering support, and through painting suicide as a logical response to bullying rather than a devastating result of mental illness, *Thirteen Reasons Why* contributed to several suicides – the opposite of what Netflix set out to do. It is insensitive and irrelevant to discuss the series' positive elements in light of lives lost. At this point, one can only hope that Netflix sincerely considers educators and mental health professionals' unease, finding ways to alter portrayal of suicide accordingly. Millions of Netflix users will undoubtedly watch season two when it begins streaming this upcoming spring. Netflix has always had an obligation to use its storytelling platform responsibly; now, hopefully Netflix will take that obligation more seriously.

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PART THREE

Netflix' *Thirteen Reasons Why*:

The Dangerous Possibility of Taking a Theme Too Far

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After one dies, he or she is often canonized in glory. Because it's insensitive to say anything about the deceased's mistakes or shortcomings, those who survive regard the dead more charitably in death than in life. As a result, when someone commits suicide, his or her social circle is hesitant to challenge the legitimacy of the deceased's grief. Nobody who adheres to standard social rules would say, "His life wasn't really that bad." It seems heartless to question the deceased's decision and, in turn, to shame the dead.

In the same sense, my premise for this paper may seem heartless. In addressing fictional character Hannah Baker's suicide as depicted in both the novel and the Netflix adaptation of Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, I don't intend to deny Hannah's grief; Hannah was undoubtedly bullied severely, and her sense of hopelessness derived from that bullying proves both logical and heartbreaking. Rather, I intend to question whether those bullies are solely responsible for her death, a claim that both Hannah and the nature of her narrative support.

Thirteen Reasons Why's theme is overt. Whether reading the book, viewing the Netflix series, or merely hearing a synopsis in passing, one easily grasps that the story is about the reaching effects of everyday interactions and the necessity of treating others kindly. Hannah states this theme expressly in episode seven: "No one knows what's really going on in another person's life. And you never really know how what you do will affect someone else. And if that goes for me, it must go for everyone." Within the larger context of the story, this statement so heavily emphasizes treating others respectfully that the importance one's response to mistreatment is written off entirely. All responsibility lies with the initiator of the interaction, and none lies with the recipient.

For example, in that same episode, Zach Dempsy asks out Hannah less than tactfully, saying, "Look, I know you think every guy likes you because you've got this great ass, but I like you for so much more than that." Zach initiates the interaction, and his means of doing so

aggravate Hannah's self-consciousness. In turn, Hannah's response is explosive. She embarrasses Zach in front of the entire cafeteria, which prompts Zach to tell Hannah, "This sh*t that happens to you, I think you bring some of it on yourself." Throughout the entire thirteen-hour series, this is the only time someone acknowledges the importance of Hannah's response to another's initiation. This is the only time someone acknowledges Hannah's hand in her injurious experience at Liberty High.

Every other episode involves a statement identical or similar to, "We killed Hannah Baker." Most notably, at the end of episode ten when Clay is working up the courage to listen to his tape, Clay asks Tony, "Did I kill Hannah Baker?" Tony answers, "You, me, everyone on these tapes. We all let her down. We didn't let her know that she had another choice. Maybe we could have saved her life, maybe not. It's impossible to know." Clay isn't satisfied by Tony's answer. He views it as a cop out, as a shirking of responsibility, so he pushes harder: "Answer the f*cking question, Tony. Knowing what you know, believing what you believe, knowing me, knowing her, and knowing what's on these tapes, did I kill Hannah Baker?" Tony pauses, his throat closing as his eyes fill with tears, and nods. He can hardly squeeze out, "Yeah."

Because Clay is the main character, and because Clay is the only one of Hannah's reasons that – as Hannah admits – doesn't deserve to be on the tapes, the narrative compels readers/viewers to agree with Clay. This is problematic because Clay sees Hannah as a faultless victim. Clay pursues revenge over justice. Clay refuses to rest until those Hannah blames claim full responsibility for Hannah's death. Clay doesn't see his fellow reasons as mean, misaligned people; he sees them as murderers. And because Clay is the voice of truth, readers/viewers are inclined to agree with Clay's repeated proclamation: "We all killed Hannah Baker."

If each reason were to fully realize the weight of that statement, the consequent guilt would be crippling. Any individual with a standard conscience, especially any teenage individual with a

developing conscience, could not move forward believing that they unknowingly killed their peer, their friend. The remorse would be all consuming, obliterating any semblance life pre-tragedy. *Thirteen Reasons Why* acknowledges and depicts the consequences of this crushing culpability through only one character. Alex is the only reason besides Clay who believes, as articulated in episode twelve, "If any one of us had still been friends with her, she'd still be alive today." As a result of accepting the guilt Hannah vengefully thrusts upon him, Alex puts a bullet through his head. Thus, the idea that the reason him/herself murdered Hannah Baker proves fatal for the fictional character who accepts it.

More importantly, the weight of this blame proves dangerous for nonfictional readers/viewers grappling with the suicide of a loved one. That loved one's family, friends, and acquaintances will unavoidably struggle with what mental health professionals term "survivor's guilt." Jeffrey Jackson, a representative of the Survivors of Suicide Loss organization, explains:

> Psychiatrists theorize that human nature subconsciously resists so strongly the idea that we cannot control all the events of our lives that we would rather fault ourselves for a tragic occurrence than accept our inability to prevent it. Simply put, we don't like admitting to ourselves that we're only human, so we blame ourselves instead.

The rational behind survivor's guilt is universal, applying to all of humanity. However, the manifestation of survivor's guilt is unique to grief following a suicide. No other grieving process looks like survivor's guilt.

In blaming themselves, survivors will mentally relive every interaction with their loved one, looking for the signs that seem so obvious in hindsight, though they were too subtle to identify when they occurred. In fact, there may have been few – if any – signs. One study reported that, of those who have survived suicide attempts, 70% tried to take their lives less than an hour

after first conceiving of suicide, and 25% made the attempt within five minutes of that first thought ("Supporting"). And even if the loved one took days, weeks, or months to plan their own death, the signs may have been too subtle to be noticed by anyone outside the suicidal individual's head, as was the case in *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

Additionally, survivors blame solely themselves. Unable to see that the suicidal individual had many acquaintances, and unable to see that each of those acquaintances also failed to prevent the death, survivors assign all fault to themselves rather than to the community of survivors. If an individual survivor were able to realize that nobody predicted the loved one's death, he or she would be able to acknowledge that nobody was at fault. Instead, survivors see only that they themselves were blind to the signs, and in turn, only they themselves are culpable (Jackson).

In this overwhelming shame, survivors are prone to develop depression and post traumatic stress disorder. Though compassionate friends are usually essential to battling depression and PTSD, those suffering from survivor's guilt are not usually receptive to friends' attempted support. More often than not, family and friends aren't capable of offering adequate words, adequate empathy when talking about suicide. It's imperative that survivors connect with a counselor who can walk them through cognitive behavioral therapy or interpersonal therapy, both of which help to normalize the grief, ease the guilt, respect the differences between other survivors methods and paces of grieving, and prepare for triggers, such as birthdays, specific locations, and various conversations that are sure to prove difficult because of associated memories ("Supporting"). Survivors need counselors to work through grief in a way that doesn't ignore the tragedy, but allows the tragedy to be accepted and incorporated into a new way of living in light of what's been lost.

It's important to note that counselors are also subject to survivor's guilt. At some point in their careers, 20% of psychotherapists and 50% of psychiatrists have lost a patient to suicide

("Supporting"). These mental health professionals experience the same grief any other survivor would, and often the anxiety associated with their grief is amplified due to the possibility of being sued for malpractice. *Thirteen Reasons Why* depicted this phenomenon accurately through Mr. Porter's character and through the lawsuit Mrs. Baker initiates.

However, *Thirteen Reasons Why* offers no solution, no means of coping for Mr. Porter, for Mrs. Baker, for Clay, for Alex, or for any character wrestling through survivor's guilt. Instead, *Thirteen Reasons Why* demands that those fictional characters sit in their guilt indefinitely. Though these fictional characters don't necessarily need to heal, as their story ends when the pages do, readers/viewers who exist in the nonfictional realm need to heal. In reality, survivors need to discover the truth about their role in their loved one's death. That truth, contrary to what *Thirteen Reasons Why* pushes, does not involve accepting full culpability.

Rather, mental health professionals work through survivor's guilt by encouraging the patient to recognize the difference between being responsible *for* and responsible *to* another. In their bestseller *Boundaries*, Christian psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend argue that it's important that we – as in humanity – take responsibility for the way we treat others, but we cannot take responsibility for those others' actions. This conviction aligns with Tony's initial assessment of the reasons' responsibility, the assessment Clay rejected outright. If Cloud, Townsend, and Tony are correct, then *Thirteen Reasons Why* misplaces responsibility for Hannah's death by placing too much blame on those who mistreated Hannah.

To biblically support their argument, Cloud and Townsend pull from Galatians 6:2-5, which reads: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load" (*ESV*). This passage seems to contradict itself, seeking to reconcile two opposing

life philosophies. How are we to "bear one another's burdens" communally, but also acknowledge that each man will have to "bear his own load" individually?

The nuance lies in the Greek differentiation between what is translated as "burden" and what is translated as "load." A burden is a problem that the individual does not have the resources, the strength, or the knowledge to bear him/herself. Often, a burden is something thrust on the individual, a weight added by an outside force. Perhaps the individual is young, in need of advice, support, and additional life experience to fully comprehend the problem and bear the burden. Perhaps the individual is sick – be that physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually – and cannot bear the burden because of their malady. When someone steps in to do what the individual cannot do for him/herself, that someone has become the love of Christ manifest, as Christ did for us what we cannot do for ourselves in saving us (Cloud 33).

Conversely, a load is a problem the individual is equipped to handle. Loads include tasks such as daily responsibilities and commitments we make of one's own accord. Cloud explains, "No one can do certain things *for* us. We have to take ownership" (33). In turn, when another steps in to take care of another's load, they do not sacrificially love that other. In bearing another's load, the surrogate bearer denies the other the opportunity to develop a sense of self. If that other never bears their own load, they will continue to be rooted in dependence.

Always, burdens will become loads after another has begun to share the burden-bearing. As Paul notes in Galatians, we can carry burdens *with* one another, but not *for* one another. In other words, we can help one another, but we cannot save one another. We can offer advice, emotional support, time, money, and any other resource at our disposal. We can love the other wholeheartedly, and we can do everything possible to ensure that the loved one knows how loved he/she is. But that loved one must use that love, that advice, and that support to solve the problem for him/herself. Cloud explains, "We are responsible for ourselves – that's why God created each

of us as separate entities… Everyone has to figure out where his soul ends and where another's soul begins" (32). That dividing line between souls is key in differentiating between a burden and a load, between what one is responsible *for* and what one is responsible *to*.

In the case of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, it's difficult to determine whether Hannah was truly suffering under a burden or whether she was lashing out against others for not helping her with her loads. This ambiguity is likely due to the fact that no character ever mentions mental illness as a contributing factor, though 90% of all suicides are linked to diagnosed or diagnosable depression ("Facts About…"). This statistic supports the argument that Hannah's death was the direct result of depression, of a burden she could not bear alone. Further, one can use bits of Hannah's voiceover to convincingly argue that Hannah was indeed suffering from diagnosable depression. Most notably, in episode twelve, Hannah narrates, "It feels like nothing. Like a deep, endless, always blank nothing. And for those of you who will be looking for signs, here's the scary thing: it looks like nothing." If Hannah were suffering from undiagnosed depression, as her narration suggests, then her situation would surely be deemed a burden. And if Hannah were suffering from undiagnosed depression, receiving kindness from her peers would certainly help, but it would not be her salvation.

Nobody chooses depression; depression is not a responsibility one must carry. Depression is an illness, not unlike cancer, that preys on victims who did nothing to deserve the depression. Just as one dies of cancer, one can die of depression through suicide. Just as doctors cannot always save a patient suffering from cancer, mental health professionals cannot always save a patient suffering from depression. Just as family and friends are not to blame when a loved one dies of cancer, family and friends are not to blame when a loved one dies by suicide. Those friends and family members can regret what they did or did not do to support their loved one throughout the

battle with cancer, and that regret is justified because everyone is responsible for the way they treat others. Those friends and family members did not kill their loved one, though. Cancer did.

This cancer analogy is effective, but imperfect. Hannah did kill herself. Even as Hannah was suffering from depression, she was capable of choice. And even if she made a choice while trapped in a cloudy state of mind, a state of mind subject to a misconstrued understanding of reality, she is responsible for her choices insofar as she will unavoidably experience the consequences of those choices. The nuance here lies in the difference between responsibility and blame. Jackson explains, "Blame is accusatory and judgmental, but assigning responsibility need only be a simple acknowledgment of fact… This is why a person who dies by suicide doesn't deserve blame." In Hannah's case, depression is to blame. And still, in acknowledging a complex tragedy involving conscious choices made in a state one did not consciously or unconsciously choose, Hannah is responsible.

Though each person listed on the tapes undoubtedly contributed to Hannah's hopelessness, Hannah ultimately killed herself. Her peers decided to bully Hannah, and they have to grapple with the guilt associated with what they were able to control, but her peers did not decide to murder Hannah. The guilt associated with Hannah's death is not their load to carry. And in pushing this theme, Hannah's story does a disservice to those living with survivor's guilt. If the story had maintained it's desire to force readers/viewers to reconsider the way they treat others – which is their load – a powerful truth would have been communicated. Ironically though, *Thirteen Reasons Why* failed to treat its readers/viewers well in stretching that theme too far and, in turn, communicating the poignant lie that Hannah's reasons are fully culpable for her death. In this sense, both Asher and Netflix need to heed Clay's second most repeated proclamation, most eloquently voiced in episode thirteen: "It has to get better. The way we treat each other and look out for each other. It has to get better.

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