

# Revisiting Jennifer Niven’s “All the Bright Places” in the Lenses of Health Humanities

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## Abstract:

This research analyses the novel “*All the Bright Places*” by Jennifer Niven through the concept of Health Humanities which portrays the lives of two teens who undergoes mental trauma and both grapples with depression. Both the characters Theodore Finch and Violet Markey have mental illness, specifically bipolar disorder and survivor remorse. They both have suicidal thoughts at the start of the novel where Violet blames herself of her sister’s death and Finch has a long history of acting out and having sudden extreme mood swings. It is implied that he is a bipolar but he managed to talk to Violet off of a ledge and Violet becomes Finch’s new reason for living. Their bond as friends started to evolve and their budding romance helps them in their personal growth as well. They learn about themselves and each other while exploring the hidden wonders of Indiana. From the perspective of health humanities, we can see that it aims to foster empathy, critical thinking, and cultural competence. The novel emphasizes on the mental and psychological aspects of the characters who evolved and understands their own personal histories. Memory is a complex and uninterpreted part of humans. In our minds, certain symbols reveal memories, and these memories trigger emotions (fear, trauma), which cause illness. Even if memory, sickness, and symbols are distinct from one another, they are interconnected to create a unique viewpoint.

**Keywords:** Health Humanities, Bipolar, Cultural Competence, Indiana

## Introduction

In the analysis of *All the Bright Places*, several aspects can be explored within the framework of health humanities—a multidisciplinary field that intersects literature, ethics, health, and medicine, focusing on how human experiences of illness, wellness, and healthcare are portrayed in the arts and humanities. Health humanities often emphasize the importance of patient narratives—stories told from the perspective of individuals experiencing illness. The novel gives readers direct access to the inner lives of Finch and Violet, offering a fictionalized form of patient narrative. This encourages empathy and understanding toward those suffering from mental health issues, making it easier for readers, especially healthcare professionals, to consider the emotional and psychological dimensions of illness. The novel fosters empathy by allowing readers to see the world from the perspectives of characters living with emotional pain. In health humanities, fostering empathy is crucial for improving patient care and the doctor-patient relationship. The story helps to humanize the abstract clinical diagnosis of depression and bipolar disorder, helping readers—both laypersons and professionals—better understand the subjective reality of mental illness. Health humanities emphasizes the importance of understanding patients' lived experiences, fostering empathy among healthcare providers. By studying narratives, literature, and art, healthcare professionals can better appreciate the emotional and psychological dimensions of illness. This leads to

more compassionate and patient-centred care, improving patient-provider relationships. This study shows that Health humanities plays a crucial role in addressing the stigma surrounding mental health. Literature and art that portray mental health struggles authentically help to humanize these experiences and challenge societal misconceptions. This awareness can lead to greater acceptance and understanding of mental health issues in communities.

Health humanities initiatives, such as literature-based mental health campaigns, contribute to public education about mental health. These initiatives can lead to increased awareness, reduce stigma, and encourage individuals to seek help when needed. It encourages collaboration between different fields, promoting a more holistic approach to health that considers emotional, social, and cultural factors. This research approach recognizes that health is not merely the absence of disease but involves overall well-being, including mental, emotional, and social dimensions. Many healthcare settings are increasingly incorporating the arts into treatment plans, recognizing their therapeutic value. Art therapy, music therapy, and creative writing programs are examples of how the arts can promote healing, reduce stress, and improve quality of life for patients. Health humanities also focuses on the well-being of healthcare providers themselves. Engaging with literature and the arts can provide a means for healthcare professionals to cope with the emotional toll of their work, reducing burnout and promoting resilience. Health humanities can inform public health campaigns by providing narratives that resonate with communities. Engaging storytelling can effectively communicate health messages, making them more relatable and impactful.

The field also addresses ethical dilemmas in healthcare, encouraging discussions about equity, access, and justice in medical practices. This focus on ethics can influence policy decisions and drive systemic change within healthcare systems. Health humanities fosters research that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, leading to a richer understanding of health issues. By examining narratives, art, and cultural representations of health, researchers can uncover insights that inform healthcare practices and policies. Studies in health humanities have shown that incorporating humanities-based approaches can lead to improved health outcomes, as patients who feel understood and valued are more likely to engage in their care actively. The impact of health humanities in today's world is profound, contributing to more compassionate healthcare practices, reducing stigma around mental health, and promoting holistic approaches to well-being. By bridging the gap between medicine and the humanities, this field enhances the understanding of health and illness, ultimately improving the quality of care and the overall health of individuals and communities.

Virginia Woolf said, "I have a great deal of sympathy for the mentally ill; they are in such a difficult position, and the only way to deal with it is to be sympathetic and understanding." This quote encloses key concepts of health humanities, emphasizing empathy, the importance of human connection, the complexity of illness, and the transformative power of narrative and storytelling in understanding health and wellness. But in the opinion of a researcher it is very important to write and as well as talk about the significance of mental wellbeing because it can save people from mental illness, and being accessed to health humanities can provide knowledge and information about the similar event occurred in the past and it can also make people aware about the and act as a coping mechanism in the difficult times. Within the health humanities framework, this story highlights critical themes: the impact of mental illness on young lives, the stigmatization of mental health issues, and the social systems that often fail to provide adequate support. Theodore Finch's battle with bipolar disorder is portrayed with raw authenticity, drawing attention to the internal conflicts and the unpredictability that often accompany mental illness. Similarly, Violet's

journey through grief after her sister's death explores how trauma manifests in physical and emotional symptoms, showing the importance of social support and healthy coping mechanisms. The novel also critiques the limitations of conventional health resources as both characters experience moments where institutional help falls short. This theme aligns with health humanities on the need for holistic, person-centred approaches in healthcare. Through both the characters, readers are able to see empathy, meaningful human connections and the need for society to normalize conversations about mental health. When viewed through the concept of Psychoanalytic Theory, *All the Bright Places* delves into the psychological complexities of its protagonists, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, offering insight into how trauma, the unconscious mind, and repressed emotions shape their behaviours and relationships. In Finch's character we can see a strong representation of the id, which is driven by impulses and often lacks control. His intense, unpredictable emotions and spontaneous behaviours reflect the id's desire for immediate gratification and thrill. He frequently seeks out extreme experiences as a means of feeling alive, often ignoring social norms or consequences. Meanwhile, Violet embodies the ego, strives to mediate her own grief and fear through more socially acceptable outlets, such as writing and academic pursuit. Violet's grief after her sister's death represents the internal struggle between the superego's self-criticism and guilt over her survival and ego's attempt to find balance and healing. Finch's bipolar disease could also be seen as a way of embodying repression and defence mechanism. He often suppresses his painful memories, including his troubled family life and lack of self-worth by retreating into different identities or "versions" of himself. These alter-egos acts like defence mechanism from confronting his inner pain. His frequent "disappearances" and shifts in personality reflect a denial and compartmentalization of his inner turmoil. Meanwhile, Violet also represses memories of her sister's death and blames herself resulting in a sort of "numbness" until Finch helps her confront her emotions. Her reluctance to control her trauma is a classic example of repression, with her grief spilling over in subtle ways.

*All the Bright Places* can be deeply understood through trauma theory, which focuses on the impact of traumatic experiences and how they shape identity, memory and behaviour. Trauma theory emphasizes that traumatic events often exceed an individual's capacity to process them fully, leading to fragmented memories, emotional numbness or an inability to reintegrate into everyday life. In the novel, the lives of both Theodore Finch and Violet Markey are profoundly affected by unresolved trauma, shaping their actions and relationships throughout the story. Trauma theory suggests that trauma can fracture a person's sense of self and destabilize their perception of the world. For Finch, his troubled family life and untreated mental health issues have created a fractured identity. He adopts different personas or "versions" of himself as a coping mechanism to distance himself from painful memories and experiences. This fragmentation aligns with trauma theory's perspectives that survivors may struggle to maintain a cohesive sense of identity after traumatic events. Finch's shifting identities and erratic behaviour demonstrate how trauma can result in a loss of control over one's inner world. Violet, on the other hand experiences trauma from the loss of her sister in the car accident, which she narrowly survived. Her memory of the incident is fragmented, and she harbours deep-seated survivor's guilt. Trauma theory notes that survivors may avoid recalling details of the event, and Violet's avoidance of activities like writing, which once was her joy, reflects her reluctance to engage with her past. The memory of her sister's death is not a cohesive narrative but rather a haunting, fragmented experience that disrupts her ability. Trauma theory also speaks to the phenomenon of hypervigilance, where trauma survivors may feel on edge, anticipating danger or emotional distress, often without conscious awareness. Finch exhibits signs of hypervigilance, as he is

highly attuned to the potential for rejection or abandonment. His sensitivity to the judgement of others and tendency to react dramatically suggest an ongoing hyperarousal as a response to underlying trauma. Violet, in contrast, demonstrates signs of emotional numbness- a common symptom of trauma- where she initially avoids strong feelings and withdraws from relationships and activities that reminds her of her sister.

*All the Bright Places* is an important text in contemporary times for several reasons, especially due to its focus on mental health, the complexities of grief, and the struggles young people face in navigating mental wellness within a society that often lacks adequate support and understanding. Jennifer Niven's work resonates with today's readers because it highlights issues that are increasingly relevant, and her approach has sparked important conversations about how we view, discuss, and support mental health, particularly among teens and young adults. The text is lauded for its unflinching portrayal of mental illness, including bipolar disorder and suicidal ideation, topics that have historically been stigmatized or underrepresented in young adult literature. As conversations around mental health become more open and urgent in contemporary society, the novel helps to bring mental health struggles to the forefront, encouraging empathy, understanding, and awareness. The book speaks to readers who may be experiencing similar issues, letting them know they are not alone, and it also educates those may not fully understand these challenges. Jennifer Niven handles these topics with sensitivity and realism, contributing to the destigmatisation of mental health issues. By writing from a place of empathy and authenticity, she plays a key role in helping readers feel seen and understood, and in encouraging conversations around mental health. Her portrayal of complex mental health issues also opens the door for other writers to approach similar topics in honest ways. Violet's journey through grief following her sister's death is another significant theme in the novel, addressing the unique ways that young people process loss. The character's avoidance of once-loved activities and social isolation mirror the experiences of those dealing with trauma and loss in real life. In contemporary society, where young people are grappling with unprecedented mental health challenges, the novel provides a relatable depiction of grieving that can resonate with readers who may be struggling with similar feelings. Niven's realistic approach to grief provides a comforting yet complex portrayal of a young person dealing with overwhelming loss. Her depiction of Violet's process of healing- gradual, non-linear, and supported by relationships- encourages readers to find hope while validating their emotions. Niven's work helps fill a gap in literature by offering a nuanced view of grief, inviting readers to see that healing is a journey and that it's okay to take time to process difficult emotions. Through Finch's character, Niven questions the societal expectations placed on young people, particularly regarding mental health. Finch's struggles with mental illness often go unseen or are misunderstood by his family, teachers, and friends, reflecting the way society sometimes fails to support or even acknowledge the mental health of young people. By portraying, Finch's unique yet realistic experiences with bipolar disorder. Niven challenges the stigma that surrounds mental illness and questions why society often expects individual to conform to the "ideal" of normalcy. Niven's choice to portray a complex character who resists societal expectations around mental health and identity sends a powerful message to readers about the importance of acceptance and support. By giving Finch a voice, she encourages readers to challenge their own biases about mental illness and to consider how they might better understand and support people in their lives. Niven's work, therefore, is instrumental in promoting empathy and awareness among her readership.

The novel's exploration of suicide is sobering but crucial, as suicide rates among young people have risen in recent years. *All the Bright Places* does not shy away from the realities of suicidal thoughts, which Finch experiences in complex, evolving ways. By addressing these issues openly, the novel highlights the

importance of suicide prevention, mental health resources, and supportive relationships, showing readers the impact that such issues can have on individuals and communities. By tackling the topic of suicide, Niven plays a vital role in suicide awareness and prevention efforts, using her platform as a writer to illuminate the need for support systems and understanding. Niven's approach encourages readers, particularly young readers, to reach out for help and recognize the importance of mental health. Her sensitive yet honest portrayal serves as a call to action for society to better support and listen to those who may be struggling. For many young people, finding characters who experience mental health issues can be validating and comforting. Finch and Violet's stories offer representation to readers who might feel isolated in their struggles. Representation matters because it reduces feelings of isolation, normalizes seeking help, and provides a sense of community for those who may feel misunderstood. Niven's work gives a voice to young people who often feel isolated in their mental health struggles. By creating relatable characters who face mental health challenges, she allows readers to see themselves within the story, fostering a sense of connection and reducing the stigma surrounding these experiences. Niven's work has also inspired readers to share their own stories, contributing to a community of openness and support. The novel has also been in educational settings to teach students about mental health, empathy, and the importance of supporting each other. As a widely read young adult book, *All the Bright Places* is accessible to young readers and can serve as a starting point for discussions on mental health, coping strategies, and support systems. Jennifer Niven's choice to write an accessible, compelling story around difficult topics has helped make the novel a valuable tool for educators and mental health advocates. Her work contributes to ongoing mental health education by providing a narrative that encourages readers to understand and support one another. Although the novel provides an honest portrayal of mental illness and trauma, there's limited research on the long-term impact of such representations on young reader's perceptions of mental health and illness. For example, while readers may find Finch's character relatable, the novel's tragic ending could potentially reinforce negative associations with mental health issues, such as the notion that mental illness often leads to tragic outcomes. Research is needed to understand how young adult readers process these portrayals over time, and whether they foster greater understanding or inadvertently reinforce stereotype. The novel subverts the traditional romantic narrative by presenting a love story intertwined with themes of trauma, mental illness and tragedy rather than an idealized, redemptive romance. Unlike conventional love stories that follow a linear path toward happiness, their relationship is marked by ups and downs, misunderstandings, and ultimately a tragic end.

## Conclusion

The novel's open-ended conclusion and lack of definitive answers allow readers to make personal interpretations about what might have led to Finch's final actions and about Violet's healing journey. Some readers may interpret the ending as tragic but hopeful, believing that Violet will find a way to honour Finch's memory and continue her life with newfound purpose. Others may view the ending as deeply tragic and interpret it as a commentary on the inadequacies of mental health systems. The text may remind some readers of other stories about young love, loss or mental health, leading them to see Finch and Violet through the lens to these prior narratives. Readers familiar with the "saviour complex" or "tragic romance" tropes might interpret Finch and Violet's relationship as romanticized, potentially problematic, or unsustainable. Others may connect the novel with the real-world issues, such as the stigma around mental health or the need for accessible support systems. These readers might interpret the novel as a social critique, seeing Finch's struggles as emblematic of societal failures rather than personal failings. Literature

can act as a mirror, allowing readers to process their feelings through the experiences of fictional characters. For those who have struggled with similar issues, reading about Finch and Violet's challenges may offer comfort or provide new insights, perhaps inspiring a re-evaluation of their own lives. Alternatively, readers might feel motivated to reach out to others who may be struggling with mental health, inspired by the novel's depiction of the importance of empathy and connection. For other readers, however, the novel's tragedy might feel emotionally overwhelming or frustrating. These readers may feel that the novel's ending limits its potential to provide a sense of hope or closure, leading to a more critical or conflicted interpretation. Given the growing popularity of both fictional and non-fictional narratives around mental health, it would be useful to compare the impact of fictional stories like *All the Bright Places* with that of memoirs or self-help books aimed at young adults to provide clearer, more actionable messages about coping strategies and seeking help.

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