

*A Time of Struggle, Complimented by Books*

2<sup>nd</sup> Place Stuckey Contest Winner

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I've been reading for most of my life. Once I learned to read, you'd be hard pressed to find me anywhere without a book in hand. This included restaurant, car rides (no matter how short they were), and even recess. Since I have cerebral palsy, I can't run and play like the other kids my age, so when I was younger, I always brought a book to read. Still to this day, I carry a novel around with me, either stowed in my purse or in my car. I've been known to be upset for days because of the ending of a novel, or to change my views on a subject because of what an author had written.

The books I read fall into two categories: books with adventures through which I live vicariously, and books about characters with mental and physical illnesses. I actually have an entire shelf about my bed dedicated solely to books that have neuro-divergent characters. It's incredibly important to me that I can connect to other people my age struggling with the same anxiety, depression and physical ailments that I struggle with. This helps in finding ways to cope with such struggles, even if some of those people are fictional. Often, these characters help me more than my best friends do. My real friends sometimes make me feel alienated because of my disability, while my fictional friends never do. While my real friends get upset when I have to cancel plans because of a sudden bout of depression, real anxiety, or pain caused by my disability, my fictional friends always wait patiently for me to come back, welcoming me into their world with open arms.

I discovered my favorite book portraying physical disabilities completely by chance. I was at a Barnes and Noble with my mom in Chicago when I stumbled upon the memoir section, and a book caught my eye. It depicted a boy in a wheelchair, his head too large for his body and his muscles atrophied. As soon as I read the title, *Laughing at My Nightmare*, I was hooked. I knew I was judging a book by its cover, something I'd been taught never to do, but I couldn't help it. Books about people like me are so difficult to find; the second I see one, I have to pick it up. As soon as my mom and I arrived back at the hotel, I curled up in bed and began to read.

*Laughing at My Nightmare* is an amazing and insightful memoir by Shane Burcaw about his struggle with a rare form of muscular dystrophy called spinal muscular atrophy. As someone who has trouble staying hooked to autobiographical stories because of their tendency to be boring, the dry and self-deprecating humor in Burcaw's writing makes the memoir even more enjoyable. The stories he depicted include his brother helping him pee in the back of their tour bus, his battles against respiratory infections and their attempts to kill him, and his hatred for the feeding tube he eventually had to receive. The stories he tells show that some of his struggles are almost humorous, but others are the difference between life and death. He titles each chapter with funny quips about the chapter's content. One of my favorites is, "Fun Fact: I drool so much overnight that I have considered hiring a lifeguard to watch me while I sleep" (14). Both little jokes like this and the overall narrative allowed me to laugh at and have fun with the quirks I have instead of trying to fix them. The book taught me that nothing about me needs fixing; I eas

made this way for a reason, whatever it may be. After realizing this, I became infinitely more satisfied with my achievements, as opposed to dwelling in my shortcomings like I had before. Today, *Laughing at My Nightmare* is at home on a table in the room where I do my exercises, ready to comfort me and help me laugh on the days I struggle most with my disability.

Another book that helped me come to terms with who I am is *Every Last Word* by Tamara Ireland Stone. Unlike *Laughing at My Nightmare*, this book is fictional. It tells the story of Samantha McAllister, a teen girl struggling with intense OCD. Since she is considered popular at her school, she goes to extreme measures to hide her suffering. It's only when she meets Caroline, who introduces Sam to a secret poetry society, that she decides to open up. With the help of Caroline and her friends in the Poet's Corner, Sam is able to become much more comfortable with herself and her illness.

Around the time that I was reading *Every Last Word*, I was struggling with both depression and anxiety. I had been going to a therapist, but she hadn't helped me at all. Figuring it was a waste of my time, I pretended to be fine so I could stop going. I told everyone I was doing well, even though just the idea of ordering food for myself at a restaurant was enough to send me into an anxiety attack. While I had a poetry group that I enjoyed, it also made me even more anxious; I often felt as though I wasn't allowed to say what I thought, for fear of judgement. I stayed for months, because I loved hearing the other members' poems. This book allowed me to realize by poetry group wasn't worth the emotional strain, as well as come clean to my mom about how I was feeling. That same day, she sat me down at our computer and had me choose from a group of therapists. I ended up finding one whom I love and who has helped me so much. Without *Every Last Word*, I may never have gotten the courage to find another therapist. Now that it has done its job, it sits on the bookshelf by my bed, always within reach if I ever need a reminder that I can overcome my mental illness.

*The Theater of War*, a book assigned to me over the summer by my English teacher, has ended up being one of the books that has affected me the most, in terms of mental illness. Since I have a great aversion to books assigned to me, I made the decision to put it off until the very end of summer. It didn't help that this particular book was about Greek tragedy, a subject I had found painfully boring. Once I finally picked it up, I was pleasantly surprised. It has so many concepts that were important and interesting to me, particularly PTSD and hospital care. The book, while talking about PTSD, also discussed suicide. Suffering from both depression and anxiety, I'm no stranger to the idea of killing myself. It really hit me with Doerries was telling Jeff's story, the army man who served two terms and was resistant to therapy until he finally tried to take his own life, because I've been there. After years of bullying and betrayal, I didn't want to live any longer, and it was then that my mom took me to therapy, where my life improved exponentially. I've never read a book where the author depicts what I was feeling in that time so precisely. It was through this book that I realized Greek tragedy isn't so terrible, because it often relates to difficulties we suffer today. Instead of sitting on the bottom shelf of my book case where all of my other school books go, *The Theater of War* is on a corner shelf by my door, where I can see it every time I enter or leave my room and remember that I'm not the only one who has struggles they can overcome.

As I continue to read, I hope to find more books that are like *Laughing at My Nightmare*, *Every Last Word*, and *The Theater of War*. Going through life, I've realized that disabilities and mental illnesses are seen as taboos. No one wants to hear about someone who needs to take painkillers just to get out of bed each morning or someone who is always exhausted because their mind runs circles around them. These books aren't for those who see the topics as a taboo; they're for people like me who will directly benefit from them. It's difficult for me to come to terms with my disability and illnesses without evidence that others with my same fate have managed to get through it, these books provide that evidence. It doesn't matter if some of these stories are fictional. All I want is representation. I have confidence that these subjects will stop being taboos, and will instead have a place of shelves in bookstores and homes alike. I hope to read more books like these as I continue to work to overcome my disability and mental illness.