

1/11/2019

Dear Paul Murray:

Adolescence, for me, has been a rocky time – episodes of depression, relocation across the state, and a stabbing ennui (at times tempered only by a sense of impending doom). Add to this litany unrelenting discomfort in my own skin, and you get a standard description of the teenage experience. Initially, I scoured the library shelves, hoping to find some heroic character to relate to, desperate to find some literary stand-in for myself who wins out in the end. I was in search of perfection, and in your novel *Skippy Dies*, I found none.

The titular protagonist meets his fate (through overdosing on pills and dying in a donut-eating contest) within the first few pages, and nothing – either in the lengthy flashback or the aftermath – comes close to a happy ending. Skippy, obviously, dies. His love interest, Lori, ends up with an eating disorder in a group home, herself navigating an all too familiar and debilitating perfectionism. His friend Ruprecht is broken with grief. The adults at Seabrook College, just as in the real world, fare no better: the school administrators in the world you created try to cover up the mess they've made, realizing that their power is slipping out from under them. They fail their students, their colleagues, and themselves. And most importantly, they lose hope – and regain it.

It is a great testament to the power of literature, Mr. Murray, that the world of your characters is painfully and inspiringly real for me, an American teenager. I have never been to Ireland. I have never attended a boarding school, or a Catholic school. Every bout of laughter, every outpouring of pain, every mundane exchange I have had in my life has been in a decidedly American accent. Yet, like Skippy, I have stared at the ceiling in my bedroom at night, questioning my self-worth and escaping into mental fantasies. Like Lori, I have grieved unrequited crushes who I had no relationship with, except they weren't even dead. Like Ruprecht, I have felt outrage at the actions of adults around me.

My high school, like Seabrook, recently dealt with a series of suicides. Actually, "dealt with" is too clinical, too matter-of-fact, too administrative to properly describe it. It was harrowing, yes, but not in the obvious sense. It wasn't a wound, because all wounds eventually fade from existence. This was something that couldn't truly fade. People try to move on from tragedies as if they're climbing out of quicksand, unaware that sudden movement sinks them further. As for me, I began to resent everything. I resented the school counseling system that was woefully understaffed in comparison to our student body and let my late peers slip through the cracks. I resented how, when I attempted to take my own life, I turned nowhere for support because I was too petrified, and the staff too busy. And most of all, I resented how the administrators felt all too silent about the tragedy, forcing the community to be silent in our pain. The silence was stentorian, oppressive, impenetrable. I – *we* – were sinking.

Maybe healing isn't possible, but growth is. And so I grew, like trees spring out of soil charred by wildfires and new life springs out of cracks in trees. I worked to let go of my resentment, to allow myself not to heal, but to do what was actually possible, to slowly crawl out of the quicksand. I decided that I would learn to value myself. Yes, I'm still uncomfortable, depressed,

and grieving. But I decided to live out of defiance, and like Lori and Ruprecht, I found solace in claiming my story. This letter, Mr. Murray, is the first time I've shared it in full, and it won't be the last. If, as Lori postulates at the end of your novel, the universe is made of stories, I intend to grow my own piece of it. How refreshing it is, then, that you let imperfection permeate your characters. Instead of sculpting them from the bottom up, intent on flawlessness, you took a hammer and smashed out the kind of beautiful, hopeful brokenness that I learned to appreciate in myself. Because of your book, I intend to write and speak and to refuse to fade out – instead, I am determined, like Lori, to weave broken stories back together.

Eternally grateful,

Colton Schons