

# A Portrayal of Adolescent Angst: How *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* Contributes to the Mental Well-Being Discourse

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Chbosky, Stephen. (1999). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: MTV Books/ Gallery Books.

*"I am both happy and sad at the same time, and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be."*  
(p.2)

It is with these words that Charlie, Stephen Chbosky's protagonist from his novel, *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* (1999) introduces us to his narrative of loss and love, pain and pleasure and fears and desires that constitute his life as a quiet and reserved fifteen year old. And it is with these words that Chbosky's novel, right from its opening page, manages to articulate a fundamental truth of adolescent experience - that emotions don't lend themselves easily to neat categorisation; they revel in being messy and tumultuous, and are usually hard to make sense of, particularly if you are a teenager trying to cope with the myriad challenges of growing up and 'finding' yourself.

Adolescence constitutes that strange liminal space where change remains the only constant and where every single day comes armed with new challenges and discoveries. It is a stage of life marked by never-ending transitions, which inevitably extracts a mental and emotional toll from all those struggling to keep up with its vicissitudes and developments. Curiosity to experience new things, intertwined with a sense of vulnerability becomes a defining characteristic of this stage. Chbosky (1999) explores this in his novel through the journey of his protagonist as

well as through the story arcs of several other characters surrounding him. His novel, with its sensitive portrayal of the mental health concerns faced by its protagonist, has significantly broadened the scope within mainstream media for a discussion of socio-emotional development and psychological well-being of adolescents.

Since its publication, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) has been hailed for its role in enabling a conversation about mental health and wellness of adolescents, as well as derided for its over-sentimental and maudlin portrayal of teenage life. In the thirteen years that have passed between the publication of the book and the release of its film version in 2012, which, incidentally, was written and directed by the author Stephen Chbosky himself, it has continued to hold sway over large swathes of millennials who have identified with the protagonist's mental angst as well as with his inability to exert complete control over his own life. Throughout the novel, Charlie is urged by different characters to 'participate' more in life as opposed to being the eponymous 'wallflower' of the novel's title. This is one of the ways in which the novel posits an integral mental health-related concern at the heart of its narrative: *is it possible to ensure that the burden of unpleasant memories and the persistent anxiety of growing up do not obstruct the formation of a healthy sense of self, so that an individual can actively steer the course of his or her own journey across adolescent life?*

## Childhood Trauma, Adolescent Anxiety

Charlie's story begins with his entry into high school, a world of many firsts - first crush, first



kiss, first dance - which, besides being a vital rite of passage for young individuals, can also be a world of peaking stress and anxiety. The readers soon find out that Charlie had spent some time undergoing psychiatric treatment in the last summer following the death of his best friend. By the time we meet our protagonist, this incident, combined with his repressed memories of his beloved Aunt Helen's death during his childhood, has already resulted in a mental breakdown. The novel dwells over the bond between a young Charlie and his mother's sister, Aunt Helen, who shifts into their house a few years prior to her untimely death as she was struggling to cope with a history of being physically abused. Part of the reason that her car accident leaves such an indelible mark on Charlie is the fact that she had been on her way to purchase two customary gifts that she bought for him (for Christmas and for his birthday) on Christmas eve when she gets hit by a truck. The pain of losing her is further compounded by the guilt that lodges itself in his psyche. It comes tumbling to the fore when his best friend, Michael, commits suicide following 'troubles' at home. But what truly precipitates Charlie's advent into anxiety and depression is the revelation that comes right at the end of the novel. Charlie had been sexually abused by his favourite adult, Aunt Helen when he was a little child, a fact that his mind has repressed so completely that it takes him two mental breakdowns and multiple anxiety attacks through the course of the novel before he can allow the memory to resurface.

The lingering impact of these events in his young life culminate in PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), a condition which develops after exposure to severe trauma. PTSD can be triggered by a range of traumatic experiences - war, natural disaster, a fatal accident, sexual abuse, assault, physical violence or childhood neglect. An individual suffering from PTSD often re-experiences the trauma, in the form of intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, chronic nightmares or recurrent hallucinations, which impede the enjoyment of a fulfilling life. Since trauma often results in repression of memories as a defence

mechanism, the individual is torn between the desire to suppress the memory of that incident and the inability to prevent oneself from re-living it at vulnerable moments. For Charlie, his trauma exists below the surface of his active consciousness, and some of its most painful aspects have entered what in psychiatric circles is termed as a "memory hole" ([www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)) - a space akin to a black hole from which details of the source event cannot be recalled because the person does not want to remember them. A series of somatic and psychological triggers, including the substances he dallies with and the new relationships he forms, eventually lead to the extraction of those repressed memories.

### **Pressure and Angst: 'Perks' of Being a High-Schooler**

Given his mental and emotional background, it is not a surprise that high school, with its numerous demands, turns out to be a domain of added stressors for Charlie. Chbosky uses minor characters as well as various episodes from Charlie's life to flesh out the contours of adolescent life in high school, stripping aside the glamour and breathless excitement adopted by most young-adult fiction to expose the rampant *cliquism*, bullying tendencies, abusive relationships, homophobia and heavy reliance on drugs and other psychotropic substances that pervade this world. At the beginning of his narrative, Charlie writes about Susan, the girl who was funny and friendly during middle school, but who no longer stops to say 'hi' to him. Having changed over the summer (which translates to 'having her braces taken off' and 'growing taller and prettier'), Susan seems to now enjoy the company (or empty adulation?) of groups of boys who hang around her. Susan had been close to Michael before his death, but refuses to acknowledge that, or even the fact that she is studying in the advanced English class, because she is too busy conforming to the 'pretty and popular' stereotype. While Susan is a minor character in the novel, without any great significance to the central plotline, Charlie's



insightful comments about her transformation (he says, “I think it's sad because Susan doesn't look as happy”(p.7), help in establishing the demands of adolescent life and how it can often lead to individuals suppressing their real identities in order to fit the socially-constructed categories of being 'cool' and 'popular'.

Another minor episode involves Sean-the-bully who threatens Charlie but instead ends up getting a good beating from him. While this could be any other incident where a bully gets his just desserts, in Chbosky's hands, the incident becomes multi-textured - first, on being threatened by Sean, Charlie points out, “He seemed pretty unhappy as well, and I told him so”(p.7), which is what angers Sean the most; second, after having hit Sean, Charlie cannot stop crying until his sister drives him back home. In one deft stroke, Chbosky manages to not only humanize the school bully, but also addresses the idea of bullying as itself being a symptom of mental and emotional distress. This episode brings into focus key aspects of Charlie's personality- his inherent tendency to justify the actions of others, his ability to spot signs of unhappiness in others even as he cannot analyse his own emotional distress, and his unexplained aggression which comes to the fore under extreme provocation.

### **The World of a Wallflower: Seeking Escape from Memory and Reality**

Not all of Charlie's high school experiences are negative in nature. His interaction with his English teacher, Mr. Anderson, becomes a source of encouragement for him. Charlie turns out to be quite gifted in his response to literature and Mr. Anderson recognizes this by assigning him extra-curricular reading and writing tasks. For anyone who loves literature, the list of books that Mr. Anderson asks Charlie to read at different points in the novel - *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, *On the Road*, *The Stranger*, *A Separate Peace*, *Walden*, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Fountainhead* and *Hamlet*, among others- is highly interesting to note. Mr. Anderson, who urges Charlie to think of him as a friend and to

call him 'Bill' when they are outside the classroom, seems to understand Charlie's struggles with expressing himself and, thus, introduces him to literary counterparts who faced moral, emotional and existential challenges of their own. By bringing characters such as Atticus Finch, Holden Caulfield, Jay Gatsby, Howard Roark or Hamlet into Charlie's frame of reference, Mr. Anderson attempts to reassure Charlie that he is not alone in his predicament and that he can gain strength by relating to these conflicted literary figures. While the books play a motivational, almost therapeutic role in Charlie's life, they pose a different kind of challenge- by immersing him so completely in their fictional world, they enable Charlie to further escape from 'participating' in his actual life. He says, “It's strange because sometimes, I read a book, and I think I am the people in the book,”(p.28) which reinforces the idea put forth in Chbosky's novel that it can be counterproductive if people use thought to not participate in life.

Charlie has a propensity to recede into the background of his own life, to observe people and their actions, and to think about things rather than 'do' things. His friends refer to him as a 'wallflower', telling him that, “You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand.”(p.37) And while there are 'perks' of being a wallflower, there is also the fear that one may miss out on actually *living* through the moments that make up one's own life, particularly during adolescence. One of the ways in which Charlie's PTSD manifests itself is through his emotional numbness or a sense of detachment with his day-to-day life, whereby he avoids active involvement with the people around him or in the activities that high school life is made up of, perhaps in order to ensure the avoidance of any stimuli which could trigger a re-experiencing of his trauma. Books and music become his constant refuge, helping establish mental and emotional safety while allowing him the scope to withdraw and retreat. At one point in the narrative, when things get particularly difficult for Charlie, he writes, “I don't know if you've ever felt like that. That you wanted to sleep for a thousand years. Or





just not exist. Or just not be aware that you do exist.”(p.94) On his way towards recovery, one of the pearls of wisdom that Charlie acquires is that “Standing on the fringes of life...offers a unique perspective. But there comes a time to see what it looks like from the dance floor.”(P.174) His journey of being an adolescent is not just his journey of being a wallflower, but also his journey of coming to terms with his fear and his pain, as well as with his longings and desires.

Adding further complexity to the novel's canvas is the storyline of Charlie's sister, who ends up being in an abusive relationship and ultimately has to undergo an abortion for an unwanted pregnancy. The first time that her boyfriend hits her, Charlie's sister, instead of putting up a fight or ending the relationship, gets spurred into greater physical intimacy with him - a reaction that puzzles and upsets Charlie. It can be counted among the many sexual encounters referred to in the novel containing elements of subjugation and force. It is important to note here that as a child, Charlie had been an unwilling witness to yet another sexual encounter - at a party thrown by his elder brother during their parents' absence from town which had soon descended into drunken chaos. Charlie narrates that his siblings had asked him to remain in his room, but a drunk high-school couple had made their way inside and despite Charlie's presence in the room, the boy had insisted on sexual intimacy. It is only much later, while narrating this incident to his friends, Charlie realizes that what he had witnessed had in fact been a rape. In the light of Charlie's traumatic past, these incidents acquire a menacing potency, inducing further fear and panic within him.

### **Adolescence: A Haven of Friendships or an Inferno of Drugs?**

Two of the most interesting characters who contribute to Charlie's coming-of-age narrative are brother-sister duo, Patrick and Sam. They are seniors at his school who welcome him into their social circle, providing him with the security of steady friendship and unpretentious company, a rarity for him. Soon enough, Charlie develops

feelings for Sam, beginning his foray into the typical adolescent territory of unrequited love. Even when he finds himself pulled into a relationship with one of Sam's close friends, Mary Elizabeth, Charlie continues to long for Sam and this in fact creates rifts in their friendship. Sam's presence in Charlie's life is a source of happiness, something that even leads him to feeling 'infinite' in her company, but when the threat of losing her looms large (such as at the time when she graduates from school and is about to move away to college), his condition becomes particularly fragile. Parallel to this runs Charlie's friendship with Patrick, who happens to be in a secret relationship with the school's quarterback, Brad. However, given the fact that the book is set in 1991 and that homophobia was an even more potent phenomenon then than it is now, Patrick and Brad cannot publicly 'date' each other, and are forced into meeting illicitly, on the side-lines of parties and in deserted places. When Brad's father finds out about them, he beats his son following which, Brad not only shuns Patrick but even goes to the extent of verbally abusing him in front of his hyper masculine friends, perhaps to vent his frustration and self-loathing. Patrick, hitherto portrayed as a happy-go-lucky character, ends up becoming manically depressed, embracing the routine of drinks, drugs, and sex in order to fill the void.

While Sam and Patrick's friendship becomes a talisman for Charlie, lighting up an otherwise dreary existence, it also catapults the 15-year-old into a world of drinking, smoking and drugs. At the first party he attends with the duo, he ends up consuming a spiked brownie, and his 'stoned' condition becomes a source of amusement for the others. To their credit however, Sam and Patrick are not aware of this prank, and Sam is quite angry with her friends about this. Chbosky's novel has been criticized by many for its free-wheeling depiction of substance abuse, and on the grounds that adolescence isn't really the inferno that Chbosky presents it to be. The altered state of mind which Charlie experiences after using LSD or pot is used by Chbosky to hold up a mirror to the chaos and confusion that exist in his mind nearly every day.



Chbosky ties up his depiction of drug use with Charlie's slow and painful process of self-discovery- under the influence of drugs, Charlie attains a higher degree of honesty about his own feelings, though it isn't necessarily productive. On the whole, the rampant presence of drugs in Charlie's high-school world does end up discomfiting readers and leaves a dangerous aftertaste.

### **Addressing Mental Well-Being through Popular Culture**

Considering the important position this novel occupies in the pop-cultural discourse regarding adolescent mental health and wellness, it is vital to note the epistolary format of the narrative. Charlie's story is narrated in his voice in the form of letters addressed to an unknown recipient, someone he believes would "listen and understand" (p.2). Chbosky deliberately makes Charlie address his letters to "*Dear friend*" in order to underline the idea that it is possible to articulate one's troubles, no matter how dense, to a receptive friend who promises not to judge or betray confidence. At the beginning, Charlie clarifies that he will withhold real names

throughout the letters, and omits enclosing a return address, because "you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that." (p.2) This prompts readers to grapple with ideas of secrecy and confidentiality, and to acknowledge the value of communication (even if it is one-sided as in Charlie's case) as the first step towards articulation of mental angst. Through this epistolary structure, Chbosky both privileges the point of view of his protagonist as well as universalises his thoughts and concerns.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999) doesn't offer pathbreaking insights into depression and anxiety, nor is it a treatise on how to deal with a loved one's mental distress. Its contribution lies in the fact that it has been able to dispel some of the stigma surrounding mental and emotional disorders by creating a sensitive and engaging portrayal of a young character suffering from PTSD, providing many young readers with a point of reference. Charlie's character is fully fleshed out, never descending into caricaturish mawkishness and thus, holds up a beacon of light for all those willing to engage in a meaningful conversation about mental and psychological well-being.

