

Original Article

Reconstructing Mental Health Narratives: A Reader Response Approach to *Reasons to Stay Alive* by Matt Haig

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ABSTRACT: *Talking about mental illness is an unavoidable discussion with contemporary youth. They share about it through various short stories, novels, and memoirs. There is a vast branch of literature that has been developed, known as Genz literature. One of the works written is Matt Haig's Reasons to Stay Alive. It is an account of the author's personal experience, which recollects the approaches that were helpful in dealing with depression and panic attacks. It provides a deep exploration that will be of greater value for those dealing with such issues. This paper focuses on analysing the memoir from a reader response theory of how the memoir connects with the reader, creating multiple interpretations, encouraging the readers to reflect upon their own experiences and emotions.*

KEYWORDS: *Memoir, Depression, Panic attacks, Genz generation, Reader response approach.*

INTRODUCTION

Mental health refers to the overall psychological well-being, including emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. It has greater significance because it affects our physical health more directly, as the two are interconnected. It extends to various spheres of life, namely professional, family, and social circle. Mental Health treatment in the past was often characterized by a lack of understanding, where people were often held up in mental asylums or subjected to exorcisms. People remained in isolation in order to cure their mental health problems. This practice is evident in "The Yellow Wallpaper," written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where Jane follows the rest cure method after her childbirth to cure her nervous disease, which leads her later to seclude herself with the yellow wallpaper by associating her with it. Finally, she experiences liberation by destroying the wallpaper.

Mental health has changed in contemporary discourse, where we converse about mental health issues in a direct manner by making the best use of methods and therapies that are available now. It could also be cured by connecting with people digitally or making lifestyle changes through food and exercise. Matt Haig is an English author and journalist who is widely known for speculative fiction. *The Midnight Children*, a work written by him, was the best-selling bookseller that received the Goodreads Choice Award for Fiction. His work *Reasons to Stay Alive* is a memoir that deals with ways in which he coped up with depression and panic attacks. It creates greater awareness among youth on how to deal with such mental health issues effectively.

READER RESPONSE THEORY

Reader Response Theory originated in the 1960s and 70s as a response against New Historicism, which gave much importance to the text instead of the reader. It further draws upon multiple interpretations of the text. In this approach, readers play a major role where the meaning of the text is subjective, and it may vary from person to person depending on their cultural background, preferences, and the education they pursue. Reading is viewed as a great activity that promotes interaction between the reader and the text. Prominent practitioners of this theory include Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, and Wolfgang Iser.

REASONS TO STAY ALIVE

Reasons to Stay Alive is a memoir written by Matt Haig, which is divided into five parts where he talks about his encounter with depression and panic attacks. The first part is titled "Falling" which recollects his mental crisis in Ibiza, Spain, at the age of 24, which makes him think that falling from the cliff and experiencing death is better than living, but somehow he motivates himself to live through the hard times. He takes various medications, which heighten his symptoms further. He cries unexpectedly while he is alone in his parents' room, showing how depression can make one feel hopeless in life.

The first part evokes a sense of sympathy on the part of the reader. It has lots of reminders throughout, which shows how depression is a part of people's lives who have achieved fame. It is made as a normal thing. Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implied reader can be applied effectively, showing how the reader is expected to engage with textual gaps and construct meaning. This part begins on a note of tension, leading the readers to develop curiosity about what will happen in the upcoming parts of the book.

The second part is titled "Landing," which shows the ways in which the author adjusts to living with depression, panic attacks, and anxiety. He recalls how he felt panic at the age of fourteen. He points out how depression and sadness are different terms, but we often consider them to be the same. He gives a list of symptoms and recollects a beautiful saying of Stephen King, who considers thoughts to be ghosts that can either conquer us or win us over. This quote shows the experience of the author with depression, highlighting how depression is invisible, and it can conquer one's mind with negative thoughts if it is not taken care of in a good manner.

The title is very significant as it shows how the author has reached a certain place in his life where he accepts depression, thereby becoming a mature speaker reflecting deeply on depression. This part makes the reader aware of how mental health issues start from a young age, gradually showing the symptoms that further develop into a mental health issue in later ages. This part shows the importance of taking care of one's mental health as well as one's physical health.

The third part is titled "Rising," where he rises from the struggles that he faced and becomes well-versed in understanding oneself. He shares a few books that have left a positive impact on him. He further adds about how running, securing publication, and writing had a good impact on him. It highlights the societal stigmas that are usually associated with mental health and depicts how love played a greater role in his life while he was facing mental health issues. He compares depression to an alien presence, emphasising its ability to consume one's mind. He recalls the 2000 years when he had lived through painless seconds which turned to minutes and later to hours and finally to days. This part marks a turning point in the memoir as he accepts his mental illness and becomes aware of it, which leads him to compare it to various things, such as a hurricane and aliens, which shows the destructive power of it. He contemplates in an introspective manner throughout this part, making him appreciate small things that often remain unnoticed. He explores an incident where he stayed along with Andrea's mother while she was suffering from ovarian cancer. This made him feel relieved from three years of separation anxiety, which he experienced. He enumerates a range of activities that can be efficacious in managing depression, such as meditating, walking, and journaling.

Part four of the book is titled "Living," where the author relates the methods that helped him to live amidst depression. He details things such as meditation, acceptance, living in the present, and the love of Andrea, which have facilitated his successful negotiation of this challenging stage. He further integrates how depression's impact is like a dark wisp that is attacking one's head. Depression and Panic attacks always combine in order to worsen the mental state of the author. Things have sometimes been in a worse state and sometimes been in a better state in his life. This part lists various methods for a reader who has experienced depression to come out of it by depicting an optimistic view of life.

Part five is titled "Being," where he gives various things that made him live. He gives a comparison of the lotus flower, which is of much significance in Buddhism. He paints an image of a lotus being submerged in water, with mud in its deep part. Here, he associates the mud with depression or anxiety. He feels better when connecting with him in the universal realm. The nature that he visualizes is Formentera Beach in Ibiza, which brings out a vast transformation in his mind. He gives a list of forty things reflecting upon life. One such beautiful saying which I associated myself with is Be brave, Be strong, Breathe and keep going. He thanks depression, which has affected him a lot, as it has made him into a great person at present. He gives a vast list of things that he enjoyed again in his life, which he thought he would never enjoy again in his life, as he suffered experienced depression and anxiety.

Having seen from a reader response perspective, this book acts as a great motivation and support to cross over the traumas faced in one's life. According to psychologists, this text may be a scientific exploration into a person undergoing depression. For a student, it is a book that provides insights into depression. This book appeals to different readers, connecting them from various backgrounds.

Gen Z Me Not Gonna Lie Reader, I Cried at Work Against Hagiography Reader Response Through Gen Z Eyes: Recognition in Pieces. Gen Z readers recognize themselves among Haig's non-linear vignettes of panic and self-doubt, viewing his "mind lying to itself" about worth and future in their own social media-fueled isolation. The textual list-games and direct address read as group chats in which young readers are co-authoring responses by mapping out Haig's metaphors of depression as fog, for example, onto their body image struggles from Instagram or parental pressure to get a job during a gap year. This dialogic tug holds space for Gen Z's story of ebbing- and flowing mental states, which turns passive reading into active remixing through memes or threads that destigmatize relapse without getting rid of it.

For Gen Z, Haig's vulnerability is a weapon to annihilate the self-stigma of mental illness, the same millennial crowd who normalized speaking about angst as an act of contrition rather than an admission of weakness. By identifying with Haig's journey within their own, amplified by economic tenuousness and online overloads, readers form ad hoc peer groups, informal social media interventions in book form. This identity politicizes mental health as a shared story, one in which Haig's "love saved me" becomes Gen Z's privileging of community validation over personal cure.

Use Haig's text in a classroom or therapeutic setting alongside Gen Z-led activities, such as founding local "reasons to stay alive" Reels and group chats that respond to the chapters; connect reader-response with digital advocacy. Facilitators ought to elevate various voices to respond to Gen Z's criticisms of silencing and universalizing white, male experiences in the face of intersectional pressures, such as racism or gig work. These methods enable youth to actively rebuild stories congruent with their own virtues of truth and connection.

As Haig helps Gen Z embrace openness, his story might miss how racialized or low-income young people face heightened barriers outside of personal shifts in mindset. Gen Z readers might remix it with a critical gaze through intersectional lenses, calling for stories that intertwine systemic problems, now that social media algorithms make anxiety worse. A reader-response pedagogy thus shows these exclusions and encourages multiple narratives for the complex realities of Gen Z.

Haig's text, when filtered through Gen Z's prism, functions as the architectural mold to narrative reconstruction: ongoing digital coproduction rather than linear cure. Young readers stretch their temporality, survival through small choices, toward proactive self-care ecosystems that can grow futures in which mental well-being not only survives but thrives with visibility and solidarity. This generative practice of reading by genre situates *Reasons to Stay Alive* as a major nodal point in Gen Z's emergent mental health discourse.

Gen Z mental health narratives emphasize collective, digital sharing and proactive destigmatization, contrasting with Matt Haig's more individualistic, analog recovery arc in *Reasons to Stay Alive*. While Haig focuses on personal survival through introspection and relational anchors like love, Gen Z integrates systemic critiques and peer validation via social media. This comparison highlights evolving storytelling from solitary endurance to communal remix culture.

Gen Z favors real-time, collaborative formats that mirror social media habits, enabling immediate feedback loops absent in Haig's static text. Haig's vignettes, however, prefigure this by breaking depression into digestible "reasons," aligning with Gen Z's bite-sized coping content. Gen Z narratives often layer structural factors like algorithmic anxiety atop personal struggles, extending Haig's embodied metaphors into broader critiques. Both reject linear cures, but Gen Z amplifies relational healing through viral solidarity. Gen Z transforms narratives into interactive ecosystems, remixing Haig-like stories into memes or challenges for collective empowerment. Haig engages via second-person address, fostering imagined intimacy that Gen Z actualizes in group chats. This shift positions young voices as co-creators, contrasting Haig's author-centric testimony.

INTERSECTIONAL AND PURPOSE-DRIVEN RECOVERY

Gen Z critiques Haig's relative privilege, expanding recovery to include racialized, queer, or low-income voices facing amplified barriers, demanding memoirs reflect these diversities. They frame mental health as intertwined with purpose and spirituality, integrating Haig's relational anchors (love) into broader ecosystems of advocacy and meaning-making. Reader-response here manifests as activist remixing, where Haig's survival plot fuels demands for policy over personal grit.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Gen Z's approach excels in accessibility and scale, rapidly normalizing help-seeking amid rising anxiety rates. Haig provides depth in raw phenomenology, offering a foundational vocabulary that Gen Z adapts digitally. Limitations include Gen Z's risk of performative sharing and Haig's underemphasis on diverse identities. Together, they model hybrid futures blending personal depth with communal reach.

CONCLUSION

The memoir "Reasons to Stay Alive" is about the author's experience with depression and the way in which he overcame through depression. This book connects with various insights that connect readers from various backgrounds. The tone of the book is in introspective manner, where he reflects upon his experience with depression. The book ends in a tone of hope, emphasizing how there are various things that are left to enjoy, and depression is normalised throughout the book. This book is an authentic account of how Matt Haig has survived through depression. The author uses lots of metaphors throughout to compare his depression.

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