Book Reviews

Highlighting the theme of Coming of Age, the novel 13 Reasons Why, by Jay Asher, does a stunning job of getting across the message that everything you do will affect others, whether it is a positive or a negative effect. 13 Reasons Why tells the story of Clay Jensen, a responsible, hardworking teenager who receives a set of thirteen tapes from a girl, Hannah Baker, who had recently committed suicide. Each tape features one person and how they played in to her decision to take her life. Thirteen reasons why she took her life. Clay, confused onto how he fits in to her story, listens to the tapes and follows her story around town learning not only a lot about Hannah, but himself in the process. I found this book very intriguing due to amazing character development, the mysterious story line, and well-presented themes and deeper meanings. One major theme is intentions. For example, after a boy named Alex in her class deems Hannah “Best Ass in Freshman Class”, another boy smacked her butt and laughed about her title. Although Alex probably didn’t have bad intentions, it led to a more invasive intention from the other boy. This leads to our next theme of the butterfly effect, the idea that one action ripples, causing many more events to occur. Hannah’s tapes all flow and connect together, events building on each other. The story references more than once the theme of giving up. Throughout the book, you can see Hannah’s light dimming, but her breaking point is when she tells her teacher that she wants to kill herself, and Mr. Porter essentially tells her to just get over it. The lesson behind this is that sometime you cannot rely on others for help, and how advice can go a long way. If Mr. Porter had given her positive advice, or sought help for her, she could still be alive. The whole story had me interested and on the edge of my seat, and I formed connections with every character. With many underlying elements and morals, the story was definitely a good read. I would fully recommend Thirteen Reasons Why to anyone considering picking up the book.

In the novel It’s Kind of a Funny Story, by Ned Vizzini, the present theme is Alienation and Belonging. This book reveals the importance about social surroundings, and how peer pressure can affect you in different ways. Our protagonist is an ambitious teenager, Craig Gilner, who gets accepted into an advanced placement school and seemingly has everything he would want. However, Craig is clinically depressed and throughout the first few chapters becomes suicidal. He also has an obsessive amount of performance anxiety, despite passing his classes and achieving a perfect score on his entrance exam. Craig is prescribed an anti-depressant and becomes happy for a little while before he stops taking his medication, and decides to take his life by jumping from the Brooklyn Bridge. Having doubts, Craig calls suicide hotline which instructs him to check in to the psychiatric hospital as a pre suicidal patient. He does so but soon learns the teen ward is closed and ends up in the adult ward. There he meets a variety of amazing people that bring him happiness, and pull him out of his depressed state. One of those people is another teen, Noelle. She turns out to have a romantic interest in Craig and plays a big role in his recovery. Not only did this novel have an interesting plotline, but conveys many underlying messages and themes. One major and obvious theme is depression. This topic is very relatable to teenagers, since the book is loosely based on the authors experience as a teen. It also proves that even teenagers who have everything going for them can be depressed, and anyone can get better. Craig’s journey ultimately ends in him recovering, giving hope to those suffering from depression. Another huge theme is the idea of friendship. This ties in to the idea that social situations can have positive or negative effects on an individual’s state of mind. For example, Craig’s original friend circle weren’t not the ideal role models, being involved in raging parties and drugs, and we learn his crush, and best friends girlfriend, Nia was also depressed. However, when Craig went into recovery, he met many new people, who could relate to him, and help him get better. These people ended up making him happier than his old friends. Lastly we have the theme of courage. Craig was very courageous when he made the decision to call suicide hotline, and even more when he checked into the hospital. Overall I enjoyed the book, and found it very inspirational.

Water for Elephants, by Sara Gruen, conveys the leading themes of Love, Hate, and Separation. The book follows an elderly man named Jacob Jankowski, as he shares his experience of working at the Benzini Brothers Circus. Our story begins on Jacob’s final day at Cornell University where he is studying veterinarian sciences. He is ready to complete his exam and become a vet when the principal calls him into the hallway during his exam. He is told his parents had passed away in a car accident and ends up running out in the middle of his exam. He looks for work and finds himself stowing away on a train where he meets Camel, who tells Jacob he is on a circus train. Throughout our story Jacob meets a bunch of people from different backgrounds. While passing by he sees a beautiful woman with the horses. Her name is Marlena and unfortunately is married to the head animal trainer, August. Jacob becomes close with the couple and a few other circus members. Uncle Al, the circus ringmaster gives Jacob the job as the circus’ vet. After having to put a horse down for a lame leg, Uncle Al buys an elephant, Rosie, for Marlena to perform with. Between August beating the elephant and Marlena, Uncle Al throwing unneeded people off the moving train, and the tragedy that ends the Benzini Brothers Circus, Jacob’s life is hectic and constantly changing. Friendship with Kinko, Camel and others as well as a romantic scandal with Marlena make this story one interesting ride. The theme of Love occurs between Jacob and Marlena and eventually drives Marlena to leave August for Jacob. The theme of hate appears multiple times. August is already a hateful person and deals with it by beating whatever makes him mad, and grows to hate Jacob when Marlena loves him. However love appears here to because August really does love Marlena and doesn’t want her to leave. There are two major examples of separation. Firstly, Jacob is separated not only from his parents but uproots his life, when his parents die in the car accident. Another separation is Marlena and August’s divorce. Overall this book was fast paced and exciting. If given the opportunity, read this book.