

LIVING WITH COMPULSIONS

a review by Patricia A. Dunn

Halli Gomez. *List of Ten*. Sterling Publishing Company, 2021.

Novels that center on a main character with a disability always run a risk of reinforcing harmful societal myths about disability. Older novels, especially, might have a disabled character who dies at the end or is unrealistically and miraculously cured, with both endings implying that disability has no place in a “normal” society. Another common plot involving disabled protagonists has them “saving the day” at the end, with their disability somehow transforming them into a superhero of sorts, a situation which still defines them as “other.” Halli Gomez gracefully avoids all those harmful scenarios in her Young Adult novel, *List of Ten* (spoilers ahead!). She depicts sixteen-year-old protagonist Troy as a teenager with debilitating Tourette syndrome (TS) and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), who, while not “cured” at the end, finds a way to live his life with some good friends and enjoyable times, even as he continues to deal with his symptoms.

This novel, winner of the 2021 North Carolina AAUW Award for Young People’s Literature, is an engaging, heart-wrenching, but ultimately hopeful story of Troy, a first-person narrator who presents in the short first chapter a list of ten things he wishes to accomplish before the shocking tenth item: “Commit suicide” (2). The chapter titles progress through months and days, as Troy works his way through his list and sublists, making progress toward the most disturbing

item. This topic can be dangerous territory for a young adult novel, as demonstrated in the controversy surrounding Jay Asher’s 2017 novel *13 Reasons Why* about a teenage character who has ended her life. Parents or teachers may fear that teen protagonists who are planning suicide or are narrating from the grave might glorify the act, making it seem like a way to escape difficult times or get revenge on bullies. These troubled narrators might also “inspire” young people who seem to imagine they will be able to look down from a more peaceful afterlife and watch the squirming of enemies they left behind.

In *List of Ten*, however, Troy gradually finds reasons to live, even if his compulsions continue to interfere with his happiness. This more realistic life trajectory seems to have grown out of the author’s lived experience with TS. As Gomez writes in the Author’s Note at the end, “I thought about ending my life many times throughout my childhood” (348). She, too, lives with TS, and she says she wrote this book “To let those who have neurological disorders, or are contemplating suicide, know they are not alone” (349). The author’s own experience with this disability brings an authenticity to Troy’s painful body movements and inner thoughts.

Humor is nevertheless laced throughout the novel as seen in Troy’s sweet and amusing exchanges with his much younger brother, who can only

communicate in pre-toddler babbling. There’s an especially humorous scene when Troy’s dad attempts to have “the talk” about sex with his son. Regarding the typical characterization of fictional mothers and fathers, many young adult novels tend to depict parents as neglectful, clueless, absent, or cruel. This novel does exhibit some of the milder traits in that list, but for the most part Troy’s parents are represented as loving and caring, though the mother is mostly absent, and the father is kind but clueless.

In spite of the humor, it is heartbreaking to read about Troy’s frustrating struggle to control his tics, compulsions, and – to give one example – urges to blurt out “Bomb!” in a movie theater. The vivid, detailed descriptions of his suffering could have been written only by someone who has had similar experiences with TS. The author makes us begin to understand why a young person would want to end, once and for all, this constant embarrassment, emotional trauma, exhaustion, and physical pain. Troy’s TS and OCD compel him to touch or squeeze things he shouldn’t, to be constantly counting to ten, and to feel he has to bend down and touch the floor or ground, no matter how dirty those surfaces are. He is in constant pain as he tries to control his neck tics. For readers who might also be experiencing suffering, whether from TS or anything else, read-



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ing this novel may help them feel seen and understood. Troy’s narrative shows ways of dealing with physical or emotional issues that may never go away, and it shows him learning to be open to the positive aspects of these good things even as the weeks and months go by and he crosses off his listed items one by one, bringing him closer to the final one.

I have one minor quibble with this book: the recurrent use of the word “lame.” Granted, it comes out in the dialogue of teenagers, so it may be a typical part of characterizing dialogue. But it is an offensive descriptor for many in the disability community. It would be good to see it retired or even called out as offensive by another character.

That quibble aside, *List of Ten* is a dramatic, engaging narrative of a young man who endures much physical pain, as well as the pain of watching other people’s reactions to his

movements. As Troy gets closer to the deadly tenth item on his list, we hope and cheer for him as he finds friends, family, and an alert and brave girlfriend, to help him find ways to live and to look forward to the future. Gomez’s novel is an eye-opening and authentic glimpse into experiences most of us did not know existed.

Describing the misery Troy experiences because of his disability is courageous. Such descriptions run the risk of causing some readers to believe the societal myth that all disabilities are life-ruining afflictions. This, of course, is not true. That is why it is so important to have stories like this one, a text written by an author who has a background similar to that of the main character. The author’s own experiences with TS in life, therefore, provide an authenticity to Troy’s thoughts, feelings, and actions that make the novel so moving and so important. This book well deserves the many accolades it has received. ■

PATRICIA A. DUNN has published numerous articles exploring the intersections of disability studies and the teaching of writing. A Professor of English at Stony Brook University in New York, she has published five books, one of which, *Disabling Characters* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), analyzes representations of disability in Young Adult literature. Her latest book is *Drawing Conclusions: Using Visual Thinking to Understand Complex Concepts in the Classroom* (Teachers College Press, 2021).

HALLI GOMEZ has published five middle-grade novels, as well as a short story collection, *Brave New Girls: Tales of Heroines Who Hack* (Sterling Teen, 2021). *List of Ten*, her first YA novel, is a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults nominee, and it is on the Oklahoma Library Association HS Sequoyah Masterlist for 2023. Halli Gomez currently lives in North Carolina with her family.

ABOVE Halli Gomez on the *Charlotte Readers Podcast* with Landis Wade, 15 Mar. 2022 ([listen here](#))