

Happiness in Harm?

By: Blake Oquist

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara is one of my most favorite books of all time, and perhaps one of the most damaging? Every single time I began reading it's 800 pages of misery I was brought to tears. It was with me through one of the roughest patches in my life, which isn't saying much considering it's hefty length and constant engagement with heavy and triggering topics which spurred me to read it over the course of multiple years. Never in those years did I feel like it was feeding into those hazy days where it felt like nothing was going right, most of the time it felt like a solace to escape to. So often in the back and forth of banning and censoring books the point comes up of how just how strongly books, and conversely, art as a whole can make you feel in a world where artists feel like they are no longer valued by society. Why else would we constantly be arguing over the banning and challenging of books for the fear that they may rot our children's brains and make them into something they're not if books aren't "just" words. This is all to say that A Little Life *made me feel* more than any novel or piece of media ever has perhaps. I think the reason it has this affect on me is also the reason it's criticized the way it is; it's engagement of highly sensitive topics that plague certain marginalized groups.

I had the (dis)pleasure of reading the novel without knowing much about it other than it being hailed as "the saddest book ever". Because frankly, I wouldn't have read it if I had known basically anything about the content, or especially if I had engaged with the

little criticism I have seen. I think the criticism of the novels we talk about in regards to banning books is some of the most equally interesting and scary aspects of these pseudo-reviews. These books are boiled down to their most basic form using as many buzzwords and generalizations of their controversial content as possible without the most important part of that content: context. It's interesting because at points you can see what people grasp onto in these books and what their true intentions are for challenging the books, but scary for that exact reason, because their intentions show some gruesome disdain for marginalized people and issues in a lot of cases. Even scarier, is that this melding of words works so often, on people in general. Before reading *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe I ran into quite a few things sensationalizing moments within the memoir going so far as to call it "child porn" and "grooming". I was scared to even write the first part for the implications of even uttering the term or writing it, and this was just thrown around in every single thing I saw regarding this memoir! All because of moments that talk about and show sexuality and SAFE AND HEALTHY sex at an age where only part of that is normal. It is advocating for younger folks to be open, safe, and encourage comfortability for people just beginning to experience them, especially for queer people who have it so much harder. The latter of the insults afforded *Gender Queer* is one that is so constantly regurgitated in queer spaces, this idea that simply speaking of queer experiences and being proud of your identity is grooming, or manipulating your child to be some sex-hungry gay freak. I'm so insanely tired of this idea of grooming, this looming fear that queer people only exist to "turn" their children gay, like that is one, a terrible thing that your child might like what they like,

and two, even possible. I must ask what is grooming, why is the toy section at Walmart split up so binarily into boys and girls toys? Why must kids be forced to attend church before they can formulate ideas on such in a country that swears by it's freedom especially regarding spiritual freedom? What are your kids reading in school? Isn't every outside action an act of "grooming"?

With that being said, the last criticism I could ever see of *A Little Life* is it being called grooming, in fact, I more often see the opposite. *A Little Life* has both the blessing and the curse of being more of a cult classic than a widespread novel that is constantly under a prying eye. It has received rewards and endless praise from it's dedicated readers within it's intended audience, but also a refusal to be read and scathing criticism by the same audience. It's sparked moments that have given me whiplash, like when one of my favorite people who reviews books online (whose account has been wiped off the face of the earth) called it nothing more than trauma porn, calling gay men pedophiles, and including a total lack of character development. Holy shit. By these boiled down synopses of queer literature and their challenges, it calls into question what kind of queer stories and accounts the world wants? Folks will not recognize LGBTQ+ narratives that are wholly proud or happy because of the reality of living as a marginalized person in a society and ironically the fear that people will be more likely to be queer after reading them. But those same folks on each side will not champion the narratives focus on the raw trauma and degeneracy forced upon people that forms their lives and relationships, because it paints a picture that your past and

trauma is inescapable and that the stories are so grotesque nobody should have to live them despite the fact that people do.

So what's the issue, what do we want? The issue is the "we" at hand. These books deal with complex identities which we cannot fully wrap our heads around because we are simply not these people and characters as we have our own complex identities that we spend each day reeling with. There is no feasible way to convey a story about triumph or one about loss in a way that will be truly felt by everyone or even whole "groups" of people. To say "we" don't need or want this account isn't entirely reflective of everyone and even those very groups of people. To label a book as harmful to people for it's content isn't reflective of the people it may help, in the same way that those accounts from the people who felt seen or helped by a narrative may not be reflective of the people it has harmed at the hands of others or themselves. It takes something immense to present a person that isn't yourself as so complex, layered, and filled with depth in writing to the point where fictional people and stories become so divisive. And it still doesn't weigh up to how inconceivably complex each person in the world is, and that scares us.

I think that's the root of so many of our battles waged over books, the fear that even a fraction of that complexity could be represented in something so finite forces us to engage with that terrifying reality that we cannot truly force everything into a box and some things aren't meant to be grasped, because they are not *you*. So, what is *A Little Life* then, really? Is it a triumphant story about the bonds we make and the love we feel in the face of such a terrible experience handed to us, or is it just constant catharsis

from drowning in the harrowing suffering of a queer man who doesn't exist?

Unfortunately for me, it's both and even more. I frankly very much dislike the idea of it being "trauma porn" because the very term implies that it's so disgusting and awful that it only exists because it does not and seeks to push the boundaries. But the truth is, in some ways it is, this being a novel implies in convention that this has not happened to this person, Jude doesn't exist and therefore neither does his suffering. Who's to say that the suffering Jude experiences in the novel doesn't belong to someone very real and not contained in a novel? Who's to say that a reader of this novel hasn't experienced the *same exact things*? Is it still worthwhile to a person who has only been the victim of a fraction of what Jude has suffered? Again, it's up to the individual who reads, or won't read the novel to decide their answer to those questions.

I am a queer man who was constantly brought to tears having to reexperience some of the most awful moments of my life through the breathtaking prose of Yanagihara's compact tale of Jude's own life and suffering. I am also the same queer man who was brought to tears by the overwhelming love I felt in my own life through Jude's friends and relationships which transcended that sheer pain through our found families. I will not spoil the book for you here, but I want to echo something that has been said that I think rings true constantly throughout this book; just because you are or have experienced something doesn't mean you can't be something else or experience other things, life is more complicated than that. But sometimes one does overcome the other in our own lives as well, such is the volatility of life, and I think *A Little Life* encapsulates that so well for some people like me, even in the title itself.

Something that comes up constantly with the idea that this novel is trauma porn is the catharsis in the novel, the feeling that you are better off for some reason after reading all of the terrible things that happen to Jude. Because if you don't feel that feeling what is even the point of reading this awful stuff? Basically is there merit in reading some of the worst things that can happen to humans because it either has not happened to you OR feeling comfort because you're not the only one suffering? Is it good to feel good because of terrible things? This is a point I totally get because it's a function of that fear of complexity except further into a conversation that people don't want to have. It's important to realize that people have different ways of processing their emotions, monitoring their mental health, and living with it as well. That is a huge aspect of this book on the outside. Jude never says "this is how I deal with my trauma" because that's not the point, that's not who he is, and maybe he's not even "dealing" with it! What even is "dealing" with your trauma?!

We are at such a pivotal point with mental health in our world, especially given that this book became wildly popular at the start of the pandemic which is when I read it. We are finally realizing that so many people struggle with our own things and nothing is concrete or universal! No one thing is going to work for everyone, and unfortunately, not everyone will get better or even make it. For that reason I will go to bat for catharsis and related talking points because this novel specifically doesn't posit that it knows everything about trauma, suffering, and mental health, nor does it propose it has the cure or lack thereof for those things! But in those moments where you feel at your worst because of the ongoing within the pages, or the relief you feel because of the same

things, you learn something about *yourself*. This is also something that is terrifying to people! We are scared of admitting that some of us do feel comforted in some twisted way in these moments despite the fact that it happens! Because in that realization and fear comes the worse feeling that you must acknowledge it in some way, and if you deem it irredeemable that you must work through it in your own way. All this to say that mental health is incredible finicky, personal, and difficult. A specific idea from the writer is brought up in a lot of criticism of this book and I think it's surmised here: "the book is, in part, about his slow and inevitable realization that he's too broken to remain in the world." (Yanagihara, *Why I'm Afraid of Therapy*). In the author's own words she says that perhaps Jude himself views as unfit for the world. Jude doesn't get better. Because better is different for everyone, better is not a universal thing, sometimes in the mind of someone there is no better. Something that's overlooked here though is exactly what I'm speaking of, it's his realization. Yes, Yanagihara had to write that perspective but that's exactly what a novelist does! He is the one thinking these things, not you. Yanagihara is writing them, you are reading them. Others thoughts and feelings are not yours solely based upon the merit that they exist. Yanagihara speaks about her disdain and fear of talk therapy, that doesn't mean it won't help you. You do not have to defend every aspect of a book or person to understand the merit that pieces of it may have in your own life, it's okay to feel cathartic and also feel uncomfortable because of that. But it's not okay to say it's fucked up that others feel that way and that they shouldn't. It's your journey. I have benefited greatly from talk therapy and the places it has led me as well, but not everyone will benefit the same way from it, which is exactly how this novel functions.

I am firmly against the banning of this book which is thankfully not exactly a talking point yet because of so many aspects of this novel. I am also firmly against the banning of every book for previously mentioned reasons. The word "banning" here is very important, because whose to do such a thing? Would these very accounts from marginalized narratives not be at risk before the actual "harmful" narratives like the people that write them have been in American history when at the whim of those with power? I don't think any knowledge should be forbidden or unobtainable, but I don't think some knowledge should be attained, specifically in certain people which should be self appointed obviously. What I'm saying is that while I will advocate for the availability of this literature, I will also advocate for people staying away from certain books for various reasons.

There are certainly people who should not read this book because of their own experiences in life and how they would react to reading certain moments in A Little Life because of those experiences. I wouldn't have this on any required reading list up through high school. Do I think it should be unobtainable for those very same kids engaging with the reading lists it's left off of? Absolutely not. Am I of the belief that we are at a place where those two ideas live in harmony? Even more no. On every side we have our own reasoning behind banning, challenging, and hiding books while uplifting and requiring other narratives to be read. It's unavoidable even when we understand that the final decision lies in the hand of the individual reader. A Little Life is the most complicated example of this conundrum, my first solution would be to offer a clear list of challenging topics, moments, and ideas in the book. Perhaps reasons you should and

shouldn't read the book so potential readers can weigh their options. The problem is that this doesn't work or "protect" everyone because everyone operates differently as I've said countless times. I regularly have conversations with people about this book, recommending it where I list more negatives than upsides to reading the book. I gave my own copy, ripped, creased, beat up, all complete with tear-stained pages to my straight mother, who I love dearly, with the addendum that she should NOT read it. So I leave any potential reader of the un-banned novel, A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara, this advice: read at your own risk

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(^ She is awesome and hilarious, I found her because of this video and ended up binging a bit. Highly recommend.)

"A Little Life || Rant Review [CC]" *Youtube*, Uploaded by Olivia's Catastrophe, Jul. 12, 2021, <https://youtu.be/kxPVhTIhWIk>

