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## ZADÁNÍ DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE (projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

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### Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se bude věnovat současné literatuře pro děti, specificky žánru románů pro dospívající, tzv. young adult (YA) fiction.

V úvodní části diplomantka stručně nastíní literárně-historický kontext vzniku a vývoje žánru YA a vysvětlí základní koncepty, s nimiž bude pracovat. Dále představí vybraná díla, zařadí je do širšího literárního kontextu a svůj výběr zdůvodní. Přiblíží také teorie traumatu a jejich využití v literární teorii. Volbu tohoto teoretického rámce zdůvodní.

Jádrem práce pak bude analýza zvolených děl především s ohledem na témata jako funkční a nefunkční rodina, neúplná rodina, vztahy mezi sourozenci, mezigenerační vztahy, trauma, dospívání a psychická porucha apod. Pojedná rovněž o použitých literárních prostředcích. Diplomantka se tedy bude věnovat žánrové a tematické analýze a využije také teorie traumatu. Závěrem své analýzy shrne a zvolená díla porovná z hlediska jejich způsobu zobrazení problematického dospívání a ne/funkční rodiny.

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## ANNOTATION

This diploma thesis focuses on the theme of dysfunctional families in contemporary young adult literature. With the aid of scholarly literature, the basic concepts of young adult literature, along with themes, presenting the portrayal of the complex subject of family in young adult literature, and features that can contribute to family being seen as dysfunctional, in conjunction with trauma studies in literature, are described in the first half of the paper. On the basis of this theoretical framework, the other half of this paper analyses two selected young adult novels;  *Holding Up the Universe*  written by Jennifer Niven, and  *Far from the Tree*  written by Robin Benway. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of the families in the selected novels, along with their presentation of characteristics, style of writing, settings, narrator, as well as depiction of the dysfunction of families and trauma portrayed in the novels.

## KEY WORDS

Young adult literature, family, trauma, dysfunctional family, young adult novel, coming-of-age novel, writing trauma, Jennifer Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , Robin Benway,  *Far from the Tree*

## ANOTACE

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na téma nefunkčnosti rodin v současné literatuře pro mládež. S pomocí odborné literatury jsou v první části popsány základní koncepty literatury pro mládež spolu s některými tématy, představení rodiny, jakožto komplexního předmětu v literatuře pro mládež, a také faktory, které mohou přispět k tomu, aby byla rodina vnímána jako nefunkční, ve spojení se studii traumat v literatuře. Na základě tohoto teoretického rámce je v druhé části provedena analýza dvou vybraných románů pro mládež,  *Tíha Vesmíru*  ( *Holding Up the Universe* ), který napsala Jennifer Niven a  *Far from the Tree*  od Robin Benway. Analýza se zaměřuje na vyobrazení rodin ve vybraných románech spolu s představením charakteristik, stylu psaní, prostředí, vypravěče a také vyobrazením nefunkčnosti rodin a traumat ve vybraných románech.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Young adult literatura, literatura pro děti a mládež, rodina, trauma, nefunkční rodina, coming-of-age romány, literatura traumat, Jennifer Niven,  *Tíha Vesmíru*  ( *Holding Up the Universe* ), Robin Benway,  *Far from the Tree*

INTRODUCTION .....	8
1. YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE .....	10
1.1. History of young adult literature .....	11
1.2. Topics in contemporary young adult literature .....	16
2. PORTRAYAL OF FAMILY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE .....	19
2.1. What makes a family functional or dysfunctional?.....	23
3. ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED NOVELS .....	28
3.1. Literary context .....	28
3.2. Holding Up the Universe .....	29
3.2.1. Family and relationships.....	33
3.2.1.1. Libby Strout .....	33
3.2.1.2. Jack Masselin .....	36
3.2.2. Trauma.....	41
3.3. Far from the Tree .....	45
3.3.1. Family and relationships.....	48
3.3.1.1. Grace .....	48
3.3.1.2. Maya.....	51
3.3.1.3. Joaquin .....	56
3.3.1.4. Grace, Maya, and Joaquin .....	58
3.3.2. Trauma.....	62
4. CONCLUSION .....	71
5. RESUMÉ.....	76
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	83

## INTRODUCTION

One of the well-known quotes by Dave Willis says that family is not defined only by last names or by blood; it is defined by commitment and by love. It means showing up when they need it most. It means having each other's backs. It means choosing to love each other, even on those days when you struggle to like each other. It means never giving up on each other. I feel that the past few months showed all of us, in its own breath-taking way, what it means to have family, and how vital it is to all of us. Family and health were the two most important things that mattered the most and still do.

It was a year ago, just before the pandemic started, I found myself in our regional library, looking for some books that I could borrow and read in my free time. It may not be right to say, however I must confess that I frequently do choose a book according to its cover. Thus, when I found myself at one moment holding the books  *Holding Up the Universe*  written by Jennifer Niven and  *Far from the Tree*  written by Robin Benway in my hands, they both immediately awoke my curiosity. It was clear in my mind that these were definitely the books I wanted to borrow and read. Yet, little did I realise at that time how these two novels are connected to one of the major themes of the recent months that they both present – family.

It was during the pandemic when many people came to the conclusion, or realisation, that health and family are the two most valuable aspects of our lives. We have had multiple chances to deepen our relationships and spend endless time together in the last few months. Yet, I believe it was no coincidence that I found myself holding these two novels in my hands in February last year. A few weeks later, I was convinced that these were the two novels I wanted to analyse and focus on in my diploma thesis.

Therefore, this diploma thesis focuses on the theme of dysfunctional families, as the theme of family may be perceived as an eligible and common component among young adult literature, either presented in a positive or negative way. When one uses the word 'family', it should be obvious to everyone what the person is referring to, yet everyone's imaginations and definitions can differ. However, at its very core it remains the same. Nevertheless, when one makes a reference to a dysfunctional family, the thoughts, opinions, definitions, and labels could differ. Commonly, many of us tend to think of a dysfunctional family as a family where either one of the parents, or both, are missing due to unforeseen circumstances, or divorce. Yet there are many other factors that could contribute to family dysfunction, which are later going to be presented.



Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to analyse the two selected young adult novels with the objective to find out how the families in the selected novels are portrayed, and whether they could be perceived as dysfunctional or not. As a result of this, the thesis has four main components: the genre of young adult literature, the theme of family, the theme of dysfunctional families, and trauma studies and its analysis in literature. Therefore, my analysis is both genre and thematic related. As wide as these topics are, more pages and chapters could have been unquestionably devoted to the analysis, yet the pages are limited, thus I tried to do my best to choose the most significant features and details and analyse them in depth.

In the first chapter, I outline some of the basic concepts of young adult literature, along with a comparison of today's literature with those of previous centuries. Then, the themes that could be observed in contemporary young adult literature are described too. In the second chapter, I focus on the presentation of the portrayal of the complex subject of family in young adult literature, especially its definition, characteristics, priorities, and different viewpoints of selected scholars. I also comment on the features that can contribute to a family being seen as dysfunctional, in conjunction with trauma studies in literature, that are both going to be used for the analysis.

In the third chapter, I briefly comment on the literary context and the reasons behind the selection of both novels for the analysis. Then, I move on to the analysis of the novel *Holding Up the Universe*. I present some of the characteristics, style of writing, settings, narrator, as well as analysing the families and trauma portrayed in the novel. Then, I present some of the characteristics, style of writing, settings, narrator, as well as analysing the families and trauma portrayed in the second selected novel *Far from the Tree*. Lastly, I conclude and present the findings and outcomes of the analysis.

# 1. YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Young adult literature, also referred to as ‘teenage novels’ or known as ‘adolescent fiction’, came into existence in the 20th century in America, in the period between the two World Wars.<sup>1</sup> The *Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* states that young adult novels were written primarily for older children who grew out of juvenile books, yet were not mature enough to proceed onto more demanding adult novels.<sup>2</sup>

Generally said, such novels are mainly written for adolescents or teenagers who are aged between twelve to eighteen years old, or as Alleen Nilsen and Kenneth Donelson mention in their textbook on YA literature, they are read by “those who think they’re too old to be children but who others think are too young to be adults.”<sup>3</sup> This is due to the fact that such works reflect changes that these adolescents are going through at this period of their life.

Amy Pattee in her analysis of *When Jack Comes Home* mentions that the conception of adolescence is associated with both identity development and the ability to perform complex cognitive tasks. Thus, adolescents can experience and think about complex issues they have never experienced before.<sup>4</sup>

McCulloch, an author of *Children’s Literature in Context*, comments that the tension between the worlds of adults and children is more than obvious. Furthermore, she labels the world of adults as a world of conservatism and the children’s world as a world of danger, corruption, and modernity. She finds the primary function of young adult novels to be attempting to guide children to “find ways to negotiate with modern society and its rapid changes.”<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Richard W. Beach, an author of books on teaching of English language arts and literacy research, and James D. Marshall, professor of language and literacy education, claim in their book *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School* that the reason for reading novels like this, is so adolescents can easily understand what other teenagers are going through and can be more aware of the similar experiences, intellectual, social, emotional changes even if their own experience might be different. Therefore, not only can such novels help them to

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<sup>1</sup> Carpenter Humphrey and Mari Prichard, *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984), 518.

<sup>2</sup> Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion*, 518.

<sup>3</sup> Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson, *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* (Boston: Pearson, 2008), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Amy S. Pattee, “Disturbing the Peace: The Function of Young Adult Literature and the Case of Catherine Atkins’ *When Jeff Comes Home*,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 35, no. 3 (January 2004): 243.

<sup>5</sup> Fiona McCulloch, *Children’s Literature in Context* (London: Continuum, 2011), 41.

boost their confidence but they can also help them to feel more secure in times full of insecurity and stress or disagreements with other people, such as family members, classmates or friends during this transformational stage.<sup>6</sup>

Pattee notes that “adolescence is recognized in terms of physical maturation as well as in terms of pragmatic and cultural activity and symbolic idealism, young adult literature acts as a partial informant of these processes.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, she adds that it functions as a source that shapes adolescents into socialised young people as they guide them through this process and help them to become a determined and matured person. “Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive perception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience.”<sup>8</sup>

Adolescence may be for many young people a truly challenging time. Thus, such novels can serve two functions. Firstly, they may serve as a source of pleasure for adolescents, as a way they can escape the difficulties of real life. And secondly, they may provide them with similar situations and problems like the ones of their own or that could possibly happen in the future. Hence, the readers can be encouraged not only to look at these situations from different perspectives but also to formulate their attitudes and opinions towards these difficulties. Ideally, such examples might help them not to repeat the mistakes.

## **1.1. History of young adult literature**

As mentioned earlier, young adult literature came into existence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, in the period between the two World Wars. Many scholars, including Russell,<sup>9</sup> Carpenter and Prichard,<sup>10</sup> or Watson<sup>11</sup> note that the genre as such, and young adult novels were significantly influenced by J.D. Salinger’s novel *Catcher in the Rye*. Russell notes that this novel was not written with the intention to be read by children but rather by adolescents, as it “signalled the trend toward greater realism, harsher language, and a willingness to face ahead-on the problems of growing up.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richard W. Beach and James D. Marshall, *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School* (Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 331.

<sup>7</sup> Pattee, “Disturbing the Peace,” 244.

<sup>8</sup> Pattee, “Disturbing the Peace,” 245.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Russell, *Literature for Children: a short introduction* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2015), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion*, 518.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Watson, *The Cambridge Guide to Children’s Books in English* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 775.

<sup>12</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 14.

However, one must keep in mind that it is not clear which novel could be labelled as the first one, or which writer could be considered as the first one, because theoreticians differ in their opinions. Michael Cart, an author and expert in children's and young adult literature, argues "YA literature—the genre formerly known as 'realistic fiction for teens'—didn't appear until 1967 with the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsider* and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*. However, a case could be made that the first young adult novel was actually Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*, published in 1942, about the same time that America began recognizing the teenage years as a separate part of the life cycle."<sup>13</sup> Roman Trušník, an associate professor who focuses his research on American gay literature after 1945, southern literature, and literature of the fantastic; is aware of this fact as he adds: "the border has been uncertain historically as well: for example, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) was published as an adult title, yet it was adopted by many young people, and some critics believe that nowadays the novel would be most likely published as a young-adult rather than adult title."<sup>14</sup> Contrary to this opinion, Watson argues that one of the very first American novels of this genre was Beverly Cleary's *Fifteen*, written in 1956, which is still in print in Britain.<sup>15</sup> Nilsen and Donelson claim Louisa May Alcott and Horatio Alger, Jr. to be the first writers of young adult novels.<sup>16</sup>

In previous centuries, society always distinguished between adults and children. However, this was changed, and youth culture emerged. In 1936, a new column titled "Boy dates Girl" was introduced in *Scholastic*. This column was written by Gay Head (pseudonym for Margaret L. Hauser) and was focused more on manners rather than on advice to young people. Some of the topics Hauser addressed "were how to make proper introductions, which fork to use at a dinner party, and whether to wait for a boy to open a car door."<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, "although boys took pride of place in the column's title, its intended readers were clearly girls,"<sup>18</sup> and thus, in the beginning of the culture, boys were the centre of attention.

Less than a decade later, psychologists and serious thinkers began to pay attention to this topic as well. Robert James Havighurst's *Developmental Tasks and Education* and Erik

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Cart, "From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature," *Voices from the Middle* 9, no. 2 (December 2001): 96.

<sup>14</sup> Roman Trušník, "How to Use a Bookworm: Michael Cart's *My Father's Scar* as a Crossover novel," in *Theories in Practice: Proceedings of the First International Conference on English and American Studies*, ed. Roman Trušník and Katarína Nemčoková, (Zlín: Tomas Bata University, 2009), 178.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, *The Cambridge Guide*, 775.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (the United States of America, 2011), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 15.

Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, both written in 1950, came with definitions of specific stages of human development. "For both, two of the stages were 'adolescence' and 'young adulthood,' which they identified as thirteen to eighteen and nineteen to thirty (Havighurst) and twelve to eighteen and nineteen to forty (Erikson)."<sup>19</sup> All these factors led to the fact that later, such works would have a significant impact on educators, writers, publishers, and therapists. Nonetheless, it was a long and gradual process.

As the 1950s were approaching, more attention was paid towards teenagers, as Thompson notes. This was simply caused by the rise of compulsory education and the postwar economic boom. Many young people spent a lot of their time in school, surrounded by their peers, where they could develop their own environment, social rules, and customs. During that time, these young people were not usually earning money, therefore they had to ask their parents in times of need.<sup>20</sup>

The fifties were times of great economic expansion – full employment for the working-class and rising wages. Consequently, parents had fewer children and were spending more money on their children's entertainment.<sup>21</sup> Besides, the forties and fifties were also decades that were devoted to genre fiction – science fiction, cars, romance, sport, adventure, and careers, as Cart mentions.<sup>22</sup> "The appearance of hard-edged realism in the late '60s opened the door to writers who began exploring issues of relevance to the real lives of teen readers with art and insight—writers like Robert Cormier, M.E. Kerr, Richard Peck, and Walter Dean Myers [...] to name only a few of the extraordinary cadre of talents."<sup>23</sup> Watson notices that marketing was significantly influenced by the role of teenagers, especially in the literary sphere during the 1970s and 80s.

Many publishers set up separate teenage imprints with covers and blurbs designed to attract the young adult market, often drawing attention to the book's 'adult' content. The clear signals that these books were not suitable for younger children were designed both to appeal to the teenage audience and to warn parents against buying such books for their younger children.<sup>24</sup>

However, as he continues, many critics and writers were becoming aware of this critique and were becoming tolerant of this new genre. The more these novels were featuring taboos,

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<sup>19</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Thompson, "A Brief History of Teenagers," *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 13, 2018. <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2018/02/brief-history-teenagers/>

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, "A Brief History."

<sup>22</sup> Cart, "From Insider to Outsider," 96.

<sup>23</sup> Cart, "From Insider to Outsider," 96.

<sup>24</sup> Watson, *The Cambridge Guide*, 776.

sex, and pregnancy, the more they were lifted. According to Cart, the seventies could be seen as the decade of the problem novel – “didactic works of social realism that sacrificed art on the altar of individual ‘problems of the weak’ (alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, poverty, etc. ad nauseam). Perhaps in reaction to this the ‘80s returned to genre, principally romance but also– at the end of the decade–horror.”<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1990s, the new generation of teenagers became interested in horrors. This new interest was not only reflected in books but in movies as well, as Cart mentions. Because of this new trend, young adult novels were no longer popular like before, simply because they seemed to be unrealistic and moreover the typical age of the protagonist was decreasing from sixteen to nearly twelve or fourteen.<sup>26</sup>

Suddenly, 1994 turned out to be a critical moment for young adult literature, indicating its rebirth instead of death. The nineties “ushered in the rise of middle school literature, the dawn of the YA picture book, and then – in the middle of the decade – an expansion of the audience, which freed authors to tackle more serious subjects and to introduce more complex characters and considerations of ambiguity.”<sup>27</sup> From then on, this genre underwent a table period of renaissance that has continued to the present day, as this genre is now foreseen as literature that “deserves a long-overdue place in literary canon.”<sup>28</sup>

With the turn of the millennium, young adult literature has been gaining in popularity, attracting a wider audience. Today’s young adult novels are read, not only by adolescents for which they were intended, but also by children and adults as well. This is no wonder since the genre as such has changed a little bit in comparison with the previous century. These writings for younger readers are now more dynamic, open to experiments in structure, style and narration as trends come and go.<sup>29</sup>

As Holly Koelling mentions in the *Best Books for Young Adults* (BBYA), when it comes to young adult literature, general fiction is a broad category that constitutes more than 83% out of all the titles that BBYA accounts for. This category includes classical genres such as fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, dark fantasy, humorous fiction, mystery, or titles written in a unique format, for example, stories in verse or graphic novels (stories accompanied by

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<sup>25</sup> Cart, “From Insider to Outsider,” 96.

<sup>26</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 64–67.

<sup>27</sup> Cart, “From Insider to Outsider,” 96.

<sup>28</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 90.

illustrations).<sup>30</sup> Fiction covers “traditionally narrated novels and short story collections, [...] stories told in verse or in the form of diaries or letters, stories written in scripts, stories composed using more than one literary form, and stories told through dual/multiple perspectives.”<sup>31</sup> Covering many topics, from coming of age to family, personal issues, high school or friends, written in the first-person narrative, followed by the third-person narrative or written from multiple perspectives.<sup>32</sup>

Cart<sup>33</sup>, Watson<sup>34</sup> and Koelling<sup>35</sup> agree on the fact that fiction written in the form of diaries, journals and epistolary fiction is a recent trend in teenage fiction, simply owing to the fact that teenage stories written in this style carry more intimacy. Thus, younger readers find it easier to relate and understand a protagonist’s problems “allowing teen readers to feel they are inside the minds and hearts of these book’s characters.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, this point of a view allows a protagonist to express himself fully and openly to the readers.

Another major trend in teen literature includes the feminisation of teen literature and the rise of so-called ‘chick lit’ novels aimed at young and adult female readers. This genre has enormous crossover potential, though it was initially intended for teen readers, yet the recognition by adult readers is intriguing as the separation of the genre for adult and young adult readers could not be more “evident than in the field of romance fiction, where genre blending have become commonplace.”<sup>37</sup>

This trend reflects on women’s current “dominance”<sup>38</sup> in romance genres featuring a female protagonist and secondary female characters who could be either adolescents or adults, yet still exceptional, strong, courageous and with whom readers can identify. These characters usually encounter an obstacle and are given an opportunity to learn and personally grow, even if they do not manage to overcome the obstacle. Nevertheless, in most of the cases, they do manage to triumph.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, these novels are recognised by “their sophisticated cover

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<sup>30</sup> Holly Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults* (the United States of America: American Library Association, 2007), 11–12.

<sup>31</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Watson, *The Cambridge Guide*, 777.

<sup>35</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 33–35.

art, usually featuring photographs of drop-dead gorgeous girls (and boys), which is designed to appeal to a broad age range.”<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly, another aspect that changed recently is the length of the books regardless of the age group of the audience. It is no longer important whether they are intended for teenage or adult readers. Koelling suggests that this might be the result of the length of J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series which demonstrates that the length of the book is not as challenging for teenage readers as one may argue. The readers do not let themselves be discouraged with the length if they are interested in it. The reason for longer novels is caused by “mature content with complex themes and using sophisticated plotting and in-depth characterisation that take many more pages than the heretofore average teen novel to successfully craft.”<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, the most fundamental aspect for the readers, as well as the authors, is the authenticity of the stories. In order to make the stories as authentic as possible, the authors use forms such as letters or diaries, which fit the intended goal the best, as well as first-person narrations. Furthermore, it could be noted that the length of the book is not the most essential feature according to which the readers choose the book.

## **1.2. Topics in contemporary young adult literature**

Trends and changes in the young adult literature are fascinating to follow not only considering style and structure but also considering topics and themes. Adolescent literature is not the same as it used to be a few decades ago. It tends to be more dynamic and realistic, focusing on more complex issues and multiple plot lines instead of purely presenting one topic, one character or one plot. As this thesis is going to examine two selected contemporary teen novels, this subchapter briefly presents and comments on some of the themes that could be observed in contemporary adolescent literature.

Consulting the primary and secondary sources, authors mostly agree on the selection of the most popular topics that are explored in the novels. Russell mentions family relationships, friendship, adventure and survival, social outcasts, death and dying, sexuality, mysteries and puzzles, and interestingly he adds sports and animals.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Koelling mentions teen internal life, sexual abuse, physical abuse, physical and psychological challenges, loss, grief,

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<sup>40</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 111.

<sup>41</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 230–239.



self, identity, acceptance, family life and social life.<sup>43</sup> She adds that “these books look at both extremes of contemporary teen life, from light, humour-filled tales of the ordinary daily life of adolescents to dark and painful stories of challenge and abuse.”<sup>44</sup> In a similar way, Watson mentions romance, relationships, family life, isolation, identity and autonomy.<sup>45</sup>

Two of the most common themes that are commonly featured in young adult novels are coming of age and identity, as the characters are moving from childhood to adolescence. A protagonist could undergo this process either on his own or with the help of others. It is typical for protagonists at their age to be looking for answers to their questions. They are going through the processes of understanding the world around them, emotional and physical changes, and the process of developing their values. Many of such novels are realistic and written in the present tense as teens find it easier to relate to the stories. However, it is not a necessary aspect, as Russell claims that a great number of fantasies feature the growing up theme.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Marie Nikolajeva, a Swedish literary critic and academic, specialising in children's literature, adds that:

...many contemporary YA authors employ present tense because of the assumption that young people live here and now, and that their perception of time and space is underdeveloped, [...] however, the excessive use of present tense sets a limitation in the temporal possibilities offered by fiction.<sup>47</sup>

Another strongly featured theme in teen novels is friendship. Friends have always played a significant role in everyone's life, and so they do in the lives of maturing protagonists. Russell notes that only a small number of teen novels do not involve establishing and developing friendships.<sup>48</sup> As teens are growing up, challenging different situations, they need a person in their life with whom they can share or undergo such experiences and to whom they can open up when it comes to crucial and personal issues. Not every protagonist feels comfortable at his or her age talking their dilemma through with a parent, thus many adolescents opt for a friend who replaces family members. Not to mention, in many cases friendships become more important than family relationships as Russell claims.<sup>49</sup> Although some

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<sup>43</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 50 – 60.

<sup>44</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Watson, *The Cambridge Guide*, 775.

<sup>46</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 231.

<sup>47</sup> Marie Nikolajeva, “Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction,” *Narrative Works* 4, no. 2 (September 2014): 88.

<sup>48</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 233.

<sup>49</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 233.

friendships could be presented that they are destined to last forever, it may not always be true as they are often challenged during adolescence.<sup>50</sup>

But friendships have their rocky spots, and books dealing with friendships usually reveal relationships being put to the test and emerging stronger. [...] the message is that friendships do not just happen, they are forged with considerable effort and sacrifice – and they come with inestimable rewards. In other words, friendships are an extension of (and sometimes a replacement for) family relationships.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast, Koelling describes that much of today's young adult literature relates to darkness and disturbing issues due to external, complex circumstances and realities that adolescents are encountered with. Therefore, many present novels that are containing some features of darkness could be characterised as “problem”<sup>52</sup> novels.<sup>53</sup> Such darkness could be depicted in a way of trauma, death, problems with parents (divorce, remarriage, single parent), grief, physical or sexual abuse, anorexia, serious illnesses, drugs and sexuality. Generally said, these issues very often reflect the society and reality that we live in. Jeffrey Kaplan points out in his article that some of these issues are “a little far-fetched” and “out-of touch with everyday reality.”<sup>54</sup> Yet, Sandra Bayona and Antonella Percara believe that these issues cannot be simply ignored, as teenagers do face them. Instead, they both believe that engaging readers with those topics could be beneficial for them in a way to help them understand that they are not alone facing such painful situations. They both stress the importance of balancing the emphasis of disturbing or problematic issues and showing some degree of hope.<sup>55</sup>

To conclude, today's young adult literature could be considered diverse. One novel can either present only a few selected themes or a selection of various themes, such as family life, various friendships, school life, the quest for identity, sexuality, trauma, loss of a close person, death, or grief. Such novels and stories, although they might not always be depicted in the brightest and optimistic way, could help young readers understand the world around them, help them realise they are not alone and give them hope. In view of the fact that no matter what happens in their life, every storm in their life is always followed by a rainbow.

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<sup>50</sup> Alice Trupe, *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature* (the United States of America: Greenwood Press, 2006), 91.

<sup>51</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 235.

<sup>52</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan, “Young adult literature in the 21st century: Moving beyond traditional constraints and conventions,” *The Alan Review* 32, no. 2 (December 2005): 11-18.

<sup>55</sup> Sandra Bayona and Antonella Percara, “Some Issues in Young Adult Literature,” *Actas de las Cuartas Jornadas Internacionales de Lengua Inglesa. Cultura de los Países de Habla Inglesa*, (September 2015): 35–40.

## 2. PORTRAYAL OF FAMILY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

With the world and society changing so rapidly in the past few decades and centuries, many aspects of our lives have changed as well. Family lives have not been left behind, as they have been strongly influenced by the era we are living in now, and thus, many significant changes in family lives and relationships could be observed in the literature as well. These changes can vary from family to family, as they do in literature – each novel represents its family and its issues in a different way. To quote Tolstoy, and the opening of his novel *Anna Karenina*, “All happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”<sup>56</sup> With this in mind, it could be noted that novels examining family life could undeniably be a book in itself.<sup>57</sup>

Noteworthy, as Koelling states, “The BBYA lists of the past seven years are full of books that focus on family life from the teen perspective. [...] suffice to say here that two larger trends seem particularly observable on recent BBYA lists: families in crisis and the definition of family.”<sup>58</sup> This could be seen as a result of the fact that nuclear families are reduced in the number of members, many children have divorced or single parents, not to mention that more commonly they are either an only child, or have just one sibling.<sup>59</sup> Thus, children and teenagers could frequently feel lonely and isolated. Family is no longer perceived as a source of help during harsh times, instead, it serves as a source or origin of troubles and crises.<sup>60</sup>

As stated by the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, a family could be defined as “a kinship unit consisting of a group of individuals united by blood or by marital, adoptive, or other intimate ties. Although the family is the fundamental social unit of most human societies, its form and structure vary widely.”<sup>61</sup> Nancy Lee Cecil and Patricia L. Roberts, the authors of the book *Families in Children’s Literature: A Resource Guide, Grades 4-8*, raise two important questions: “What is a family? What values, if any, should every family hold?”<sup>62</sup> They note that historically, family was defined as “a reciprocal sense of commitment, sharing, cooperation,

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<sup>56</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (London: Penguin, 2000), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 58.

<sup>59</sup> Šárka Bubíková, *Úvod do studia dětství v americké literatuře* (Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2009), 67.

<sup>60</sup> Bubíková, *Úvod do studia dětství*, 68.

<sup>61</sup> “Family,” *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/family>.

<sup>62</sup> Nancy Lee Cecil and Patricia L. Roberts, *Families in Children’s Literature: A Resource Guide, Grades 4-8* (Englewood: Teacher Idea Press, 1998), xii.

and intimacy. This commitment defines the bonds between family members. [...] Such bonds assumed to be deeper and more lasting than those that exist in other, non-familiar relationships.”<sup>63</sup> Whereas, in comparison to a definition of a family in later years, they stress that the “nuclear family assumed a place of even greater importance, where cooperation, caring and morality could continue to flourish.”<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, both authors add that the continuation of preserving the above-mentioned values could be seen as the most crucial factor of the value, and any kind of a departure from those values could be seen as “threatening” by many people.<sup>65</sup> Although today's families may vary and differ in the size, colour, or sex, it should be kept in mind that families should still hold onto their values, or at least have some of them in common. Parents should not only take care of the family as such, to support one another, but they should also be present in order to nurture and protect their loved ones. These family goals are persistent among people who “differ in religion, race, wealth, and cultural heritage. Furthermore, such goals for family life are shared by people whose lifestyle may vary widely, some families may be what has been commonly referred to as traditional, while others (if only outwardly) appear nontraditional.”<sup>66</sup>

Koelling agrees with the fact that family and its life have changed a lot compared to previous centuries. Both have become more complex and diverse and as she states, these changes have been reflected in literature as well. She argues that the definition of family, or even what exactly constitutes a family, is harder to narrow down than ever before, as it is more complex and broader, as well as the issues that teens are facing are complicated, challenging, and deep. Furthermore, by the time children reach their teen years, they are examining the nature and design of their family, occasionally denying the reality and experience of their own family to look for other possibilities. On the other hand, at other times some of them are looking for answers and meaning from within.<sup>67</sup>

Koelling notes that books dealing with family life can examine different themes. Some of the books can address the issue of identity in tandem, others can address the quest for reunion, or even introduction, or adjustment to parents or other family members. Other themes that could be addressed are adoption and foster care, and thus teens being a part of foster, adoptive or nontraditional families. Lastly, another theme is children on their own, who either had to make

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<sup>63</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>64</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>65</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>66</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>67</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 59.

the decision to become a parent or are raising a child and who are therefore already facing adult challenges despite their young age.<sup>68</sup>

Gillian Avery, a British children's novelist, and a historian of childhood education and children's literature, noted down in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, in the chapter written by her, *The family story*, that considering American books of the last century that aimed to depict a complete family, it is always the mother who holds the home together. Nevertheless, she admits that such a happy family has always been an exception. She was of the same opinion that in the past few decades a lot has changed, perhaps children are no longer provided with a great number of domestic securities and "struggle to survive against a background of problem parents."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, she elaborates on this thought by saying that there is an increasing number of authors who write about divided, and many times alienated families, owing to the fact that households with two parents are becoming so rare. Yet, she stresses out that it must be kept in mind that there are still some books where the family circle is unbroken.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast, Ann Alston, a senior lecturer of English literature at University of the West of England, and author of *The Family in English Children's Literature*, argues that when it comes to a definition of family or family as such, and its place in literature, there has not been much change during the past few decades and over the last two centuries. According to her, family is still the ideal and the vital part of any children's fiction, though it has been said many times, especially over the last five decades, that family and its life has experienced a revolution.<sup>71</sup>

There is no doubt that "the family as a living reality has altered; divorce rates have soared; blended families are commonplace; often both parents work outside the home; children have become more central to family life as is often evident in parental battles for custody; there has been a decline in religious faith: the list of changes, it seems, is endless."<sup>72</sup> as Alston says. Yet, the family in children's literature remains at its heart the same. Although families could be portrayed differently in the novels, "it is not so much the family as reality that is our subject here as the family as an ideal and the ideal of family remains surprisingly fixed."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 59–60.

<sup>69</sup> Gillian Avery, "The family story," in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (New York: Routledge, 2004), 454.

<sup>70</sup> Avery, "The family story," 457–458.

<sup>71</sup> Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

<sup>72</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 1.

Furthermore, Alston points out that it is not a matter of fact whether a family or parents are present or absent in a novel, as the characters are in a way dependent on family regardless of the particular member of the family. It does not matter whether it is a sibling, grandparent, parent, aunt or uncle and it does not matter whether a particular member can be a good or bad role model for children. The foremost fact remains, family is inherent, and it remains central to most children's literature.<sup>74</sup>

Besides, "children's literature rarely asks the fundamental question of what constitutes family, and what, if anything, is ideal."<sup>75</sup> As it was already mentioned before, the world and society have undergone changes and some of these changes are depicted in the literature as many texts present topics, such as divorce, social issues, or abuse that are in contrast with the ideal family. Yet, Alston argues that such topics are addressed owing to the fact that texts must be relevant to those children who have not experienced the idealised, classic, nuclear family.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, she adds:

The fact that the family is 'fractured' may drive plots, but it is not used to question the received ideals of family or to establish different social models in which children could be socialised and protected. Even where there is no family, a surrogate family is created. In spite of all the pressures on the nuclear family, it is culturally still promoted as an ideal and the norm in children's literature and in other texts aimed at a juvenile audience. Children's literature promotes a specific ideology; it attempts to instil in its readers certain values which dictate how families should be: loving, respectful, preferably with two parents, contained in domestic harmony and sharing wholesome home-cooked family meals.<sup>77</sup>

In addition, Alston argues that despite social, cultural and economic changes over the last two centuries, the nuclear and ideal family remains fundamental to children's literature and is still cherished. The literature tends to present a so-called 'disciplinary discourse' which has a tendency to create subjects who will aspire for the ideal family and replicate it in turn.<sup>78</sup> "Fictional families may have changed, but the all-important, two heterosexual parent ideal is still in the ideological foundation of twenty-first-century children's literature. [...] Children's literature is where we can see most clearly our nostalgia for the past, but equally, it is crucial in determining attitudes towards the future."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 5.

To conclude, family is an essential and vital part of any child's life, and therefore it is in any children's book. Despite the fact that families and family life have changed and could be depicted in such books differently or could focus on different themes than in the past few decades or centuries, they are still part of the literature regardless of the fact if a family depicted in a given book is broken or unbroken, typical or alternative. Moreover, such families, or some of the members, are not depicted as role models anymore. Each family is different, with its difficulties and situations that they have to go through. All these perceptions and new forms of families are depicted in books for young adult readers which may help them to realise that providing for their family is specific or not ideal, they are not alone in this, and there are many families and teenagers out there who are facing the same situations or even worse ones.

## **2.1. What makes a family functional or dysfunctional?**

A lot has been said in the previous pages about family, what aspects make a family and how it is depicted in children literature, illustrated by various and also different opinions and definitions by some of the authors or experts in children's literature. But what may lead one to the conclusion to say that a family is either functional or dysfunctional? According to the features, can one decide whether a portrayed family in a given novel could be labelled as functional or not?

To quote *McGraw-Hill Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine*, a dysfunctional family could be defined as “a family with multiple 'internal' – eg sibling rivalries, parent-child–conflicts, domestic violence, mental illness, single parenthood, or 'external' – eg alcohol or drug abuse, extramarital affairs, gambling, unemployment — influences that affect the basic needs of the family unit.”<sup>80</sup>

On the other hand, psychologists and mental health professionals of the King University claim that dysfunctional families are a common thing and can be the result of untreated mental illness, addiction, or co-dependency. They point out that an accidental insult or argument does not immediately qualify a family as dysfunctional. Yet, “the term “dysfunctional family” might be used flippantly in popular culture, growing up in a toxic environment can have a lasting impact as children transition into adulthood.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> “Dysfunctional families,” *McGraw-Hill Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine*, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Dysfunctional+families>.

<sup>81</sup> “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families,” King University, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://online.king.edu/news/dysfunctional-families/>.

They list the following features as common characteristics. Firstly, poor communication is one of the obstacles, when the individual members are either unable to listen to one another or they struggle to confront each other directly. Instead, they tend to talk with members about other members behind their backs. Secondly, alcohol or drug abuse, where family relationships, family roles, or even rules are established around alcohol or drugs. Thirdly, they claim that perfectionism can be another obstacle, when one of the parents can be perfectionists, having high expectations for children or other family members. Fourthly, lack of empathy or even excessive parental control of children can contribute to a dysfunctional family. And lastly, excessive criticism or other verbal abuse patterns can be associated with such a family.<sup>82</sup>

Kelly Spears, a writer, and mental health advocate mostly dealing with topics such as anxiety, depression, postpartum depression, eating disorders, and body dysmorphia, argues that almost everyone seems to claim these days that they are from a dysfunctional family. Yet, she claims that it must be kept in mind that there are multiple negative aspects and influences which separate “families with minor dysfunction from those where family dysfunction is a serious problem.”<sup>83</sup>

She lists the following characteristics as the most common influences that can contribute to family dysfunction. Spears agrees with psychologists and mental health professionals of the King University that addiction (either to drugs, alcohol, gambling or any other), perfectionism, ineffective communication, excessive control, lack of empathy, and criticism are some of the common influences. Besides this, she also lists medical problems, mental illness, lack of privacy, independence, stress, or life circumstances.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, she mentions five common roles that could be observed in dysfunctional families:

1. “Enabler or caretaker” – This person tries to keep the family going regardless of the presence of any of the influences listed above. They protect the rest of the family from others.
2. “Scapegoat or troublemaker” – This person tends to break rules either in society or within the given family unit. “The scapegoat or troublemaker may become sick or weak, or angry and rebellious. This individual’s wellbeing is often sacrificed to maintain the family structure.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> King University, “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families.”

<sup>83</sup> Kelly Spears, “Dysfunctional Family: What It Is And What It’s Like To Grow Up In One,” Better Help, December 22, 2020, <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/family/dysfunctional-family-what-it-is-and-what-its-like-to-grow-up-in-one/>.

<sup>84</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>85</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”



3. “Lost child or quiet one” – This person could be mostly seen as calm, avoiding causing troubles. The lost child tends to spend time on his own, avoiding his family and its dysfunction. Such children can struggle with social skills.
4. “Mascot” – This person tends to be funny or make fun of things in order to alleviate tension within the family and lighten the mood. However, such people usually suffer when things slow down.
5. “The hero” – This person has a desire to be successful in his life and therefore has a tendency to cover up the dysfunction of his family and make his parents look “normal.” Yet, such a person can suffer from illnesses related to stress.<sup>86</sup>

As broad as this topic is, many other authors, experts, opinions, points of views or theories could have been mentioned in this subchapter. Nevertheless, for the analytical part and analysis of the given young adult novels, the above-mentioned negative influences and roles will be used in order to distinguish whether the portrayed families could be perceived as either functional or dysfunctional.

Furthermore, as Spears mentions, stress could contribute to a family’s dysfunction, yet it could be closely related to trauma, as Esther Giller, a founder and President of Sidran Institute providing traumatic stress education and advocacy, points out. Because traumatic events appear in both selected novels, concepts of trauma and its studies in literature are presented in this subchapter, as trauma is going to be analysed in the analytical part of this thesis.

Giller claims that there is no clear division between trauma and stress, as different experts in the field define trauma differently. In her article, she defines psychological trauma as “the unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions, in which the individual’s ability to integrate his/her emotional experience is overwhelmed, or the individual experiences (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity.”<sup>87</sup>

In contrast, as stated by the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, trauma can either refer to any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual’s view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Paraphrased from “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>87</sup> Esther Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?,” Sidran Institute of Traumatic Stress Education and Advocacy. <https://www.sidran.org/resources/for-survivors-and-loved-ones/what-is-psychological-trauma/>.

<sup>88</sup> “Trauma,” *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/trauma>.

Or to “any serious physical injury, such as widespread burns or a blow to the head.”<sup>89</sup>

As Beata Piątek stresses in her book on trauma and memory, there are two problems connected with the word trauma and the way it is used and the way it functions in contemporary culture.

One is related to its usage in psychiatry, literary studies and memory studies, and results from ambiguity inherent in the term which denotes both an event so extreme that it leaves the subject wounded psychologically, and that psychological wound, which is the condition of the subject. [...] the other terminological problem is connected to the ubiquity of the word “trauma”, its everyday usage and in consequence, trivialization of the term. [...] it has seeped into the everyday language (not only English), and is commonly used to denote any kind of stressful or unpleasant experience; in the popular press, any distressing experience from divorce to moving house may be described as traumatic.<sup>90</sup>

Giller adds that trauma is defined by each survivor’s experience meaning that when two people undergo the same experience, their experience may undoubtedly differ. One person may feel traumatised whereas the second person may feel relatively unscathed. Furthermore, it is not possible to make generalisations about trauma and its aspects in a way that “X is traumatic for all who go through it” or “event Y was not traumatic because no one was physically injured”<sup>91</sup> as it would differ in everyone’s case and perception. Not to mention that trauma comes in different forms.

Although the traumatic experience is over, the memories and person’s reaction to it may not necessarily be. Effects of trauma may be lasting, and survivors may frequently carry some of the following criteria that meet the diagnoses of “substance dependence and abuse, personality disorders (especially borderline personality disorder), depression, anxiety (including post-traumatic stress disorder), dissociative disorders, and eating disorders.”<sup>92</sup>

In addition to this, when a child undergoes some kind of a chronic early trauma, while his own personality is forming, it shapes his later beliefs and perception of the world and everything around him. It can have a major impact on his life, besides it can lead to disruption on his basic developmental tasks. “The developmental tasks being learned at the time the trauma happens can help determine what the impact will be. For example, survivors of childhood

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<sup>89</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology, “Trauma.”

<sup>90</sup> Beata Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014), 32–33.

<sup>91</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

<sup>92</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

trauma can have mild to severe deficits in abilities such as: self-soothing, seeing the world as a safe place, trusting others, organized thinking for decision-making, avoiding exploitation.”<sup>93</sup>

Any kind of a traumatic disruption in childhood could possibly result in adaptive behaviour, which might be interpreted as symptoms in the mental health symptoms, for example disrupted self-soothing can be labeled as agitation, the disrupted ability to see the world as a safe place looks like paranoia, distrust of others can be interpreted as paranoia (even when based on experience), disruptions in organized thinking for decision-making appears as psychosis, avoiding/preempting exploitation is called self-sabotage.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, Piątek adds that there is one more aspect that is crucial for trauma theory and that is the fact that trauma signifies the problem of representation –

since it is such an extreme experience which lies beyond mental representation of the world of the given subject. Hence the shock and impossibility of assimilation and, in consequence, impossibility of translating the experience into a coherent story. Therefore the experience remains stuck in the mind, as it does not lend itself to normal memory process, it returns to haunt the subject, but it will neither be forgotten nor recalled at will.

In recent decades, many books that depict various kinds of trauma have been written. As well as this, trauma theory has been used frequently to analyse such literary texts. The same could be said for young adult novels, especially coming-of-age novels which represent various kinds of trauma too. There is no wonder that its depiction is frequent, as literary fiction texts could be perceived as an exceptionally well-suited medium for the examination of this given topic.<sup>95</sup> However, as suggested by Piątek, the usage of the term trauma is often trivialised, especially in the media. Therefore, in the following discussion and analysis, I limit my usage of the term trauma to events which are truly traumatic, such as parental abandonment, or loss of a person, not to events that are just difficult or unbearable.

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<sup>93</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

<sup>94</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

<sup>95</sup> Šárka Bubíková, “Writing Personal Trauma in Young Adult Fiction: Benjamin Zephaniah’s Refugee Boy and Siobhan Dowd’s Solace of the Road,” *American and British Studies Annual*, vol. 10 (2017), 1–3.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED NOVELS

#### 3.1.Literary context

Both young adult novels that are going to be examined and analysed further in the following pages were written in recent years. Therefore, both of them could be said to be contemporary novels, because of their detailed and realistic portrayal of characters and settings where the novels take place. More specifically, they could be said to belong to a category known as ‘coming-of-age novels’. As pointed out by Judith L. Gibbons, a professor of psychology, specialising her research interest in international and cross-cultural studies of adolescent development; and by Brien K. Ashdown, a professor of psychological science, specialising his research in cultural psychology, adolescent psychology, religion and psychology,

the theory of emerging adulthood was a necessary addition to the science of human development. It appears to be growing in importance as more societies become industrialized and marriage and entry into the workforce are postponed. The theory allows developmentalists to study the concepts of a unique period that was previously considered to be covered by other developmental stages. The theory of emerging adulthood not only allows us the chance to consider the uniqueness of this age group but also sheds light on other stages of development. It allows us to differentiate among adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young adulthood, and to more closely study the constructs and issues that are unique to those periods.<sup>96</sup>

The first novel  *Holding Up the Universe*  was written by Jennifer Niven in 2016. Jennifer Niven is the author of *All the Bright Places* which is a *New York Times* and international bestseller. She has not only written novels for teen readers but for adults as well. She has written nonfiction books, historical novels, and a memoir about her high school experience.

*Holding Up the Universe*  was inspired by Niven’s own life as she claims:

Holding Up the Universe comes from my heart, as well as from my own loss and fear and pain, and from real people who are dear to me. Those people—along with many others—help hold up my universe. [...] I did not have to be rescued from my house the way Libby was, but I have struggled with weight issues and anxiety over the years—particularly when I was Libby’s age—and I know what it feels like to be bullied. In addition to my own experience, I drew on the experiences of family and friends, who also understand firsthand what

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<sup>96</sup> Judith L. Gibbons and Brien K. Ashdown, “Emerging Adulthood: The Dawning of a New Age,” review of *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in 21st Century*, by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner, *PsycCRITIQUES*, August 30, 2006.

Libby has gone through. I am not personally face-blind, but I have family members who are.<sup>97</sup>

This novel was chosen for analysis as it depicts realistic experiences of a loss of a close person, family trauma as well as experiences of bullying and its consequences in the lives of teenagers. This novel does not have to necessarily be seen as another example of a teenage love story with a predictable end. Instead, it could serve as an example of how different teen protagonists can deal with various challenges during their maturing and overcoming them in order to recover and get better.

The second novel *Far from the Tree* was written by Robin Benway in 2017. Robin Benway is a National Book Award winning and *New York Times* bestselling author. She is known for writing young adult novels including *Far From the Tree*, the *Also Known As* series, and *Audrey Wait!*. Benway has received numerous awards, including Pen America Literary Award, the Blue Ribbon Award from the Bulletin for the Center of Children's Books, ALA's Best Books for Young Adults, and ALA's Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults.<sup>98</sup>

*Far from the Tree* was chosen for the analysis as it depicts realistic experiences of foster care, adoption, as well as parent abandonment and trauma. Pursuing this further, this novel asks a crucial question from its very beginning, as could be evident from its book cover: "What does it mean to be a family?" This book does not only centre around family issues and its portrayal, but around difficulties and obstacles that are closely connected with the process of adoption and lives of children in foster care.

### **3.2. Holding Up the Universe**

This young adult fiction presents us with two main characters Libby Strout, a 16-year-old overweight girl, also known as "America's Fattest Teen,"<sup>99</sup> who in the past had to be cut out and lifted from her house by crane after a panic attack, and Jack Masselin, a 17-year-old popular boy who is secretly suffering from prosopagnosia – a neurological disorder that does not allow him to recognise faces of others.

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<sup>97</sup> Jenifer Niven, *Holding Up the Universe* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 403.

[https://www.amazon.com/Holding-Up-Universe-Jennifer-Niven-ebook/dp/B01B0K97FM/ref=tmm\\_kin\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=1618153370&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Holding-Up-Universe-Jennifer-Niven-ebook/dp/B01B0K97FM/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1618153370&sr=8-1)

<sup>98</sup> "About Robin," Robin Benway, accessed April 5, 2021,

<https://www.robinbenway.com/about>.

<sup>99</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 19.

Jack and Libby equally take turns in narrating their stories. Sometimes, when they are both part of the same situation, they take turns, alternating chapters to narrate the story from their point of view. The first half of the novel moves backwards and forwards in time. This happens so that the reader is taken back in time to reveal further details about Libby's panic attacks, her mother's death, or her rescue. In Jack's case, it helps the reader to discover more details about his disorder or about the time when he was watching Libby being rescued from her house. This also helps readers to better understand their emotional, social and mental challenges and obstacles that they both must undergo. Both Libby and Jack narrate from the first-person point of view in the present tense.

Some of the chapters are followed by lists, mostly written by Jack. These lists are either listing top things that happened in his life, either happy or embarrassing, or instructions for building a robot, and things that have something to do with his father's cancer or Jack's disorder. Such an example could be types of careers for people with prosopagnosia. These lists mostly contain some hint of irony, pointing to his bad life situation connected with prosopagnosia.

The language used in this young adult novel is mostly informal. Both characters either in their descriptions, thoughts or direct speech with other characters have a tendency to use informal language, and vulgar words rather frequently. This may lead one to wonder why Niven has decided to use such an excessive amount of swearing in her novel. For what purposes was it done? Although it has never been explained, there are several reasons that could be taken into consideration.

Ellen Brock, a professional freelance novel editor, argues most teenagers have a tendency to either constantly or occasionally swear. This being said, she argues that therefore the teenage audience is not going to pick up any new words as they already know many or all of them. Furthermore, she elaborates on this idea by adding that agents and editors are interested in books that have potential to be sold, as well as the plot and characters being interesting.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Jennifer Bardsley, an author, newspaper columnist, and a girl scout leader; posted an article on Dr. Bickmore's blog, who is a professor of English education and scholar of young adult literature, in which Bardsley points out that it is crucial to keep in mind that these novels are written mainly for young adult readers, but are also read a lot by adults as well. Therefore,

realistic fiction is called realistic fiction for a reason. The fact many adults are resistant to facing is that teens use the f-bomb every day. Some of them have sex, do drugs, grapple with suicidal ideation or pregnancy. There are hordes of

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<sup>100</sup> "Edgy' YA Fiction Part 2: Can I Curse in YA?," Ellen Brock Editing, last modified September 24, 2013, <https://ellenbrockediting.com/2013/09/24/edgy-ya-fiction-part-2-can-i-curse-in-ya/>

teenagers living lives straight out of the pages. [...] There needs to be diversity in content, just like there is diversity in humanity. Who knows? Maybe a sixteen-year-old struggling with an addiction to meth could find inspiration in clean fiction. Perhaps the grittiness of dark fiction helps everyone gain empathy.<sup>101</sup>

Interestingly, throughout the novel, passages can be found when the text is either written in italics, uppercase letters, or in bold. Sentences or passages written in bold are mostly written when one of the main characters either writes a letter or message or reads to himself a letter or message.<sup>102, 103, 104</sup> As for the italics, Caitlin Berve, an author of fantasy books and teacher of creative writing, states that “italics can be used to denote many different aspects of language, and in today’s virtual world, they are used a lot. When used correctly, they clarify an author’s meaning. [...] Italics in creative writing are often [used for thoughts, foreign words, emphasis and titles.]”<sup>105</sup>

Regarding the novel being analysed, italics are used for thoughts of the two main characters: “I close the door and rest my forehead against the metal of the locker because my head is going hot and I feel dizzy, which is sometimes how it starts. *Is this what she felt the day she drove herself to the hospital? Is this how it began for her?*”<sup>106</sup> It is also used for emphasis: “Just then another fire truck comes roaring up, siren blaring, and then this white truck comes lumbering along behind and this one’s pulling a crane. *A crane.*”<sup>107</sup>

Furthermore, Jennifer Niven, the author of *Holding Up the Universe*, wrote many of the words or sentences in different chapters in all capital letters. This could be seen as another example of the author trying to attract the reader's attention. It is used by the characters in the novel to shout at someone. Such usage can be claimed to evoke strong emotions in a reader.<sup>108</sup>

In some parts, Niven combines uppercase letters together with italics not only to differentiate between dialogue or description and thoughts, but also to evoke even stronger emotions in the reader, and to capture their attention, as can be seen in the following excerpt

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<sup>101</sup> “Cursing, Sex, and Censorship in YA by Jennifer Bardsley,” Dr. Brickmore’s YA Wednesday, last modified May 17, 2017,

[www.yawednesday.com/blog/cursing-sex-and-censorship-in-ya-books-by-jennifer-bardsley](http://www.yawednesday.com/blog/cursing-sex-and-censorship-in-ya-books-by-jennifer-bardsley)

<sup>102</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 93.

<sup>103</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 123.

<sup>104</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 124.

<sup>105</sup> “How to use Italics in Creative Writing: Thoughts, Readability, and More,” Ignited Ink Writing, last modified December 11, 2017,

<https://www.ignitedinkwriting.com/ignite-your-ink-blog-for-writers/using-italics/2017>.

<sup>106</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 147.

<sup>107</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> “When to Use Uppercase or Capital Letters,” Thought Co., last modified July 03, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/when-to-use-uppercase-capital-letters-31734>.

from the novel: “And then I’m thinking about making out with Libby Strout. *What the hell? I tell myself, this is the girl you saw LIFTED OUT OF HER HOUSE BY A CRANE.*”<sup>109</sup>

It could also be said that both narrators are biased owing to the fact that they experience life and its challenges in different ways. As for Libby, ever since her mother had died, she gained weight and she was bullied, therefore whenever somebody has some comments or takes an action, she always tends to interpret it her own way, in the way that always has something to do with her weight.

Moreover, it happens as well when the reader is presented with a situation when Libby meets new people, when she thinks, or claims that people are looking at her, she argues that they are always looking at her because they are shocked and taken aback because of her weight and the way she looks. Yet, the reader never has a chance to get to know the other person’s view and is always presented only with Libby’s view that could have been biased, as was already stated before.

To illustrate her biased attitude, the following situation when Jack takes Libby on her first date ever to Richmond could be examined in detail. Libby is expecting him to take her somewhere in their hometown, Amos, yet when she realises, they are leaving it, she says:

my heart deflates a little, which tells me I didn’t actually expect him to do this, and now he’s doing it – smuggling me over city lines like the daughter of some wealthy oil baron. “Where are we going?” My voice sounds flat, as if it’s underridden a semi about fifty times. “Richmond.” “Richmond?” It comes out sounding like ARE YOU F-ING KIDDING ME [sic]? RICHMOND?! WHY DON’T YOU JUST CHAIN A BOULDER TO MY LEG AND THROW ME IN THE RIVER?<sup>110</sup>

On the contrary, as Jack explains further in the following chapter, he did not take her to Clara’s pizzeria in Richmond to not be seen with her, but instead he claims that this place is not boring or typical for him. When he was six and fell off the roof, his dad smuggled one of their pizzas to the hospital. It reminds him of his dad being a great guy.<sup>111</sup>

Jack’s biased attitude could be seen in the way he experiences his life influenced by his own disability, as well as being influenced by his dad recently having cancer. Although Jack is seen as a popular or even arrogant guy by others, deep down, as the story winds on, it can be observed that his attitude towards life, and its multiple challenges, is rather negative, influenced

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<sup>109</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 209.

<sup>110</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 266.

<sup>111</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 270.



by these two negative and traumatic circumstances, as one can tell from his own reflection at the beginning of the novel:

The guy in the mirror isn't bad-looking—high cheekbones, strong jaw, a mouth that's hitched up at one corner like he just got done telling a joke. Somewhere in the neighborhood of pretty. The way he tilts his head back and gazes out through half-open eyelids makes it seem like he's used to looking down on everyone, like he's smart and he knows he's smart, and then it hits me that what he really looks like is an asshole [sic].<sup>112</sup>

Jack tends to look at the world from a rather negative point of view and whenever something bad happens to him, he always sees it as a consequence of his disability, or as a consequence of his family situation. He does not have much hope for the future, he believes there is not much left for him after his studies. He is just trying to survive his high-school studies, seeing himself working alone or even being alone for the rest of his life.<sup>113</sup> Yet, at the end of the novel, we learn that Jack is able not only to recognise but also remember Libby's face without any identifiers.

This novel presents us with numerous themes, topics, or symbols such as family, trauma, fear, identity, dreams, love and loss, death, seeing another person, and relationships which are going to be discussed and analysed in detail in the following subchapters.

### **3.2.1. Family and relationships**

#### **3.2.1.1. Libby Strout**

Libby is growing up with her father as an only child. Such a family portrayal would not be unusual, as a large number of young adult novels present families with only one parent or protagonist being an only child,<sup>114</sup> or raised by just one of the parents.<sup>115</sup> However, in Libby's case it is a little bit different, and in addition to that, it is traumatic too. Libby's mother died when she was 10 years old. Thus, if we were to discuss whether such a family could be seen as functional or dysfunctional, according to McGraw-Hill Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine, single parenthood could be defined as a dysfunctional family.<sup>116</sup> In addition to that,

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<sup>112</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 25.

<sup>113</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 35.

<sup>114</sup> Bubíková,  *Úvod do studia dětství*, 67.

<sup>115</sup> Avery, "The family story," 457–458.

<sup>116</sup> McGraw-Hill Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine, "Dysfunctional families."

Spears sees such an event as an example of a life circumstance that leads to a family being possibly labeled as dysfunctional.<sup>117</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that Libby's father is portrayed as supportive, kind, and loving, always being there for Libby when she needs, and being his major priority,<sup>118</sup> Strout's family could still be seen through experts' eyes as dysfunctional due to single parenthood. Libby's father cares about Libby and Libby has a happy relationship with him as could be noticed in her description: "My dad is a big, handsome guy. Salt of the earth. Smart (he does IT security for a big-name computer company). Smushy heart."<sup>119</sup>

He supports his child and is always present during crucial moments of Libby's life to make sure she can rely on him. One such moment could be found at the beginning of the novel when Libby decides to go back to school after several years of home-schooling. He is aware of the fact that this experience must be unpleasant for his daughter, therefore he explains that she does not have to do this for him - the only person she is doing this for is herself. He encourages her to give it at least a try and if it will not work, they can always go back to home-schooling.<sup>120</sup>

As the story develops, his behaviour, character and priorities remain the same. He is always interested in Libby's life, asking her how she is doing or what is new at school, patiently listening to her stories, troubles, or fears and supporting her dreams. Regardless of his care, he is seen by others as the one who does not care about his daughter, especially about her health status. He is believed to be the reason why Libby gained so much weight:

After they freed me from the house, he had a hard time of it. As awful as it was for me, I think it was worse for him, especially the accusations of neglect and abuse. The press couldn't imagine how else I would have been allowed to get so big. They didn't know about the doctors he took me to and the diets we tried, even as he was mourning the loss of his wife. They didn't see the food I hid from him under my bed and deep in the shadows of my closet. They couldn't know that once I make up my mind about something, I'm going to do it. And I'd made up my mind to eat. At first, I refused to talk to reporters, but at some point I needed to show the world that I'm okay and that my dad isn't the villain they made him out to be, stuffing me with candy and cake in an effort to keep me there and dependent on him.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>118</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>119</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 28.

<sup>120</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 30.

<sup>121</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 28–29.

It was not only the press that accused her father of Libby's overweight. Libby received numerous hate letters saying: "*it is disgusting that anyone would ever let themselves get so large, and it is disgusting that your father wouldn't do anything about it.*"<sup>122</sup> Nonetheless, as the story develops, there are no moments where it is depicted how her father felt about this or would express any opinion or thought. He simply does not discuss this topic in front of Libby.

Though, it turns out Libby is later on faced with the reality because she realises how her dad could have felt during all those years. Libby has her moments when she does not want to open up even to her dad and rather prefers to leave some questions unanswered, leaving her dad unaware of her fears, thoughts, or even questions that run through her mind. At one particular moment, Libby realises her dad is all she has, and she is tired of pretending everything is fine. Thus, she decides to open up to him and tells him about everything that is going on in her life. Moreover, she even tells him the other things she stopped telling him a while ago.<sup>123</sup>

As Libby talks, her dad is pacing and listening to her, and as soon as she stops talking, he says that he needs to know she is fine, and Libby promises she will always from now on and apologises to him:

"I'm sorry. For everything I put you through." I can tell he knows I'm talking about everything, not just tonight. "I'm sorry too, Libbs." And it hits me square in the face. All the grief my dad has taken and swallowed and carried—not just the loss of my mom, but the loss of compassion from the people who blamed him for what happened to me. If he got mad, I never saw it. He just carries on, making sure I eat healthy, trying to keep me safe and feeling loved. And then, maybe to prove there are no secrets between us, he tells me about the woman he's been seeing off and on for a while. [...] He didn't want to tell me because he's not sure where this will lead or what their relationship means, and he wants to be careful with me, with her. But I think really he just didn't want me to feel bad about being the only one in the world who hadn't moved on. I say this to him now, and he takes my hand. "It's not moving on, Libbs. It's moving differently. That's all it is. Different life. Different world. Different rules. We don't ever leave that old world behind. We just create a new one."<sup>124</sup>

At that particular moment, it does not matter whether the family is complete or not and how other people perceive such a family or the parent. What remains important is the fact that Libby and her dad achieved creating a strong nuclear family bond. Such a bond could be assumed to become deeper and to last longer than non-familiar bonds.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, the father

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<sup>122</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 38.

<sup>123</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 382.

<sup>124</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 382–383.

<sup>125</sup> Cecil and Roberts,  *Families*, xii.

and his daughter achieved the goal of not only holding onto the values of cooperation, caring, and support, but also having them in common.<sup>126</sup>

Through Libby's flashbacks we learn that Libby had a close relationship with her mom as a child, they used to spend a lot of time together. It could be observed that she was attached to her mum and now that she is gone, from time to time, especially when Libby is suffering from her anxiety, she thinks about her mom, being afraid that perhaps heaven might not exist and thus she might not be able to see her ever again.<sup>127</sup> In contrast, when Libby feels happy and calm and wants to relax and connect with her mum, she throws on one of her mother's albums and dances. Dancing is her passion, dancing is what brings her joy, besides that, dancing is what she is planning to do with her life.<sup>128</sup>

As a matter of fact, Libby claims she has never had a best friend except for her mom, unless those she made up in her mind as her friends could be counted too.<sup>129</sup> Being a child, her mum used to tell her stories, cheer her up, teach her how to swim, and support Libby in her dreams. Her mum believed that every situation or problem can be looked at from two completely different points of view and she wanted her daughter to keep that in her mind.<sup>130</sup> In every single depiction, she is portrayed as a joyful woman, with a positive mindset, cheering everybody up as Libby notes: "mom always did that—made things nicer than they were."<sup>131</sup>

One could assume that Libby's family used to be a happy one before the traumatic event, although it could not be exactly concluded from the story as the reader is not directly told. But if we were to look at this family from Avery's point of view, such a family depiction could be compared to those that were commonly depicted in American books in the last century – "a complete family where the mother holds the home together."<sup>132</sup> Yet, the family is not complete anymore. The mother's death was sudden and unexpected with traumatic consequences for its family members.

### 3.2.1.2. Jack Masselin

In comparison, Jack, the second main character of the novel, lives with his parents and two younger brothers. In the novel, there are a few occasional references to race and skin colour.

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<sup>126</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>127</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 23.

<sup>129</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 30.

<sup>130</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 124.

<sup>131</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 66.

<sup>132</sup> Avery, "The family story," 454.

“Technically, Mom is half black, half Louisiana Creole, and Dad is white and Jewish.”<sup>133</sup> It is also noted that Dusty, the youngest son, has the darkest skin, and “his hair is the color of copper penny.”<sup>134</sup> Jack, the oldest son and the second main character, has dark skin as well and afro hair. Marcus, the middle son, “on the other hand, couldn’t be whiter.”<sup>135</sup> Such a portrayal of a family could be labelled as the portrayal of today’s family as some of the members are of a different colour.<sup>136</sup>

Nevertheless, neither is this family perfect despite its completeness. But to begin with the family’s strengths; it could be noticed that Jack has a happy and strong relationship with his younger brother Dusty. In their free time, they like to spend time together. Jack enjoys constructing robots, especially for Dusty, and in exchange, he is always excited to get one from his oldest brother and play with them. Jack loves to build robots as it gives him freedom to do something on his own, something that does not acquire any particular instructions or rules because he claims that those robots which are for Dusty simply do not need any instructions as “he deserves something original that has never been created before.”<sup>137</sup> Another reason behind this hobby is the fact that Jack tends to imagine he is able to give the robot “a good brain. A complete, fully functioning, normal, regular brain.”<sup>138</sup> Thus, he can later on program it, and it would function normally without any problems or disabilities. Unlike him and his prosopagnosia.

Jack and Dusty also like to talk about the process of building a robot, its parts, or components. Yet they do not mind talking about random topics, or everyday life too. They are open to one another, sharing their worries and uncertainties.<sup>139,140</sup> Yet, Jack is always hiding his disability away from Dusty. Jack and Marcus have a happy relationship as well, despite the fact from time to time it did not used to be like this when they were children as Jack hated taking care of him or watching him.<sup>141</sup> They do not mind talking about their everyday lives, especially when Jack is giving a ride to his younger siblings to school. However, their conversations are not so open like those with Dusty and they do not spend much free time together.

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<sup>133</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 33.

<sup>134</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 33.

<sup>135</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 33.

<sup>136</sup> Cecil and Roberts,  *Families*, xii.

<sup>137</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 220.

<sup>138</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 220.

<sup>139</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 83.

<sup>140</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 249.

<sup>141</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 249–250.

Similarly, the same could be said about Jack's relationship with his mother. It is obvious that Jack likes his mother and also his father, yet it is noticeable he likes his mother more:<sup>142</sup> "for all their faults, my parents are good people. Okay, Mom more so than Dad."<sup>143</sup> The possible reason behind this statement could be seen in his father's infidelity, which Jack knows about. Thus, when he sees his mother worried or not feeling well, he can easily sympathise with her and show her his understanding and sympathies; he hugs her and kisses her on the cheek.<sup>144</sup>

Though, when it comes to communication, Jacks struggles to open up to his mother and from time to time tends to make up lies and excuses instead of speaking the truth.<sup>145</sup> His mother cares<sup>146</sup> about him and her sons in general; she asks them about school, their lives or possible problems all the time. She wants to know what her children are doing or if there is something that could possibly worry them.<sup>147</sup> His mother is strong, trying to do her best for her family, not letting anyone down, always having her family as the number one priority.<sup>148, 149</sup> Still, she can be vulnerable at some moments, especially when she cries about her husband's cancer, thinking no one sees her.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, she has no idea about her oldest son being unable to recognise anyone's face, he is keeping his secret away from her, yet she notices he has been behaving in a strange and different way recently.<sup>151</sup> Although Jack wants to tell her, it takes him a lot of time and courage to do so.

Jack's father, Nate Masselin was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago. Although he has managed to get over this illness and is now free of cancer, Jack assumes that his illness changed everything. He claims that a couple of years ago, his parents used to get along pretty well, but since the diagnosis they do not have such a close relationship<sup>152</sup> and they fight.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, Jack notes that "*there's just this shit [sic] happening at home,*"<sup>154</sup> stressing that this life challenge has not been easy for any of the family members, especially for Dusty, who is ten.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 312.

<sup>143</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 92.

<sup>144</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 216.

<sup>145</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 297.

<sup>146</sup> Avery, "The family story," 454.

<sup>147</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 216.

<sup>148</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 311–312.

<sup>149</sup> Cecil and Roberts,  *Families*, xii.

<sup>150</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 51.

<sup>151</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 216.

<sup>152</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 311.

<sup>153</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 283.

<sup>154</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 24.

<sup>155</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 32.

As it was already stated, Jack knows about his dad cheating on his mother. He found out accidentally, the week before his father was diagnosed with cancer.<sup>156</sup> It happened when his younger brother Dusty saw a text on his father's phone saying it is from Monica, wondering why it says it is from Monica when their mother's name is Sarah. Moreover, this phone was not his regular phone, he bought it to text with his lover who turned out to be a teacher at Jack's school.<sup>157</sup> Jack keeps this finding away from everyone, not being sure whether his mother knows about her husband's infidelity or not. This dilemma confronts Jack all the time until one day, he cannot handle it anymore and simply opens one of Monica's e-mails to his father and replies to it in the name of his father.<sup>158</sup> Obviously, the father finds out and wants to talk to Jack about this issue:

“You shouldn't have gone into my email. I'm sorry you saw what you thought you saw, but there's the matter of respecting my privacy. There's more to it than you know, so what you read there—it's out of context. But I'm sorry.” He says it nicely because Nate Masselin is a nice guy and it's important for him to be liked, especially post-cancer. I can tell he's waiting for me to forgive him and move on the way everyone else does, and that pisses me off. I take my time brushing, rinsing, wiping my mouth on a towel. Finally, I look at him. I'm taller than he is by a good inch, not counting my lion fro. I say, “You can't use cancer as an excuse for shittiness [sic] anymore.”<sup>159</sup>

Moreover, almost at the end of the novel, all their children are confronted with the reality that their parents' relationship is not what it used to be like:

Marcus, Dusty, and I sit on the couch side by side. Mom is opposite us on the ottoman that's the size of a small boat. She leans forward, hands on her knees as if she might leap up at any minute. Dad clears his throat. “Your mom and I love each other very much. And we love you. The three of you are our life, and we'd never do anything to hurt you.” He goes on like this for a while, all about how much he loves us and how he's lucky to have such a great, supportive family, how we were all there for him when he was sick, and he can never tell us what that means to him. Finally, Dusty raises his hand and goes, “Are you getting divorced?” [...] Mom says, “Your father and I think it's best to separate for a little while. We need to work on some things in our marriage, but those issues have nothing to do with you.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 32.

<sup>157</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 56.

<sup>158</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 176.

<sup>159</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 179.

<sup>160</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 349–350.

Notably, for some of the already mentioned issues and influences, Masselin's family could be labelled as dysfunctional. Firstly, it can be observed that some of the family members struggle to communicate with one another.<sup>161</sup> This is especially true for the parents, arguments, and Jack, in the way that he sometimes communicates with his parents, or perhaps better said does not communicate the whole truth or point in given situations.<sup>162,163,164</sup> Secondly, as Spears notes, Jack's father's illness and stress, either from his father or other family members, is very closely connected to his medical problem, and could definitely contribute to the dysfunction of their family.<sup>165</sup>

Thirdly, Jack claims that his parents have high expectations of him "for whatever reason everyone expects Great Things from Jack."<sup>166</sup> When Jack takes part in the "Fat Girl Rodeo"<sup>167</sup> game and his parents find out, his father tells him: "Your mother and I are disappointed in you."<sup>168</sup> Such a claim would not necessarily have been seen as unusual, as parents want to teach their children to be good people. Nonetheless, as experts of the King University and Spears claim, "perfectionism can be another obstacle, when one of the parents can be perfectionists having high expectations for children or other family members."<sup>169,170</sup>

Lastly, due to the circumstances of the father's cancer in which Masselin's family found themselves, such a life event could contribute to dysfunction too.<sup>171</sup> Not only are the parents unable to maintain harmonious relationships anymore, but they are just about to get separated for some time as well. Moreover, it is not explicitly stated how this particular complication was sorted out – whether they got divorced or whether they managed to improve and continue their relationship as a married couple.

Finally, in Spears' article, she mentions several common roles that could be observed in dysfunctional families. Jack could be defined as what she calls a "mascot,"<sup>172</sup> as revealed by Jack saying: "this is the price I pay for trying to keep everyone happy."<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, he

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<sup>161</sup> King University, "Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families."

<sup>162</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 297–298.

<sup>163</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 82.

<sup>164</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 216.

<sup>165</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>166</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 81

<sup>167</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 62.

<sup>168</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 110.

<sup>169</sup> King University, "Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families."

<sup>170</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>171</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>172</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>173</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 24.



could be defined as a so-called “enabler or caretaker,”<sup>174</sup> as he tries to keep the family going regardless of the presence of his father’s medical problems or infidelity. The same could be said about his mother.

### 3.2.2. Trauma

*Holding Up the Universe*  depicts realistic experiences of bullying and traumatic experiences as well as their consequences. Libby Strout, one of the main protagonists, is a victim of bullying, as well as of trauma, both of which could be said to lead into Libby developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. When Libby was ten years old, her mother died. Her death was sudden, shocking, and unexpected.

I was in fifth grade, in the middle of a school assembly, when the principal found me and led me out of the auditorium in front of everyone. She took me to the office, where my dad was waiting along with a school counselor. A big box of Kleenex sat on the corner of the principal’s desk, and that was what I focused on. It was such a big box, as if they’d created it especially for that moment. “*Your mom is in the hospital and we have to leave now.*” “*What do you mean?*”<sup>175</sup>

Shortly after her mother’s death, she was bullied by a group of children, who she refers to in the novel as “Moses Hunt”<sup>176</sup> because that is the name of the boy who initiated this unfortunate situation. These children verbally bullied her because of her physical appearance by creating a nickname for her “*No one will ever love you because you’re fat! [...] You’re so big you block the moon. Go home, Flabby Stout, go home to your room,*”<sup>177</sup> as well as this, they pried on her mother’s sudden death.

Moses steps in front of me. “*Go home, Flabby Stout ...*” I step the other way, and he blocks my path again. So now I move toward the jungle gym, where I can sit in peace, but he says, “I can’t let you do that. You might break it.” “I won’t break it. I’ve been on it before.” “But you might. Your flab has probably cracked the foundation. The next time you go on it, I bet that whole thing’ll collapse. Maybe the playground too. You’re probably cracking it right now just standing here. You probably killed your mom by sitting on her.” The boys die over and over. One of them rolls along the ground, hooting his face off.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>175</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 102.

<sup>176</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 22.

<sup>177</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 22.

<sup>178</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe* , 73.

Despite the fact that as a child Libby had only one friend, Bailey, the one that she eventually claims to be an actual friend, not the one she would make up, Bailey did not help her whenever she was bullied. Although Libby needed her to help her, she pretended that nothing was going on, especially during those moments when Libby was bullied by the group of children or decided to run away.<sup>179</sup>

As a consequence of bullying, Libby develops PTSD symptoms, eventually re-experiencing all the traumatic events through various flashbacks as well as through repetitive images.<sup>180</sup>

It's 6:33 a.m. and I am out of bed and standing in front of the mirror. There was a time, a little over two years ago, when I couldn't, wouldn't look at myself. All I saw was the bunched-up face of Moses Hunt, yelling at me across the playground: *No one will ever love you because you're fat!* And the faces of all the other fifth graders as they started to laugh. *You're so big you block the moon. Go home, Flabby Stout, go home to your room....*<sup>181</sup>

Consequently, Libby developed panic attacks whenever she had to leave her house. These panic attacks were often followed by anxiety, as Libby refused to go anywhere, even to school and prefers to stay home, being isolated as well as undergoing home-schooling. To overcome her fears, stress, and anxiety, Libby eats a lot, yet this is not a solution to her problems. They are not solved, instead Libby gains so much weight that when once she has one of her panic attacks, her father was not able to help her and she had to be rescued from their house by professionals.

Besides her social isolation and re-experiencing of the traumatic events, Libby occasionally has trouble falling asleep: "It is 3:38 a.m., and the time of night when my mind starts running around all wild and out of control, like my cat, George, when he was a kitten. All of a sudden, there goes my brain, climbing the curtains. There it is, swinging from the bookshelf. There it is, with its paw in the fish tank and its head underwater,"<sup>182</sup> or uses violence as a way to escape.

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<sup>179</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 68.

<sup>180</sup> Giller, "What is Psychological Trauma?"

<sup>181</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 22.

<sup>182</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 18.

During the first days of school, Libby becomes a victim and at the same time the “prize”<sup>183</sup> of the so-called game “Fat Girl Rodeo.”<sup>184</sup> During this cruel game, Jack's friends grab and hold onto fat girls. Jack decided to stop the game by grabbing Libby and holding onto her. When Jack holds onto Libby, she is shocked and blown away, yet she manages to pull herself together, pushes Jack off and punches him in his face. After this incident, Libby runs away to hide and isolate herself inside the girls' bathroom where she locks herself and decides to vandalise the toilet door. She decides to write things she heard other students saying about her shortly after the incident. As well as this, she adds in “one or two other lines, the meanest things I can think of, so that I don't have to hear it from anyone else. I write it so they don't have to.”<sup>185</sup>

Libby reaches up her arm and writes as large as she can so that everyone would see it „*Libby Strout is fat. Fat and ugly. She will never get laid. No one will ever love her. [...] Libby Strout is so fat they had to destroy her house to get her out. [...] Libby Strout is the fattest teen in America. Libby Strout is a liar.*”<sup>186</sup>

Besides the already mentioned factors, Libby suffers from depression, feeling hopeless and restless. Libby feels restless especially during her first day of school, she is worried about the school, about her acceptance by other students, about her survival as well. She does not trust the new environment being a safe place.<sup>187</sup> “My brain goes zooming up the wall, where it hangs, shaking. *What if it never happens? What if you die before anything good or wonderful or amazing ever happens to you?* For the past two and a half years, the only thing I've had to worry about has been my survival. The focus of every single person in my life, including me, has been: *We just need to get you better.*”<sup>188</sup>

Moreover, her mother's death has been so traumatic for her that she is worried about her survival, as she was told by a nurse after her mother's death that her mother died because of cerebral hemorrhage in the right hemisphere of her brain. Furthermore, the nurse said that this uncontrolled bleeding in the brain can run in families, and from then on Libby was convinced that the same is going to happen to her one day too. Frequently, she checks on her heart rate or wonders about her life or thinks about death. The day when her mother died, Libby went to bed thinking: “*Last night she was here. This morning she was here. Now she's gone,*

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<sup>183</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 86.

<sup>184</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 62.

<sup>185</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 66.

<sup>186</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 65–66.

<sup>187</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

<sup>188</sup> Niven, *Holding Up the Universe*, 23.

*and not for a few days, but forever. How can something so final happen in an instant? No preparation. No warning. No chance to do all the things you planned to do. No chance to say goodbye.*<sup>189</sup>

On her journey, Libby receives several treatments. At first, as she claims, her father is always there for her, the one who stands by her, always prepared to help her whenever she needs.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, she received medical treatment due to her mental health issues and eating disorder. She meets with her counsellor, who helps her to talk her through her dilemmas and worries, and after the incident with Jack during the Fat Girl Rodeo game, both of them are assigned to attend counselling in the school's Conversation Circle.

Yet after all, when she returns back to school it is obvious that she has changed both mentally and physically. She lost her weight, despite the fact that her classmates still do not see her as pretty and skinny, and had the chance to think a lot about herself, her life and her dreams while she was in hospital, home alone or when she underwent different therapies. She is determined to live her life to the fullest and make her dreams come true. Despite her breakdowns, she takes things seriously and shows signs of progress. She pursues her dreams in the best possible way, she focuses on what she loves, dancing, as she submits her application form for the school dance team and proudly does her audition not caring about her weight at all, as she claims that dancing is her passion and dream, and no one is ever going to take it away from her. She even starts her own dance club, taking in anyone who cannot or does not want to be part of the school dance team.<sup>191</sup>

Furthermore, Libby fights for herself and her acceptance, after finding several rude letters in her locker. She is determined to handle this situation on her own. One day, she decides to write "I'm wanted"<sup>192</sup> on her belly and shortly after her swimming class, she proudly stands in the middle of the school hallway, wearing only an electric purple bikini. While everyone gathers around her and stares at her, she hands out copies of her short piece of writing in which she criticises those who told her she is unwanted arguing that she is wanted by her family and friends.

As it is seen from the already stated examples, Libby was determined and persistent in order to get mentally better and showed signs of improvement. Her symptoms decreased as the story winds on, and surprisingly they were slowly left unnoticeable by the end of the story. Not

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<sup>189</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 189

<sup>190</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 29.

<sup>191</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 336

<sup>192</sup> Niven,  *Holding Up the Universe*, 321.

only that, Libby worked more on her relationship with her father, to get even better and more open, and on the relationship with herself too. She accepted herself and became proud of who she was and what she stands for.<sup>193, 194</sup>

### **3.3.Far from the Tree**

This young adult fiction presents its audience with three main characters: Grace who is 16 years old, Maya who is 15 years old, and Joaquin who is 17 years old. All the characters were given up for adoption as children, either immediately after they were born or as a toddler. All the characters are aware of this decision made by their biological parents.

This novel is written in a shifting third-person narration through the eyes of the three main characters, taking equal turns according to their chapter, to share their stories and thoughts. For Benway's selection of the third-person narration, it could be assumed that the narration is not biased, nor judgmental, but rather deeply empathetic, as is going to be illustrated further in detail in the following subchapters. Grace's passages centre around her pregnancy, adoption of the baby, the relationship with Peach, her own adoption, bullying, and retelling the experiences of her siblings through conversations with her new friend Rafe.

In comparison, Maya's passages centre around different negative issues, such as frustration, rage, her mother's alcoholism and her feeling of being a misfit of not belonging to her own family. In Joaquin's passages, his themes centre around fear of abandonment, traumatic experiences from the past in foster homes, or even violence. The shifts of characters and chapters help readers to see and understand adoption, foster care, and issues that are connected to these processes from different perspectives and points of view. Moreover, the reader is better able to create a complex picture of this process. As Ellen Singer, LCSW-C, senior adoption-competent therapist notices, Benway did careful research for her novel.

Those with little or no connection to foster care or adoption get an authentic peek into the complex themes of this experience, which can correct myths and misperceptions. [...] Common sense media recommends the book for ages 13 and up. I personally recommend that all prospective parents read this to understand the journey they are considering, and all foster or adoptive parents read it to understand their teens. Family members of birth parents should read this as well.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 111.

<sup>194</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 33 – 35.

<sup>195</sup> Ellen Singer, LCSW-C, "BOOK REVIEW: Far From the Tree: What Does It Mean to be a Family," review of *Far From the Tree* by Robin Benway, *Center for adoption, support and education*.

This novel is closely connected with this main topic, as it asks a crucial question from its very beginning, better said from its book cover: “What does it mean to be a family?” Even the name of the novel carries an underlying meaning that is connected to its central themes – family and adoption. The word *Tree* in its name could be seen as a family unit and the phrase *far away* could possibly carry a connection, or a hidden meaning linked to adoption and foster care, or moreover a connection to abandonment. As well as this, the novel is divided into two parts. The majority of chapters belong to a part named *Falling*, and the rest, the last three chapters, are equally divided into Grace, Maya and Joaquin, belong to a part called *Landing*.

The name of the first part could be significant because of the negative issues and concerns that are closely connected to the process of adoption, foster care, as well as family, relationships, or the past. Through another perspective, it could be compared to leaves which fall from trees during fall. Such a process could eventually signify the end of one stage in a life cycle, followed by new beginnings during spring. The second part signifies the process after the road trip when the characters come to the conclusion of belonging to a family, when they let love come into their lives. As explained by Cambridge dictionary, to land, besides all the other definitions, can mean “to get or achieve something good, especially in a way that seems easy or unexpected.”<sup>196</sup>

Furthermore, it could be obviously argued that this novel presents a young adult audience with heavy topics. For many teenagers it could be fearful to imagine being pregnant at such an early age, having their parents get divorced, or even imagine what it is like to live without any parents at all, or to feel abandoned, rejected, and unloved by their family. Some of the readers claim that given passages made them cry.<sup>197</sup> Yet on the other hand, it can be noticed that Benway managed to use humour throughout the novel to cheer her readers and lighten up the story.<sup>198</sup> The same could be true for Maya’s passages, because as it was already mentioned, she likes to be sarcastic, thus if a reader has the same sense of humour, they are going to be amused even more. For example, when Maya and Grace meet for the first time, this experience is stressful for them, yet Maya manages to lighten up the situation by making fun of it: “Can

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<sup>196</sup> “Land,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/land>.

<sup>197</sup> “Far From the Tree: Kinde edition,” Amazon, accessed April 12, 2021,

[https://www.amazon.com/Far-Tree-Robin-Benway-ebook/dp/B01NCTHS0L/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=WX50Y4W6Z52C&dchild=1&keywords=far+from+the+tree+robin+benway&qid=1619280740&s=digital-text&srefix=Far+from+the+tree+robi%2Cdigital-text%2C281&sr=1-1#customerReviews](https://www.amazon.com/Far-Tree-Robin-Benway-ebook/dp/B01NCTHS0L/ref=sr_1_1?crid=WX50Y4W6Z52C&dchild=1&keywords=far+from+the+tree+robin+benway&qid=1619280740&s=digital-text&srefix=Far+from+the+tree+robi%2Cdigital-text%2C281&sr=1-1#customerReviews).

<sup>198</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 49.

Grace and I be excused?” she asked. “We have, like, fifteen years of bonding to catch up on.”<sup>199</sup> Moreover, all the individual stories at the end are beautifully tied up to a happy end.

Not only does this novel feature shifts in narration, but it features changes in time as well. During several flashbacks of each character, more details are revealed about their childhood, relationship with their adoptive or foster parents, or traumatic experiences from the past. Yet, considering the setting of the story, it is never properly revealed. It could be assumed that the story is set in America as the novel is written in American English and all characters use this particular variety of English language to communicate with others. At one particular moment, Benway makes a reference to a city in Los Angeles County, Pomona, when talking about Joaquin's past. Yet, it is not revealed whether the protagonists and their families are living in this city or anywhere close to it.<sup>200</sup> From the context, it could be also noticed that the story is set in an area that is populated and developed. Nevertheless, any particular name of a city, region or country is never revealed, nor any clues. Moreover, it is not said whether Benway has done this intentionally or not.

The language that has been used is informal, with frequent usage of vulgar words, which can be observed especially in the communication between teenagers. Similarly, Benway uses italics, all capital letters, or either words or sentences written in bold like Niven does in her novel, yet the amount and its frequency is far less common. Mostly, she uses italics for emphasis or for thoughts of individual characters.<sup>201, 202, 203</sup> Interestingly, what could be frequently observed in her novel is the usage of names of either movies, TV shows, series, or books, particularly, when one of the characters compares another character to either someone to a particular movie or series, or when one of the main characters compares life of the other to a life of somebody from the given movie, series, show, or book.

For instance, when Grace and Maya's families meet for the first time, Maya's mother introduces Maya's sister to everyone, and Grace begins to reflect on that. “Lauren smiled and Grace smiled back. Lauren was so obviously biological that it was ridiculous. Grace wondered what that was like, living in a house where the other three inhabitants looked nothing like you, like you were in a forever game of One of These Things Is Not Like the Other.”<sup>204</sup> She eventually made a reference to a song from *Sesame Street*.

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<sup>199</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 37.

<sup>200</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 180.

<sup>201</sup> Ignited Ink Writing, “How to use Italics in Creative Writing: Thoughts.”

<sup>202</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 228.

<sup>203</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 9.

<sup>204</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 34.

Benway's novel could be claimed to be indeed a realistic novel which succeeded to portray all the characters in a realistic way with realistic feelings and motivation. As Benway mentions in her acknowledgment "and finally, thank you to Joaquin, Grace, and Maya. I've spent more time with them than with any of my other characters, and even though they may be fictional, their struggles and triumphs feel so very real to me. I am endlessly grateful that they chose me to tell their story, and I hope they're doing well, wherever they may be."<sup>205</sup> *Far from the Tree* presents numerous themes and topics such as family, trauma, fear, identity, violence, love, loss, drugs, alcohol, inadequacy, abandonment, and relationships which are going to be discussed and analysed further in detail in the following subchapters.

### **3.3.1. Family and relationships**

#### **3.3.1.1. Grace**

Grace lives with her parents as an only child. She was adopted as a baby, shortly after she was born. Grace's relationship with her parents could be seen as harmonious and open. Her adoptive parents have from a young age been open towards her about her adoption, telling her whenever she would like to know any information about her biological mother or family, they would be happy to tell her everything they know.<sup>206</sup> It was sort of an agreement they had. Yet on the other hand, "they didn't really talk about it, either. It just *was*."<sup>207</sup>

Grace's mother is portrayed as the one who supports her no matter what the current situation may be like. She is always there for her whenever something unexpected or hideous happens, always prepared either to help her, talk to her, support her, pick her up, or listen to her.<sup>208</sup> As in the cases when she was pregnant, during the delivery, shortly after that, when she was bullied at school, or when Grace discovers about her siblings. She has a strong connection to her child, thus when she is confronted with the reality that one day she is eventually going to grow up and might move away and not be here anymore, she bursts into tears.<sup>209</sup>

When Grace was pregnant, her mother liked to watch her sleeping, Grace "pretended to not know she was there, and after a while, her mom would leave."<sup>210</sup> Besides, during the child's delivery "her mother held her hand and wiped her hair back from her sweaty forehead and didn't

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<sup>205</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 261.

<sup>206</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 13.

<sup>207</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 13.

<sup>208</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>209</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 70.

<sup>210</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 10.



mind that Grace kept calling her Mommy, like she had when she was four years old.”<sup>211</sup> Moreover, in one of her reflections she reminds herself “Grace remembered how tight her mom’s grip had been on her hand during her contractions, how she had never left Grace’s side, how her dad had watched Netflix for hours with her without saying a word.”<sup>212</sup>

Grace’s father never actually approved of her pregnancy. “He could barely look at Grace. She knew she had disappointed him, that even though he still loved her, Grace was a different person now, and she would never be the same Grace again. He must have felt like they swapped out his daughter for a new model (‘Now with baby inside!’), a Grace 2.0. Grace knew this because she felt the same way.”<sup>213</sup> Yet, he never said a single negative word or comment about this situation. After Grace’s parents found out about her pregnancy, they met with Max’s parents, who is the father of the baby. Although Max’s parents did not want to have anything to do with such a situation, Grace’s father was highly supportive of her and stood behind her. “Grace has a future, too”<sup>214</sup> he said to the other parents to let them know that their son is not the only one who has.

Both parents are portrayed as loving and strongly supportive of their child. During a therapist’s session when they found out about their daughter meeting up with a new boy, shortly after her pregnancy, they claim “whatever you need, Gracie. We’re always going to be there for you, no matter what.’ [...] ‘We’ve made a lot of mistakes, I think. But we love you more than anything. And God, Grace, we’re trying to make it better, but we don’t know how to fix you.”<sup>215</sup> Their family unit could be undoubtedly defined as a family, because as *APA Dictionary of Psychology* claims, family is “a kinship unit consisting of a group of individuals united by blood or by marital, adoptive, or other intimate ties.”<sup>216</sup>

Despite the parents’ unconditional love and support, this family has some issues that could contribute to the idea of being seen as a dysfunctional family. Grace claims she has never seen her parents argue, and if they did, it was always behind closed doors, “whatever battle they had smoothed over by the time the sun rose the next morning. She had never even heard them yell at each other.”<sup>217</sup> Yet, their communication lacks honesty.<sup>218</sup> Such a claim could be

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<sup>211</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 11

<sup>212</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 186.

<sup>213</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 10

<sup>214</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 31.

<sup>215</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 186

<sup>216</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology, “Family.”

<sup>217</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 130.

<sup>218</sup> King University, “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families.”

especially true for Grace, who struggles to open up to her parents, for example, she frequently lies to them about her friends, siblings or her feelings.<sup>219, 220, 221, 222</sup> She feels that it is better to keep the truth to herself.

Furthermore, she claims during the therapist's session that her parents do not talk to her enough about her adoption or biological mother

“Like they said that if I ever wanted to know about my adoption, that all I had to do was ask them. But why was that *my* responsibility? Why did I have to be the one who asked? Why couldn't they be the ones to tell me about it?” Grace's mom had tears in her eyes. “We just didn't want to give you too much information.” “No!” Grace cried. “You thought that if I knew about my biological mom, I would try to find her, and that scared the shit [sic] out of you.”<sup>223</sup>

Besides that, Grace has a feeling that her parents have a great tendency to control her,<sup>224</sup> or to pretend that nothing ever happened before. Through her eyes, it could be said that her parents take the role that Spears labels as “enabler or caretaker”<sup>225</sup> as they try to keep the family going regardless of any of the influences listed above, trying to protect the rest of the family<sup>226</sup>

“I'm not going to heal from this! You keep acting like I'm going to explode at any moment, and if you don't say anything long enough, that I'll forget about my baby”—the word got caught in her throat and she had to almost spit it out to get it out of her—“and it'll all be fine! That's what you always do! You pretend like something didn't happen, and then eventually, it's like no one remembers that it did happen. You did the same thing with me!”<sup>227</sup>

Grace claims that after her pregnancy, she lost all her friends.<sup>228</sup> Thus, whenever she feels the need to talk to anyone about her family, she talks to her biological siblings Maya and Joaquin. Or, when she needs to talk to someone about her baby or biological siblings, she often talks it through with her new friend Rafe. As Alston points out, in Grace's case she is still dependent on her family regardless of their imperfections.<sup>229</sup> She needs her siblings to help her

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<sup>219</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 33.

<sup>220</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 106.

<sup>221</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 128.

<sup>222</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 228.

<sup>223</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 185.

<sup>224</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 164–166.

<sup>225</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>226</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>227</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 185.

<sup>228</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 10.

<sup>229</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 2.

get over her dilemma as well as needing a friend who replaces family members in order to help her.<sup>230</sup>

It should be kept in mind that Grace and her adoptive parents do not form the one and only family unit that she would be part of. Eventually, she is part of two more families. The second one, that is created by her two biological siblings and their biological mother, and a third family that she forms with her baby, called ‘Peach’ by Grace or ‘Milly’ by her adoptive parents, and her biological father, Max. Moreover, this third family does not only consist of the three of them but of the adoptive parents as well. When thirty days passed after Milly’s birth, the adoption is official, therefore Grace can no longer claim any rights to Milly.<sup>231</sup> Thus, Milly and her adoptive parents officially form a family.<sup>232</sup> Yet deep in her heart, she is still strongly attached to her and cannot help herself from thinking about her.

However, the question remains: could the third family unit be seen as functional or dysfunctional? At the beginning of the novel, the audience is confronted with the fact that Milly’s biological father claims no rights to her.<sup>233</sup> Grace despises him for his decision and from then on, they are never able to communicate together anymore. Moreover, when Milly is born, Grace abandons her for a long period of time. It takes her a lot of courage and time to visit her and continue their relationship. During those harsh times, for the two reasons stated, the family unit could be viewed as dysfunctional, despite Milly’s adoptive parents providing her with true and unconditional love.<sup>234,235,236</sup>

### 3.3.1.2. Maya

In contrast, Maya, who was adopted shortly after her birth like Grace, lives with her adoptive parents, who three months later after her adoption found out they are about to have a baby, although it was assumed they would never be able to have a baby. That was the main reason why they adopted Maya, yet they were shortly after blessed with one more daughter, Lauren.<sup>237</sup> Similarly, to her sister Grace, Maya knew from an early age that she was adopted

In a family of redheads, that fact was pretty obvious. At night when Maya was little, in order to get her to sleep, her mom would tell the story of how they had

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<sup>230</sup> Russell, *Literature for Children*, 233.

<sup>231</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree, Far from the Tree*, 106.

<sup>232</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology, “Family.”

<sup>233</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 30–31.

<sup>234</sup> King University, “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families.”

<sup>235</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>236</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 107.

<sup>237</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 19–20.

brought her home from the hospital. She had heard it a thousand times, of course, but she always wanted it told again. Her mom was a good storyteller (she had been a radio DJ in college), and she'd always ham it up and do these big exaggerated gestures about how scared they were to put Maya in the car seat for the first time, and how Maya's parents had bought pretty much every single bottle of hand sanitizer that Costco had. But Maya's favorite part was always the ending. "And then," her mom would say, pulling the covers up over her and smoothing the blankets down, "you came home with us. Where you belong."<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, as she adds, her parents always wanted to talk about her adoption, especially when she was a child. Maya suspects that this was as a kind of prevention to make sure the parents would not mess her life up.<sup>239</sup>

From the excerpt above, it could be naturally assumed that the family should be happy without any flaws, with their home to be a happy place to live in. Despite the fact that Maya's parents love both their daughters, support them, provide them with great education by sending them to the best private school in the area,<sup>240</sup> and care about them, such an image is sometimes far from reality. When Maya and Lauren were little, their parents began to fight quite frequently. Maya claims she does not even remember a time when they would not fight. At first, when the sisters were little, it was done behind closed doors, however, "over the years, though, the quiet words became raised. Then came the shouting, and finally screaming. The screaming was the worst, shrill and high-pitched, the kind of noise that made you want to cover your ears and scream right back. Or run and hide."<sup>241</sup> She adds:

The fights were louder than ever. The fights were all the time. *You're always working! You're always working and you don't — For you! For the girls! For our family! Jesus Christ, you want everything and yet when I try to give it to you—* Maya was old enough to understand that a lot of those angry words had to do with the wine: a glass before dinner, two or three during dinner, and a fifth sloshed into the glass when Maya's dad was away on business. Maya never saw empty bottles lying in the recycling bin, and the pantry shelves always seemed to be stocked with unopened bottles, and she wondered who her mom was hiding the evidence from: her daughters, her husband, or herself. [...] But the wine only served to rev her parents up like cars before a race, gunning at each other until someone waved a flag and vroom! [...] It wasn't that their parents' fights got violent or anything like that; words could shatter harder than a glass breaking against a wall, hurt more than a fist plowing through teeth.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 19.

<sup>239</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 47.

<sup>240</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 38.

<sup>241</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 17.

<sup>242</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 18.

Deep in her heart, Maya truly loved her parents. As she says, her parents are good people minus “the wine, the fighting, the suffocating *adulthood* of kitchen renovations and mortgage payments.”<sup>243</sup> She is aware of the fact that they love her deeply and wholly, yet she has felt that she does not somehow belong to this family. As Koelling mentions, by the time a child reaches their teen years, they might examine the nature and design of their family, occasionally denying the reality, or looking for answers and meanings from within.<sup>244</sup> Apart from this, Maya is sure that since her parents are constantly fighting, she cannot fully trust their thoughts, or even them to be strong for her since “they could barely keep it together around each other – what sort of energy did they have left over for her?”<sup>245</sup>

Because of their parent’s constant arguments, Maya and Lauren are not sure from the very beginning of the story whether their parents would be able to fix their relationship or would eventually break up, which brought even more concerns to Maya about who would choose her to live with them. The question kept popping up in her head as she was not a biological daughter unlike Lauren.<sup>246</sup> Until a particular moment, when it happens that Lauren and Maya are told their parents are getting divorced. As both girls already expected the divorce to happen, for Maya it was not that much of a surprise.<sup>247</sup> Shortly after the announcement, their father moved away and both daughters continued to live with their mother in their family house.

As her parents were arguing a lot, it could be partly assumed there was poor communication. However, such a claim cannot be made certainly, as any precise or detailed information about the content of their arguments is not revealed. Maya only notes that the arguments usually follow a similar pattern which were easy to follow: “Maya was fairly certain she could even write out their dialogue for them. Once the yelling began, it was always about fifteen minutes until her mother accused her father of having an affair. Maya didn’t know if it was true or not, and honestly, she didn’t even really care that much. Let him, if it made him happy.”<sup>248</sup>

Yet, there is definitely poor communication between Maya and the rest of the family. Not only does Maya have trouble expressing herself, finding words, or opening up, even to her girlfriend. She either does not say anything or she lies. To illustrate that, when Maya found out

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<sup>243</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 20

<sup>244</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 59.

<sup>245</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 22.

<sup>246</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 23.

<sup>247</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 84.

<sup>248</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 18.

about her biological brother, shortly after she and Grace e-mailed him. Grace “didn’t tell her parents much about going to meet Joaquin, mostly because she didn’t want to answer questions about it. Her parents were super into discussing everything. It made Maya feel anxious, the way she was supposed to put her emotions into words, like it was an easy thing to do.”<sup>249</sup>

Maya does not have a harmonious relationship with her younger sister Lauren, although she has always felt the need to protect her younger sister. Moreover, she felt this need during their parents’ arguments, thus she would always turn the TV volume up, so that her sister did not hear all the noise and yelling.<sup>250</sup> Nevertheless, as well as feeling the need to be responsible for her sister, she also felt there was an obvious difference between them – Lauren was biological. As well as this, they usually do not get on well. As their mother notices, they are either best friends or enemies.<sup>251</sup>

Maya compares her sister to a smart kid that is always present in any class. The kid who knows the answers and who is always in charge of the classroom whenever a teacher needs to leave it for a while.<sup>252</sup> Besides that, Maya sometimes compares herself with her sister, claiming that Lauren is simply better and more loved.<sup>253</sup> Occasionally, they would have little fights as Maya noted: “Lauren had always been like this, explosive as a toddler, screaming tantrums when she didn’t get her way. [...] But when Lauren stormed out, Maya realized that she hadn’t left anything behind, and what used to feel like a victory now felt like a sad, hollow loss.”<sup>254</sup>

Surprisingly, throughout the harsh times, they both bonded together. For instance, when the parents’ fights got worse “the girls had slept in the same bed that night, something they hadn’t done since they were little.”<sup>255</sup> Or when their mother ended up in hospital “Maya pushed herself up off the ground and walked over to hug Lauren. They hung on tight to each other, longer than Maya had ever hugged Joaquin or Grace, and then let go. Lauren, who was almost a full head taller than Maya, patted her sister’s hair as she walked away.”<sup>256</sup>

As previously mentioned, Maya's family could be observed to have a problem with alcohol - her mother is an alcoholic. Though Maya and her sister knew that she occasionally

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<sup>249</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 22.

<sup>250</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 17.

<sup>251</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 36.

<sup>252</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 39.

<sup>253</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 82

<sup>254</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 170.

<sup>255</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 23.

<sup>256</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 150.

has a glass or two of wine, one day, they found all the bottles that were hidden away from everyone.

The wine bottle (or *bottles*, actually, but one of them hadn't been opened yet, so Maya decided that it didn't count) was wedged in the back of the closet, nestled into a pair of old boots that Maya thought would look spectacular on whoever played Marie Antoinette. [...] Maya looked at it for a long minute before reaching into the other boot and pulling out a half-full bottle of red zinfandel. It was cheap—Maya could tell by the label—which for some reason upset her even more. [...] The two sisters stood across from each other for a long few seconds before Lauren finally walked into the room. “There’s another bottle downstairs in that old Crock-Pot,” she said. [...] “Do you think Dad knows?” Maya asked. “No,” Lauren replied. “Dad travels. He’s not looking in Mom’s boots during his free time.”<sup>257</sup>

Unfortunately, their mother did not manage to handle her addiction on her own and continued to drink until one day was found lying on the floor in the bathroom, with blood coming from her head.<sup>258</sup> She was taken to hospital and immediately afterwards to rehab with “her head bandaged, her hands shaking.”<sup>259</sup> Yet, it is not stated in the novel when exactly the mother started drinking, or for how long she has been addicted to alcohol. Besides alcohol, there are also drugs mentioned in the novel as Maya likes to smoke weed either with her girlfriend or on her own.<sup>260,261</sup> Luckily, she does so only occasionally, therefore no addiction could be observed in her case.

For all the reasons stated; lack of communication, or ineffective communication, addiction to alcohol, parents’ fights, and divorce, which is closely connected to stress, it could be obviously claimed that Maya’s family is portrayed as dysfunctional.<sup>262, 263</sup> As for the roles observed within this dysfunctional family, Maya could fit into the role that Spears calls “scapegoat or troublemaker,”<sup>264</sup> who may have a tendency to break rules in society or within the family, become angry and rebellious, and often sacrifices to maintain the family structure.<sup>265</sup> Maya does not necessarily break rules all the time, only rarely, but she is definitely rebellious,

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<sup>257</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 82.

<sup>258</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 144

<sup>259</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 167.

<sup>260</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 150–151.

<sup>261</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 47.

<sup>262</sup> King University, “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families.”

<sup>263</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>264</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>265</sup> Spears, “Dysfunctional Family.”

trying to be different, being gay, or smoking weed. Yet, it is her responsibility to protect and take care of her family, especially her younger sister, even when it is falling apart as well as being concerned about her biological siblings and their concerns.

### 3.3.1.3. Joaquin

Joaquin is the only one who had not been adopted as a child and spent his entire childhood with different foster parents in different places. As Joaquin says, the foster homes and parents had been both good and bad throughout the times.<sup>266</sup> At one point in his childhood, he was eventually adopted by one family, yet this adoption did not last long and he was shortly after returned back to a group home. Right now, he has been living with another foster family for almost two years. Mark and Linda, the fosters, cannot have children, thus they decided to foster Joaquin. They truly and deeply love him, they even offered him an adoption process. As Joaquin notes, he loves them too, they “are good people. [...] Linda had taught him how to drive on their ancient minivan, ignoring the small dent that Joaquin had put in the back passenger-side door; Mark had taken him to six baseball games last summer, where they sat next to each other and watched the games in silence, nodding in agreement whenever the ump made the right call.”<sup>267</sup>

Joaquin’s foster parents are depicted in the best possible way. Throughout the novel, there is no single moment where they would be depicted in any negative way. They are portrayed as loving and caring parents, whose highest priority is family, including Joaquin. They always want the best for him, supporting him in his decisions and steps he takes in his life, ready to talk to him whenever he needs it or cheer him up in case he is upset. Moreover, they do not forget to remind him how much they love him as well as the fact that they implicitly trust him.<sup>268</sup> As they admit “we love you so much, Joaquin [...] you . . . Feel like our son; we can’t imagine making it permanent.”<sup>269</sup>

Yet, for all the terrible and traumatic consequences of his childhood and experience with foster care and adoption, Joaquin's attitude towards them is a little bit distant despite liking them. Joaquin has trouble to truly open up to them, to talk about his feelings or emotions, he struggles to feel a part of their family, calling Linda and Mark by their names, not as Mum and Dad, furthermore, he “still hadn’t and still didn’t think of it as ‘my house’ or even ‘our house,’

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<sup>266</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 25.

<sup>267</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 24.

<sup>268</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 123.

<sup>269</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 26–27.



just ‘their house.’ It was okay, though, because it was still a nice house. It didn’t have to be his for him to like living there.”<sup>270</sup> As revealed by him,

he had never called anyone Mom or Dad. It was either first names or, in some of the stricter homes, Mr. and Mrs. Somebody or Other. There were no grandparents, no aunts or uncles or cousins like other foster kids sometimes had. And the truth was that he wanted to call Linda and Mark Mom and Dad. He wanted it so bad that he could feel the unspoken words sear his throat. It would be so easy to just say it, to make them happy, to finally be the kid with a mom and dad who kept him.<sup>271</sup>

As previously mentioned, Joaquin's communication with his foster parents is portrayed as poor. Not necessarily every single instance, but for most of the conversations such a claim is true, as it takes Joaquin almost the whole novel to open up to his foster parents or share with them how he really feels and what he is going through. Instead, many times he opts for lying, either claiming that nothing has happened, nothing worries him, or he makes up a lie.<sup>272</sup> Such an aspect could be said to contribute to the family’s dysfunction. In Joaquin's case, it is not that the individual members would be unable to listen to one another or that they would struggle to confront each other directly, instead he opts to talk about the issues and members behind their back.<sup>273</sup> Mark and Linda are open, they share everything with Joaquin, they have no secrets, yet Joaquin is the one who needs to talk about his concerns either with his biological sisters or his therapist.

Such a fact would be no surprise, as Alston points out that although some of the characters may not recognise their parents or other family members, the characters are commonly in a way dependent on family regardless of their particular role in the family. It does not matter which family member it is in particular, as long as the foremost fact remains - family is inherent, and it remains central to most children’s literature.<sup>274</sup> Yet, such dialogues with others are troublesome for Joaquin too, thus he does not manage to open up, even to his foster parents. Mark and Linda are aware of this fact. They were told in advance before taking Joaquin into foster care, as they had to undergo a special course so that they would be prepared for it.<sup>275</sup> This contributed to the fact that they decided to pay Joaquin private sessions with a therapist, in order that he would not feel any pain in the future and would be able to open up more.

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<sup>270</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 89.

<sup>271</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 27.

<sup>272</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 94.

<sup>273</sup> King University, “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families.”

<sup>274</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 2.

<sup>275</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 180.

The first time Joaquin had met with his therapist after moving in with Mark and Linda, it hadn't gone well. [...] "I'm not going back in there," he told Linda and Mark at the time, which was the first time he had actively told them something that they didn't want to hear. [...] They had sat with him on the curb while he got his breath back, Mark's hand resting carefully on his shoulder as his heart slowly returned to a normal pace. They had sat with him for the better part of twenty minutes, waiting silently for him to explain, and when Joaquin didn't—*couldn't*—explain, they started asking questions. Sometimes he liked when they asked him questions, sometimes he didn't. Sometimes it felt like they cared too much; other times, it felt like they wanted to *know* too much.<sup>276</sup>

Thus, if this family is to be seen as dysfunctional, due to Joaquin's poor communication with his parents, and a conclusion was to be made about their roles in the family as such, Linda and Mark could undoubtedly be seen as what Spears labels as "enablers or caretakers."<sup>277</sup> They both protect the family as well as they try to keep the family going regardless of Joaquin's past, his traumatic experiences, or his inability to fully open up. In contrast, Joaquin could be seen either as a "lost child or quiet one,"<sup>278</sup> or as an "enabler or caretaker"<sup>279</sup> as well. Joaquin is portrayed as the person who is most of the time calm, avoiding causing any trouble to his foster parents, furthermore, he likes to spend time on his own either avoiding his family or its dysfunction. As Spears points out, this can lead to a child struggling with social skills in future.<sup>280</sup> Yet, there are moments when Joaquin tries to keep the family going as if there was no dysfunction. As well as this, he protects his foster parents as he claimed after the first meeting with his therapist "He had tried so hard to make them happy, to make them *want* him."<sup>281</sup> His role depends on his current mood or state of mind.

#### 3.3.1.4. Grace, Maya, and Joaquin

Besides this, it is not the only family that Joaquin is a part of. And the same is true for Grace and Maya. They are all biologically related and part of their own families. Despite the fact that they find out about one another and reunite in their teenage years, they soon become strongly attached to one another. Although it is just the three of them on their own, without their biological parents present, they are still perceived as a family, as stated by *APA Dictionary of*

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<sup>276</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 88.

<sup>277</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>278</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>279</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>280</sup> Spears, "Dysfunctional Family."

<sup>281</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 88.

*Psychology*, it is of no matter that the structure of this family may vary, or be different, from the psychological point of a view the siblings form a group of individuals united by blood, therefore they indeed form a family.<sup>282</sup>

The novel presents this family as mysterious in a way. It is a known fact that all three of them have a mother who gave them up when they were young. Joaquin when he was one year old, Grace and Maya immediately after their birth. Yet it is not stated at all what were the reasons behind such decisions, or whether all their siblings have the same biological father or not. Joaquin is presented as someone who has dark skin, whereas Maya and Grace do not. Moreover, Joaquin is the only one who knows some information about his parents and early life but does not remember much.

He knew from seeing his birth certificate once that her name was Melissa Taylor, and that his father's last name was Gutierrez, but that had been about ten social workers ago, and Melissa's parental rights had long been severed. [...] He didn't know anything about his bio dad, other than his last name and the fact that Joaquin only had to look in the mirror to know that his mysterious father hadn't been white. "You look Mexican," one foster brother had told him after Joaquin had to explain that he didn't know where he was from. No one had ever said anything to argue against it, so that was that. Joaquin was Mexican.<sup>283</sup>

When Maya and Grace met for the first time, Grace could definitely tell that they are related together "eye color, hair color, even the same weird, ski-slope nose. She was a little bit shorter than Grace, but give or take a few freckles, it was like looking in a mirror."<sup>284</sup> Moreover, she was taken away by the fact that from then on, she is not an only child anymore. She even asked Maya what it was like to have a sister as she was not accustomed to it.<sup>285</sup>

Each one of them is highly supportive of one another. They care about one another, always being there to either patiently listen, or to take action and help. As could be evident from the following excerpt when Joaquin was having a hard time after a fight with his foster parents

"That's exactly what family *is*, Joaquin!" Maya shouted at him. "It means that no matter where you go, no matter how far you run, you're still a part of me and Grace and we're still a part of you, too! Look at us! It took us fifteen *years* to find each other, but we still did! And sometimes, family hurts each other. But after that's done you bandage each other up, and you move on. Together. So you

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<sup>282</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology, "Family."

<sup>283</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 24–25.

<sup>284</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 35.

<sup>285</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 37.

can go and think that you're some lone wolf, but you're not! You've got us now, like it or not, and we've got you."<sup>286</sup>

Nevertheless, they do keep some of their secrets away from each other. This is especially true for Grace, who has trouble admitting her pregnancy and her baby she gave up for adoption.<sup>287</sup> Moreover, she does not admit that this is the major reason why she wants to find their biological mother and visit her.<sup>288</sup> In contrast, Joaquin struggles to open up to his sisters as it was previously mentioned how difficult it is to talk about his feelings or past. As for Maya, she is frequently straightforward, having no troubles to be honest, but occasionally it takes her time to admit some family problems or life difficulties.

When Maya and Joaquin find out about Grace's baby and eventually understand why she is so eager to find their biological mother, they finally agree and set out on a one-day trip to find her and get to know her.<sup>289</sup> Despite the fact that all of their parents are highly supportive of their newly reunited family, none of the characters reveal to their parents that they are about to visit their biological mother. However, when they arrive, they are confronted with the fact that their mother, Melissa, died several years ago in a car accident when she was twenty-one years old and are welcomed by her sister, Jessica.<sup>290</sup>

Jessica helps to answer their questions about their parents and the audience finds out that Mellisa, the biological mother, got pregnant as a high-school student, when she was in love with her first boyfriend, father of Joaquin, who unfortunately was deported even before she found out about her pregnancy. When she realised that she was about to have a baby, her parents kicked her out of the house. Shortly after Joaquin's birth, she started dating another man and got pregnant again with Grace and as she did not have enough money, she decided to give her up for adoption. And the same happened again when she met another man and got pregnant with Maya.<sup>291</sup> Yet, as her sister reveals "she couldn't keep any of you. She couldn't keep her own life together. I think losing you broke her."<sup>292</sup> Moreover, "she wanted so badly to know the three of you."<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 233.

<sup>287</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 41.

<sup>288</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 211.

<sup>289</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 211–213.

<sup>290</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 236.

<sup>291</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 239.

<sup>292</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 239.

<sup>293</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 240.

Although their mother is gone, this trip remained crucial for them. Joaquin is given a key to a deposit box, and when they open the safety deposit box, they find photographs of Mellisa, with her children. Such an experience makes Joaquin realise that he had been loved by his mother.<sup>294</sup> Nevertheless, not only is Joaquin strongly influenced and moved by this experience, but his sisters are as well. All three of them feel as if they finally belong to a family. After all, Maya accepts her mother's addiction to alcohol and is glad to see her back home from the rehab.<sup>295</sup> Joaquin decides he wants to be adopted and this process is done on his eighteen birthday as well as his birthday party.<sup>296</sup> And finally, Grace decides to visit her baby and her adoptive parents.<sup>297</sup> As soon as all three of them realise they do deserve to be loved and be part of a family, their opinions about adoption and their adoptive parents finally change for the better as they are better able to let love come into their lives.

Interestingly enough, at the end of the novel, all characters are depicted in a way of belonging to one big family. This happens during Joaquin's birthday and adoption party, where almost all the characters from the novel are present. Grace and her parents, Maya and her family, Joaquin and his parents, as well as their newly discovered aunt Jessica, with Joaquin and Maya claiming that although one door has been closed, finding their biological mother is not alive, another door has just opened. Yet they could still feel their mother being there with them.<sup>298</sup>

Nevertheless, due to the siblings' past, their family could have been labeled as dysfunctional. It is especially true because of the life circumstances that this family went through – fathers who were not present or decided to leave the family, as well as the adoption, which were both closely related with stress, which definitely has “a lasting impact as children transition into adulthood.”<sup>299</sup> This is especially true for Joaquin, as observed from the illustrations and excerpts in the last few pages. Notably, their communication was not always perfect, especially at the beginning, with all their secrets and struggles to open up. Yet in the end, they managed to overcome all the obstacles and reunite their newly discovered family in a happily ending way.

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<sup>294</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 245.

<sup>295</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 251.

<sup>296</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 252.

<sup>297</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 258–259.

<sup>298</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 256.

<sup>299</sup> King University, “Defining the Traits of Dysfunctional Families.”

### 3.3.2. Trauma

Trauma and its depiction in *Far from the Tree* are closely connected with adoption, specifically with two aspects – giving up a child for adoption and not being adopted. From the very beginning of the novel, Joaquin is portrayed as the one who has been traumatised and suffered the most from the fact that he had been given up for adoption as a child and this experience and its consequences reshaped him, his mentality and attitude towards life in many negative ways.

Joaquin is the only one who had not been adopted despite his age. He feels insecure about this fact, wondering why his biological mother has never visited him while he was in foster care, which makes him feel even more unwanted. Even though as a child Joaquin has lived with several foster parents in different places, none of them have ever offered him adoption. The exact number of foster families is not stated in the novel, yet from the context it can be surely noticed that most of the times, the experience was very unpleasant, as Joaquin mentions:

There had been the foster mom who once lost her temper and whacked Joaquin in the back of the head with a wooden hairbrush, making him feel like one of those cartoon characters who literally saw stars; the elderly couple who, for reasons that Joaquin never understood, would tape his left hand shut, forcing him to use his right (it didn't work, Joaquin was still a lefty); a foster dad who liked to squeeze Joaquin by the back of the neck, literally grinding his vertebrae together in a way that Joaquin could never fully forget; the parents who kept the fosters' food on a separate pantry shelf, the generic store brands lined up right below the brand-name cereals for the biological kids.<sup>300</sup>

Nevertheless, there were a few foster parents who were according to Joaquin great, loving and caring:

But then there had also been Juanita, the foster mom who stroked his hair and called him *cariño* when he had the stomach flu one winter; Evelyn, who organized water balloon fights in the backyard and used to sing Joaquin a song at night about three little chicks who curled up under their mother's wing and fell asleep; and Rick, the foster dad who once bought Joaquin an entire set of oil pastels because he thought that he was "pretty goddamn talented." (Six months later, after Rick had too much to drink and got into a fistfight with the next-door neighbor, Joaquin had been forced to leave that foster home and his pastels behind. He still wasn't quite over losing them.)<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 25.

<sup>301</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 25.

However, as it is obvious from the novel, every loss, from either his biological parents or foster parents was a harsh experience that had influenced his life in a way that whenever something unexpected or different happened with his current foster family, with Linda and Mark, something that did not either follow the regular patterns of everyday life or when they behaved weird in Joaquin's eyes, he was always sure that this was a signal letting him know that they were just about to announce to him that they do not want to take care of him anymore. Yet, this point of view was always biased, as it was never true. To illustrate this, once when Joaquin was sitting at the kitchen table, Mark and Linda "sat down across from him, holding hands, and Joaquin knew immediately that they were asking him to leave. It happened seventeen times before, so he knew the signs well. There would be excuses, apologies, maybe even tears (never Joaquin's), but it always ended the same way: Joaquin putting his few things in a trash bag and waiting for his social worker to pick him up and take him somewhere new."<sup>302</sup>

That being said, this could be seen as a consequence of undergoing some kind of a chronic early trauma while Joaquin's own personality was forming, as it had further consequences in shaping his later beliefs and perception of his world and everything around him.<sup>303</sup> At first as a small child, Joaquin believed that there was a future for him and one day he could be adopted, but as time passed and he was not offered the chance, he started to believe he simply did not deserve neither to be adopted nor to be loved, thinking about himself in the most negative ways. Furthermore, he thinks that he is the only chance for Mark and Linda to get what they wanted, yet never could – to have a child. Instead of feeling grateful to be a part of such a loving family who wants to adopt him, he feels desperate and unable to receive their love.<sup>304</sup>

Therefore, when his current foster parents, Linda and Mark offer to adopt him, Joaquin is unsure whether he wants to be adopted anymore simply for the reasons of feeling unwanted ever since he was born, or of his worried feelings that he might hurt Mark and Linda the way he hurt one of the foster parents who once adopted him when he was twelve. Unfortunately the foster parents had to return him back into foster care for his violent outbursts and tantrums.<sup>305</sup> Not to mention that besides his tantrums, feeling unwanted, unloved, or being scared to hurt someone, Joaquin also has depression, as well as trouble falling asleep, nightmares, and does not like being expected to do anything from others as he feels he cannot fulfil them. Whenever

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<sup>302</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 25–26.

<sup>303</sup> Giller, "What is Psychological Trauma?"

<sup>304</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 28.

<sup>305</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 179–180.

Joaquin is on his own, he does not re-experience the traumatic events from his life, instead he questions himself why is he not good enough for anyone, why his biological mother has never visited him, or whether he is the worst and naughtiest child in the world. He blames himself for being the reason why any family has never truly adopted him.<sup>306, 307</sup>

Eventually, when Joaquin dates a girl, he is still convinced he does not deserve both to be loved and to love. Furthermore, he is scared of the relationship getting any more serious, as he felt that he would never be able to give his girlfriend, Birdie, everything that she wants in her life despite the fact that it is never directly mentioned what she wants, it is just Joaquin assuming about her expectations.

And Joaquin had the horrible, terrible feeling that he would never be able to give this kind of life to her. There was no one to tell her about him, no one to share embarrassing stories about him that Birdie would love, or show her baby pictures of him. Mark and Linda had photos around the house, sure, but it wasn't the same. Birdie wanted—no, *needed*—the world. She was used to it. These photos were her map, and Joaquin knew then that he was rudderless, that he would only lead her astray. He knew what it felt like to be held down. He loved Birdie too much to do that to her. He broke up with her the next day.<sup>308</sup>

Mark and Linda are aware of Joaquin's worries, problems and the consequences of his early childhood traumatic experience, they know they must be careful in their behaviour and actions towards Joaquin, as well as when it comes to communication. Yet, they always show their deepest understanding and support, as well as his therapist who tries to listen to him and helps him to see the world and everyday situations, and Joaquin's troubles from different perspectives. Yet, for Joaquin it is difficult to make progress. As it was already stated in previous subchapters, he has trouble opening up to anyone and talking about his worries, not to mention that he is convinced that everyone expects him to talk nicely about adoption and the system as such.

He knew that's what they wanted him to say, that it wasn't as bad as the news always made it out to be, that no one had ever hit him or hurt him, that he had never hit or hurt anyone. People always thought they wanted the sordid details, Joaquin thought, until they actually had them. [...] That's why he didn't tell people that he was a foster kid. Their curiosity always got the best of them, making him feel like a science experiment, a cautionary tale.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 25.

<sup>307</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 28.

<sup>308</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 61.

<sup>309</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 65.



Moreover, he “was also really good at asking open questions, making other people talk about themselves so he wouldn’t have to say anything about himself. His therapist called it a coping skill, but Joaquin just thought it was polite. They agreed to disagree on that one.”<sup>310</sup>

In the novel, it is depicted that Joaquin uses violence as an escape mechanism, to either solve his problems, or as a mechanism that releases his emotions out of him as his mind is full of them as a result of his unwillingness to share them with anyone. When Joaquin was twelve and the previous foster family adopted him, although they provided him with his own room, own bed, his own space, even taking him shopping to let him pick his own sheets which felt fine to him, Joaquin still felt that they were not nice.

“I just started . . . I don’t know, I just started having these tantrums. They called them meltdowns. I would just black out with this anger. It felt like my skin was exploding, you know? Like I couldn’t even breathe. And the closer we got to the adoption, the worse it got. I was starting fights with everyone except Natalie and I couldn’t even explain why. The Buchanans still went through with the adoption, though. [...] So one day, about six months after the adoption went through, Natalie was almost two, and it was a Saturday afternoon, and I was having this epic meltdown. [...] No one could even touch me. I wouldn’t let anyone get close. And then the dad, Mr. Buchanan, he tried to pick me up and set me on my feet, right? Like, to stand up. And I just started throwing everything that I could get my hands on. We were in his office and there was a stapler on the desk. . . .” [...]“I threw it,” he said again, clearing his throat. “I threw it at him, but it went out the door and Natalie . . . Natalie was coming around the corner right then.” Joaquin dropped his head, closed his eyes, sick with shame. “It hit her in the head.” He gestured her up toward his temple. “Right here, and she just dropped.”<sup>311</sup>

There are more parts during the novel when Joaquin uses violence. When he is unable to express his true feelings and worries, he has several arguments with his current foster parents, Mark and Linda. Besides, when Grace is bullied and called “a slut [sic]”<sup>312</sup> by one of her classmates in front of Joaquin, he uses violence again to solve the situation:

In one smooth motion, he had Adam up against the wall, his forearm pressed across his chest, and Adam looked wide-eyed and scared, a fish out of water. “Listen, you asshole [sic],” Joaquin hissed, and now Maya was standing up next to Grace, hanging on to her arm. “That’s my *sister*, okay! You think it’s cool to talk to my sister like that? Do you?!” Adam didn’t say anything. Maya felt the pressure in her chest go straight into her heart, bursting with a sudden, vicious

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<sup>310</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 63.

<sup>311</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 178–179.

<sup>312</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 174.

love for him. [...] “You talk to her again, you even *think* of looking at her again”—Joaquin pressed his arm harder across Adam’s chest, sliding it up toward his throat —“and you’re going to have to talk to me. You got that?”<sup>313</sup>

Yet, situations like these shock Joaquin when he returns back to reality, making him feel sick and shaking his whole body. Surprisingly, Joaquin is aware of the fact that violence is not a solution, especially because power does not always make you a good person as he assumes.<sup>314</sup>

There is one more aspect that traumatises, worries, and at the same time haunts Joaquin – photos. Joaquin perceives them as a feature of a happy and idyllic childhood, as well as a feature of belonging to a family. It does not make him feel any better when his girlfriend wants to show him a photo album of her as a baby or when he notices that Maya’s house is full of huge family photos that are hanging on the walls. Even Mark and Linda have photos around the house too. Nonetheless, Joaquin is not captured in any of them, because he simply has no photos from his childhood, which makes him even more sorrowful.

However, this changes once Joaquin opens the deposit box and finds photos of himself as a child. This experience leads to Joaquin realising that he had always been loved by his biological mother and therefore helps him to shift his view of the world and helps him to open up to love and open up in general to others. It is also the first time when Joaquin calls Linda and Mark as “Mom and Dad,”<sup>315</sup> and thus, shows signs of progress in his way. As a result, shortly after the trip, Mark and Linda display these photographs around the house, not to mention that during his birthday party and celebration of the adoption process, they take another group of pictures as a family.<sup>316</sup> Although this early childhood experience remains traumatic for Joaquin, and it is going to be part of his life for the rest of his life,<sup>317</sup> Joaquin finally has a sense of belonging and is not part of only one family (the one with Linda and Mark), but is also a part of his biological family, being able to unconditionally love and support his sisters as well as he does for his biological, yet unfortunately dead, mother. “He hopes she can see him, because he sees her now. He sees her every single day. He hopes he can make her proud.”<sup>318</sup>

In addition to this, Grace could be seen as a traumatised character as well. The trauma that has changed her personality and keeps haunting her is the disturbing experience of giving up her baby for adoption. Although this act is over, the memories and Grace’s reactions are not.

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<sup>313</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 175.

<sup>314</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 176.

<sup>315</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 247.

<sup>316</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 256.

<sup>317</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

<sup>318</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 256.

The effects are lasting, and it takes a long time for Grace to get over emotions and the trauma itself.<sup>319</sup> The issue connected with her pregnancy is the fact that Grace discovers her pregnancy late. She was already in her fifth day of her second trimester, and there was not much that she or her family could do about this situation.<sup>320</sup> From the very beginning of this moment, Grace created a strong attachment with her unborn baby and kept calling her Peach, as the baby was at that given moment the size of a peach. No one knew about this baby's nickname except for Grace.

Grace decided she was not going to keep the baby as she claimed she could not because of the fact that she “wasn't exactly earning baby-raising money.”<sup>321</sup> Furthermore, she was convinced that

even that babies cried or smelled or spit up or anything like that. That didn't seem terrible. It was that they *needed you*. Peach would need Grace in ways that she couldn't give to her, and at night, she would sit in her room, holding her now-rounded stomach, and say, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” a prayer and a penance, because Grace was the first person who Peach would ever need and Grace felt like she was already letting Peach down.<sup>322</sup>

Thus, she decided to give her baby up for adoption. Yet she was occupied by the thought that the future family for her baby must be perfect. Nonetheless, whenever she was looking for a family, no one was good enough for her baby. Grace was mindful and careful about her decision, simply for the reason that she was occupied by the thought that her baby deserved more.<sup>323</sup>

During the pregnancy, Grace kept talking to her unborn baby all the time, as she claims that Peach was the “only person Grace really talked to.”<sup>324</sup> When Peach was born, the nurse...

...had asked Grace if she wanted to, and she ignored her mother's worried eyes, her lip caught between her teeth. She reached out and took Peach from the nurse, and she didn't know how else to explain except to say that Peach fit, she fit into Grace's arms like she had fit beneath her rib cage, nestled there soft and safe, and even though Grace's body felt like soot and ashes, her head felt as if it had been washed clean for the first time in ten months. Peach was perfect. Grace was not. And Peach deserved perfect.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Giller, “What is Psychological Trauma?”

<sup>320</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 9.

<sup>321</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 9.

<sup>322</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 9.

<sup>323</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 9.

<sup>324</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 10.

<sup>325</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 10–11.

Grace did not actually remember the moment she gave the baby to her new future adoptive parents, but her body did. She...

...locked her bedroom door and writhed in agony, one of Peach's receiving blankets clutched in her fist as she choked into it, sobs pressing down on her chest, her heart, crushing her from the inside. She didn't want her mother anymore. This wasn't a pain that she or the doctors could take away. Grace's body twisted on the bed in a way that it hadn't during her labor, like it was confused about where Peach had gone, and her toes curled and her hands flexed. Grace had delivered Peach, but now it felt like she had truly left her. She was untethered, floating away.<sup>326</sup>

Despite the fact that the adoption remained open, which the adoptive parents insisted on, Grace was not ready to get in touch neither with them, nor with her baby. Grace could not imagine seeing her baby again. When the baby was born, during the following thirty days, Grace was officially allowed by law to contest the adoption and claim the baby back. "On the thirtieth day, Grace had huddled in bed and watched the clock tick down. When her phone flipped to 12:01 a.m., something in Grace wilted. Thirty days had passed. The adoption was official. Peach was truly gone."<sup>327</sup>

After the childbirth, Grace occasionally re-experienced the traumatic event, wondering what things she would never be able to give her child as her mother,<sup>328</sup> playing with the thoughts of what her life could have been like, had she decided to keep her baby,<sup>329</sup> as well as deeply missing her baby. She suffered from nightmares, pain, and sorrow. Yet, she was fully aware of the fact that this traumatic event is part of her past, which she would never be able to outrun.<sup>330</sup> Not to mention that when she received photos of and letters about the baby from the adoptive parents, she...

...picked up both photos and carefully tucked them under her shirt, pressing them against her stomach, where Peach had once been. She knew it was ridiculous, that they were just photos, that Peach would never be anchored to Grace the way she once had been, but she tried to feel it again anyway, tried to remember the press of her tiny foot against Grace's ribs, the way she would drum her fists at three in the morning. But in the end, they were just photos, and Grace finally took them away and placed them in a drawer, feeling foolish. She wanted to look

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<sup>326</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 12.

<sup>327</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 106.

<sup>328</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 107.

<sup>329</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 184

<sup>330</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 96.

at them forever, and she never wanted to see them again. [...] Grace knew that she couldn't go back, but as she stood in her messy room, one hand over her stomach as if to keep Peach there, she also realized that she had no idea how, exactly, to go forward.<sup>331</sup>

At one point in the novel, when Maya told Grace and Joaquin about her parents planning to get a divorce, Grace became horrified by the idea of what would happen if her baby's adoptive parents would possibly get divorced one day too. This thought was constantly haunting her, even in her dreams, and she could not get over it. She felt devastated by the idea that she would not be able to help her baby and became convinced that she had chosen the wrong parents for her baby. "The idea that she had picked the wrong parents, the wrong home, for Peach sent her into a panic that clawed at her back whenever she was alone—whenever her mind was quiet. *You did it wrong*, a voice would say, and Grace would shiver. *You had one job as Peach's mom, and you completely, royally fucked it up* [sic]."<sup>332</sup>

However, after giving birth, Grace strives to get back to high school, but she is constantly bullied by Adam, her classmate, who keeps playing a recording of a baby crying to make fun of her. In addition to this, Grace is called by some of her classmates "a slut and a baby mama [sic]."<sup>333, 334</sup> Grace finds no other way than to respond to this with violence by punching Adam several times in his face and running off to the bathroom where she hides.<sup>335</sup>

During these harsh times, Grace was constantly keeping her sorrow, worries and feelings to herself, feeling reluctant to share them with anyone else. From time to time, she shared some of her worries with her friend Rafe, yet she did not fully open up to him. Grace claims that talking to other people, especially strangers about the baby was impossible for her, as it felt almost like a betrayal.<sup>336</sup> Thus, when she and her family decided on family therapy, she felt under pressure and was unable to handle her feelings anymore, and unexpectedly vented her emotions in front of her parents and the therapist. She said:

"I miss P— Milly very much. Of course I do. I carried her for almost ten months. But she's in a much better home, a better family for her. I did the right thing. My parents agree." [...] "Of course I'm not myself!" Grace cried. "I had a baby and then gave her away! I don't even recognize who I am anymore! You act like I'm just going to go back to high school and go to dances and prom and

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<sup>331</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 108.

<sup>332</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 127.

<sup>333</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 70.

<sup>334</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 174.

<sup>335</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 74–76.

<sup>336</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 186.

everything, but none of that has happened. I can't even go to the mall without people whispering about me, calling me a slut [sic]! You want a daughter back who doesn't exist anymore." [...] "You don't get it!" Grace cried. "I'm not *going* to heal from this! You keep acting like I'm going to explode at any moment, and if you don't say anything long enough, that I'll forget about my baby"—the word got caught in her throat and she had to almost spit it out to get it out of her—"and it'll all be fine! That's what you always do! You pretend like something didn't happen, and then eventually, it's like no one remembers that it *did* happen. You did the same thing with me!"<sup>337</sup>

After the session, the therapist offered Grace a solution. He noted that Grace should try to talk to other girls who underwent the same experience as her, the girls who are in the same situation as she is, therefore he suggested finding and visiting a support group. Which, as it is revealed at the end of the story, she did. She met with her birth mother's support group and shared her experience with the girls. At the end of the family therapy session, the therapist also noted that Grace and her family made progress during the session. However, for Grace it is not until the moment that she and her siblings decide to visit their biological mother.

Grace was strongly influenced and moved by this visit. After all, she decided to visit her baby and her adoptive parents. "She knows how hard she will hold on to the things she has, the brother and sister who fill a new place in her life. The spot where Peach was is still there, still open and hollow, but there are new chambers in her heart that fill her up, make her feel whole in a way she didn't before."<sup>338</sup> She thought that she would never be able to talk to, or even see her baby but she did. And everyone, including her parents, siblings, girls from the support group and friends, supported her idea and stood by her. Interestingly, when she met with the adoptive parents and her baby and when she looked at her, Grace could see Maya's eyes, Joaquin's nose and jaw, and their biological mother's hair.<sup>339</sup> Although she still feels occasionally angry, and from time to time she cries, Grace makes progress. She is brave to let the past go, especially her ex-boyfriend, the biological father of the child, and is prepared to move on.<sup>340, 341</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 184–185.

<sup>338</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 258.

<sup>339</sup> Benway, *Far from the Tree*, 259.

<sup>340</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 111.

<sup>341</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 33 – 35.

## 4. CONCLUSION

By focusing on the theme of family, especially dysfunctional families in this thesis, I have presented a detailed literary analysis, both thematic and genre of young adult literature. By deciding to make my analysis as elaborate as possible, my aim was to find out how the families are portrayed in the two selected novels and whether they could be perceived either as functional or dysfunctional. I wanted to look at all the families from many different angles, to provide as comprehensive an analysis as possible. Yet, I am aware of the fact that more aspects of the selected novels could have been analysed in conjunction with the already presented aspects.

During my study of the theoretical background and during my analysis, I found many similarities between the two selected novels, some of which were occasionally apparent and some not, along with the links to the theoretical background. Young adult literature is frequently linked to coming-of-age novels, which during the analysis of the two selected coming-of-age novels related to family and its ideology, has shown beyond doubt to be an eligible theme for exploration of both dysfunction of families and trauma studies in literature. Secondly, the theme of family discloses the fact that it inevitably was, still is, and always will be, as Alston argues, the ideal and vital part of any children's fiction, despite the fact that world, society and novels with their depiction of families have changed a lot in recent years.<sup>342</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, the choice of the theme of family in contemporary young adult literature can also have its challenges, as this theme is rather complex and broad. As seen in the analytical part of the thesis, the families portrayed in the selected novels do vary in their depiction. Moreover, it could happen that the characters do not have to be necessarily part of only one family, but of more, thus they must be thoroughly separated from one another if a decision is made whether such families could be perceived as dysfunctional or not. As in the case of *Far from the Tree*, where the protagonists were not only part of their individual families, but in addition to this the siblings formed a family of their own. Grace formed another extra family with her baby and her adoptive parents and on top of that, almost all the characters form a group of people that have many things in common, and such a group could be perceived as a newly formed family too.

Besides this, such a wide presentation of families from the *Far from the Tree* and  *Holding Up the Universe* can be seen as beyond what used to be called a traditional and idyllic

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<sup>342</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 1.

portrayal of families in literature. Yet it is considered by Cecil and Roberts,<sup>343</sup> Koelling,<sup>344</sup> Alston,<sup>345</sup> and Avery<sup>346</sup>, that such a portrayal is typical for contemporary novels, and more importantly, the attention should be rather focused on values and priorities that each family shares together, as well as care, love, and support they provide to one another, without regard to the family's size, colour, sex, completeness or incompleteness.

Interestingly, all the families mentioned in the analysis, despite their flaws, showed sharing of the foremost family values. The parents and the children showed signs of pure love, care, support, and understanding. Nonetheless, on the other hand, they also manifest influences that contribute to dysfunctional families. The influence that seems to occur in frequent patterns is either lack of communication or poor communication. All families being analysed showed to some extent this pattern, some of them to a significant extent, some of them to a less significant extent. Furthermore, Libby's and Jack's families, who are both the protagonists of *Holding Up the Universe*, demonstrate influences of medical problems and unforeseen life circumstances that contribute to family dysfunction, such as loss of a family member, or divorce. Considering the protagonists from *Far from the Tree* and their families, besides the poor communication, Maya's family demonstrates alcohol addiction, parents' arguments, stress, and divorce, which could be seen as features contributing to family dysfunction.

The research of this thesis is also interested in trauma that some of the protagonists went through, how it affected them and whether they managed to cope with the consequences of their trauma or not. Firstly, trauma terminology has been presented with the help of scholarly literature in the theoretical part of this thesis. As wide as this terminology and theory is, it was clearly stated that for the research of this thesis, trauma and stress would be limited only to events which are truly traumatic, not to events that are just difficult or unbearable. Such a decision was made as a consequence of the function of these two terms in contemporary culture, their everyday usage and trivialisation of these terms, especially by media, in order to imply various kinds of stressful or unpleasant experiences from divorce to moving house, as Piątek points out.<sup>347</sup>

*Holding Up the Universe* realistically depicts Libby, the protagonist, as a traumatised character because of the loss of her mother and because of her experience of bullying by her

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<sup>343</sup> Cecil and Roberts, *Families*, xii.

<sup>344</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 59.

<sup>345</sup> Alston, *The Family*, 2.

<sup>346</sup> Avery, "The family story," 457–458.

<sup>347</sup> Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction*, 32 – 33.



classmates. She shows signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as panic attacks, re-experiencing traumatic events, anxiety, eating disorder, social isolation, problems falling asleep, depression, as well as feelings of hopelessness and restlessness. In comparison, *Far from the Tree* realistically depicts Joaquin and Grace, the protagonists, as traumatised characters as a consequence of the unsuccessful adoption process in Joaquin's case and as a consequence of giving up a baby for adoption in Grace's case.

Joaquin, who is seventeen years old, has not been adopted yet and lived with several foster families, experiencing unpleasant situations with different foster parents, along with pleasant situations with different foster parents. Yet, he suffered a lot as a child and as a consequence of such experiences, he has trouble fully opening up to anyone. His perception of the world has been shaped to a rather negative one, he has depression, and he feels unwanted and unloved too. He simply believes that he cannot be loved at all. Occasionally, Joaquin uses violence to solve his problems.

Shortly after the birth of Grace's baby, the baby was given up for adoption. Despite this decision, the experience was traumatising for Grace, and she is constantly being haunted by this event as the time passes by. Grace feels pain, sorrow, anger, as well as frequently missing her baby. Furthermore, she occasionally re-experiences the event and suffers from nightmares. Besides this, she is bullied by one of her classmates because of her pregnancy.

Interestingly, all three characters receive treatment on their journey. Libby was provided medical treatment due to her mental health issues, she frequently meets with her therapist, and she attends the school's Conversation Circle. In comparison, Joaquin on a weekly basis meets his therapist and Grace once underwent family therapy where she was recommended to visit a support group. Grace continues to see this group which helps her to get over the adoption of her baby.

In conclusion, all of the three traumatised characters managed to get over their trauma and its consequences. For all of them, it took some time, but luckily, they managed to do so and never gave up. Furthermore, Grace and Libby's portrayals could be seen as what Cart<sup>348</sup> and Koelling<sup>349</sup> mentioned in their books as female protagonists who are adolescents, yet still exceptional, strong, courageous, who encounter an obstacle and learn from the opportunity, and who personally grow. Yet, both of these novels could be recognised by their sophisticated cover art to appeal to a broad age range of readers.

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<sup>348</sup> Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, 111.

<sup>349</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 33 – 35.

Both of the selected novels present more than one topic, more protagonists, as well as plot lines which could be seen as trends and changes that are typical for contemporary young adult literature. These novels explore family relationships, friendship, survival, social outcasts, death, loss, grief, self-acceptance, and identity. Yet, Benway, the author of *Far from the Tree*, manages to present her book looking at extremes of contemporary teen life from a light and humorous point of view at given parts of the novel.<sup>350</sup>

Undoubtedly, both novels, which are written in a realistic way, present protagonists who are moving from childhood to adolescence, and who are looking for answers to their questions. They are going through the process of understanding the world around them, which goes hand in hand with physical and emotional changes, and the process of developing their own values and opinions. Despite some flashbacks and shift in time narration, they are mostly written in the present tense, which can help readers to relate to the stories.

Although Jack, the protagonist of  *Holding Up the Universe*, and Maya, the protagonist of *Far from the Tree*, were not mentioned in the third chapter in the subchapters which focused on the analysis of trauma within the two selected novels, it does not necessarily mean that their adolescence and transition from childhood to adulthood are depicted in a smooth and effortless way. Both of them were trying to figure out who they are, where they belong, and as well as this, they were looking for answers to their questions. They were going through the processes of understanding the world around them, emotional and physical changes, as well as going through the process of developing their own values. Jack was trying to figure out his life and his future with the disability he is diagnosed with, Maya was trying to figure out whether she belongs to her family with her adoptive parents and sister, along with trying to understand her changing personality and sexual orientation.

Despite the stories' depictions in not the most optimistic and brightest ways, I believe that young readers would not find them an obstacle, as it may help them to either understand the world around them better, or to realise that they are not the only ones who have similar troubles and worries, like the protagonists. Instead, it can give them hope and help them to overcome their troubles more easily. Moreover, these novels are not only as authentic as possible, but are also aimed at a variety of audiences, as they are not aimed only at young adult audiences. I consider *Far from the Tree* to have enormous crossover potential, because of the major themes of adoption and foster care, though it was initially intended for teenage readers.

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<sup>350</sup> Koelling, *Best Books for Young Adults*, 49.

The same suggestion could be made about *Holding Up the Universe* too, as it may actually appeal to adult female readers.

## 5. RESUMÉ

Cílem této práce je s využitím primárních i relevantních sekundárních zdrojů zmapovat způsoby, jakými je reprezentována rodina v současné literatuře pro mládež<sup>351</sup> a zdali se na konkrétní rodinu a její vyobrazení dá nahlížet jako na funkční či nefunkční rodinu. Práce je rozdělena na čtyři kapitoly. První kapitola představuje teoretickou část, která je následně rozdělena na dvě podkapitoly. Tato kapitola popisuje základní modely v literatuře pro mládež, spolu s její historií, současnou prezentací této literatury a vybranými tématy, která se v této současné literatuře objevují.

Úvodní podkapitola se zabývá historií literatury pro mládež. Tato podkapitola představuje vybrané vědce a literární autory a prezentuje jejich názory na vznik této samostatné oblasti literatury. Většina z nich se shoduje na tom, že tento žánr vznikl v Americe ve 20. století, v období mezi dvěma světovými válkami. Mnoho vědců, včetně Davida L. Russella, Humphreyho Carpentera, Mari Pricharda, či Victora Watsona poukazuje, že tento žánr a romány pro mládež byly výrazně ovlivněny románem J.D.Salingera *Kdo chytá v žitě*, jež nebyl napsán pro děti, nýbrž dospívající.

Nicméně, liší se také názory teoretiků na průkopníka literatury pro mládež a dospívající a také na to, který z románů byl vydán jako první. Michael Cart označuje *Seventeenth Summer* od Maureen Daly jako první oficiální titul. Jiného názoru je Victor Watson tvrdí, jež tvrdí, že první americký román tohoto žánru byl román *Fifteen* od Beverly Clearly. Alleen Pace Nilsen a Kenneth L. Donelson považují za Louisu May Alcott a Horatia Alger, Jr. za jedny z prvních autorů románů pro mládež.

S příchodem padesátých let bylo více pozornosti věnováno teenagerům, což bylo způsobeno nárůstem povinného vzdělávání a poválečným ekonomickým rozmachem. Padesátá léta byla dobou velkých hospodářských expanzí. Lidé z dělnické třídy pracovali na plný úvazek a jejich mzdy rostly. V důsledku toho byly rodiny menší, rodiče měli méně dětí, a proto více utráceli za zábavu svých dětí. Jak Watson poznamenal, během sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let byl marketing výrazně ovlivněn teenagery, a ne jinak tomu bylo i v literatuře.

Rok 1994 se stal zásadním momentem v literatuře pro mládež, protože během tohoto roku začal tento žánr vzkvétat namísto toho, aby zanikl. Od této doby prošel tento žánr renesancí, jež pokračuje až do současnosti. S přelomem tisíciletí získal na oblibě a oslovil širší publikum než doposud. Současné romány pro mladé jsou dynamičtější, otevřenější

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<sup>351</sup> V anglosaské terminologii se používá termín „young adult literature“.

experimentům v rámci stylu, formy i vyprávění. Tato literatura zahrnuje klasické žánry, jako je fantazie, sci-fi, záhadné příběhy, tituly napsané v unikátním formátu, například ve verších, doprovázené grafickými ilustracemi, příběhy ve formě deníků či dopisů nebo vyprávěné prostřednictvím více perspektiv. Děj pokrývá více různých problematik od prožitků, přes kamarádství, až po školní prožitky a je vyprávěn ich-formou nebo er-formou, či s použitím více perspektiv nebo vypravěčů.

Jedním z trendů je použití ich-formy pro vyprávění a psaní románů ve formě deníků či zápisníků, jež dokážou zajistit pro čtenáře větší autentičnost, ale také možnost se s hlavní postavou a jejími problémy lépe ztotožnit. Dalším výrazným trendem je feminizace této literatury, kdy romány často představují ženu jako protagonistku, spolu s dalšími ženskými postavami, které mohou být buď dospělé nebo v období dospívání, a které jsou odvážné a silné. Tyto postavy obvykle musí překonat překážky, které jim zároveň poskytují příležitost osobně růst, i přesto, že se jim překážku nepodaří překonat. Mimo to je zajímavé, že další aspekt, který prošel změnou je delší rozsah knih bez ohledu na věkovou skupinu publika. Tyto romány častokrát prezentují obsah s komplexními tématy.

Druhá podkapitola popisuje podrobněji témata, jež jsou v současné literatuře pro mládež vyobrazována. Tyto romány mají tendenci být dynamičtější, realističtější a zaměřují se na složitější otázky namísto toho, aby se soustředily pouze na prezentaci jednoho tématu, dějové linky, či symbolu. Mezi populární témata patří rodina, vztahy, přátelství, sociální život, či dobrodružství, k němuž patří i přežití, tajemství a záhady. Ovšem nevyhýbá se ani citlivým tématům jako je smrt, umírání, sexualita, sexuální zneužívání. Jedním z nejčastějších témat, jež je prezentováno v těchto románech je dospívání a identita jedince. Protagonista tento proces buď prochází sám nebo s pomocí druhých. Pro postavy v tomto věku je typické, že se mění v dospělého člověka, kdy se snaží pochopit svět kolem sebe, procházejí fyzickými a emocionálními změnami a hledají odpovědi na své otázky. Mnohé z těchto románů jsou realistické, psané pro dospívající čtenáře v současném čase, jež se mohou díky tomu s příběhy ztotožnit.

Druhá kapitola se zaměřuje na vyobrazení rodiny v literatuře pro mládež a také poukazuje na faktory, jež přispívají k nefunkčnosti rodiny, a také pojednává o teorii traumatu v literatuře. Tato kapitola prezentuje jednotlivé definice rodiny. *APA slovník psychologie* vnímá rodinu jako příbuzenskou jednotku, jež je složena ze skupiny jednotlivců, kteří jsou spojeni krví, manželskými, adoptivními nebo jinými intimními svazky. Také zdůrazňuje, že její forma a struktura se může lišit.

Nancy Lee Cecil a Patricia L. Roberts přirovnávají současnou podobu rodiny k nukleární rodině, jejíž důležitost může být vnímána v upevňování vzájemné spolupráce, péče a morálky. Obě souhlasí s názorem, že dnešní rodiny se mohou lišit ve velikosti, barvě pleti, či pohlaví, přesto by se měla držet některých daných hodnot. Rodiče by se měli především starat nejenom o rodinu, ale i se vzájemně podporovat, vychovávat a chránit své blízké.

Holly Koelling tvrdí, že definici rodiny je těžké zúžit na pár slov, protože je čím dál tím více složitější a delší, stejně jako problémy, kterým dnešní rodina a její členové čelí. Také poznamenává, že romány, jež se zabývají rodinným životem mohou zkoumat různá témata, či řešit problém identity, snahu o shledání, či pojednávají o adopci a pěstounské péči. Gillian Avery dodává, že v dnešní době je šťastná rodina spíše výjimkou, s čímž ruku v ruce narůstá počet autorů, kteří píšou o neúplných a odcizených rodinách. Přesto zdůrazňuje, že existují knihy, u nichž je možné najít rodinný kruh, který je neporušen.

Ann Alston tvrdí, že pokud jde o definici rodiny a jejího místa v literatuře, mnoho se za posledních několik desetiletí a uplynulá dvě století nezměnilo. Podle ní je rodina stále ideální a zásadní součástí každé dětské fikce, přestože rodina v poslední době zažila revoluci. Alston zdůrazňuje, že není důležité, zdali je rodina v románu přítomna, či chybí, protože postavy jsou svým způsobem závislé na rodině, bez ohledu na konkrétního člena rodiny, stejně tak jako nezáleží, jestli daný člen ztvárňuje dobrou či špatnou roli.

Tato kapitola je tvořena podkapitolou, jež se zabývá faktory, které přispívají k nefunkčnosti rodiny a teorií traumat v literatuře. Faktory, jež jsou zde prezentovány jsou převzaty od odborníků a psychologů z Univerzity King a také od spisovatelky a advokátky duševního zdraví Kelly Spears. Tito odborníci se shodují, že mezi společné rysy a faktory nefunkční rodiny můžeme zařadit špatnou komunikaci, alkohol, drogy, perfekcionismus, nedostatek empatie, nadměrnou rodičovskou kontrolu dětí, nadměrnou kritiku. Mimo jiné také verbální manipulace, zdravotní problémy, duševní choroby, nedostatek soukromí, nezávislost, stres nebo neočekávané životní okolnosti. Dále je představena teorie traumat, jelikož trauma může být do určité míry spojováno s nefunkčností rodin. Mnoho románů pro mládež představují různé druhy traumat. Proto pro analýzu této práce je trauma definováno a limitováno na události, které jsou skutečně traumatické, jako je opuštění rodičů, či ztráta blízké osoby.

Třetí kapitola se na základě tohoto teoretického rámce věnuje analýze dvou vybraných románů pro mládež, *Tíha Vesmíru (Holding Up the Universe)*, který napsala Jennifer Niven a *Far from the Tree* od Robin Benway. Analýza se zaměřuje na vyobrazení rodin ve vybraných románech, ale také na analyzuje styl psaní, prostředí ve kterém se děj odehrává, vypravěče, vyobrazení nefunkčnosti a traumat. Tato kapitola je rozdělena na celkem tři podkapitoly.

Nejdříve představuje širší literární kontext a zařazení těchto dvou vybraných děl do kontextu a následně jsou ve zbylých dvou podkapitolách obě díla analyzována jednotlivě.

Ve druhé podkapitole je analýza věnována románu *Tíha Vesmíru (Holding Up the Universe)*, jehož dvě hlavní postavy jsou Libby Strout a Jack Masselin. Tento děj je vyprávěn v ich-formě, přičemž oba protagonisté se při vyprávění svých příběhů rovnocenně střídají. V první polovině románu dochází k posunu v čase, někdy se čtenář ocitne v minulosti, jindy v přítomnosti. Libby vypráví o svém dětství, problémech se šikanou, ztrátě své matky, panických záchvatech a problémech s nadváhou. Jack vypráví o své poruše mozku, nemožnosti rozpoznávat lidi podle jejich obličejů, či o nefungujícím manželství jeho rodičů. V tomto románu jsou také velmi často používány vulgarismy a další zajímavostí je, že se zde objevuje plno slov či dokonce vět napsaných buď v kurzívě, či pomocí velkých písmen nebo tučně, jež nesplývají se zbytkem textu, ale naopak přitahují pozornost čtenáře. Tento román představuje řadu témat a symbolů, jako je rodina, trauma, strach, identita, sny, láska, ztráta, či smrt.

Libby, které je šestnáct let vyrůstá pouze se svým otcem, jelikož její matka náhle zemřela, když byla Libby ještě dítě. Její otec je vyobrazen jako podporující, laskavý a milující, pro něhož je Libby tou nejdůležitější prioritou v jeho životě. To stejné by se dalo říci i o její matce díky různým pohledům do minulosti, kdy je čtenářům představena v různých situacích. Přesto tato rodina může být vnímána jako nefunkční z několika důvodů. Především je nekompletní a také vykazuje známky nedostatečné a špatné komunikace. Mimo jiné mají na nefunkčnost této rodiny vliv zdravotní problémy a náhlá a nepředvídatelná smrt její matky.

Tento román také realisticky znázorňuje Libby jako hlavní traumatizovanou hrdinku kvůli ztrátě její matky a jejím zkušenostem se šikanou ze strany spolužáků. Libby vykazuje známky posttraumatické stresové poruchy díky svým záchvatům paniky, opakovanému prožívání traumatických událostí, úzkostí, poruchám příjmu potravy, sociální izolaci, poruchám spánku, depresím, pocitům beznaděje a vnitřního nepokoje. Libby se dostává kvůli těmto problémům lékařské ošetření, setkává se svým terapeutem a navštěvuje speciální školní konverzační kruh. Všechny tyto ošetření jí nakonec pomohou na její cestě uzdravení. Libby dokáže přijmout sama sebe a začne být hrdá na to, kým je.

Jack, jemuž je sedmnáct let, se potýká s poruchou zvanou prosopagnosie, která mu znemožňuje rozpoznávat obličejové tváře. Jack vyrůstá se svými rodiči a dvěma bratry. Oba rodiče jsou milující, všechny své děti bezmezně milují a podporují v jejich životech. Nicméně ani tato rodina není dokonalá navzdory své úplnosti. Jackův otec si v uplynulých letech prošel rakovinou. Naštěstí se mu podařilo ji překonat, ovšem tato nemoc měla velký vliv na rodinu i psychické zdraví všech členů rodiny. Mimo to Jackův otec tajně podvádí svou ženu, o čemž

Jack ví, ale před otcem to tají. I Jack má svá tajemství, žádný ze členů rodiny neví o jeho obličejové slepotě. Rodiče spolu nevycházejí zrovna nejlépe, rodina vykazuje známky nedostatečné komunikace mezi jednotlivými členy, mimo to Jack přiznává, že se častokrát cítí, že na něj rodiče mají velké nároky a sám sebe staví do role jakéhosi “maskota”, kdy se snaží všechny kolem sebe dělat šťastné, ovšem sám se tak po většinu času necítí. Díky všem výše zmíněným faktorům může být tato rodina vnímána jako nefunkční.

Ve třetí podkapitole je analýza věnována románu *Far from the Tree*, jehož hlavní postavy jsou Grace, Maya a Joaquin. Všechny tyto tři postavy byli jako děti, a to buď ihned po narození anebo jako batole, předány do procesu adopce. Všichni tři o tomto faktu vědí a jsou si vědomi toho, že nevyrůstají se svými biologickými rodiči. Tento román je psán s použitím *er-fromy* vypravěče, očima protagonistů, přičemž v jednotlivých kapitolách se hlavní postavy dělí o své příběhy a myšlenky. Lze tedy předpokládat, že žádný z příběhů není zaujatý.

Graceiny pasáže se točí kolem jejího těhotenství, adopce dítěte, vztahu s jejím dítětem, její vlastní adopce, šikany a vztahů s její rodinou a sourozenci. Pasáže Mayi se soustřeďují na různé negativní problémy, jako je frustrace, vztek, alkoholismus její matky a její pocit, že nepatří do své vlastní rodiny. V Joaquinových pasážích se objevuje strach z odpuštění, traumatické zážitky z minulosti v dětských domovech nebo dokonce násilí. Díky velice podařenému a realistickému vyobrazení adopce a pěstounské péče, je čtenář schopen si vytvořit kompletní obraz o těchto procesech.

I v tomto románu jsou často používány vulgarismy, slova či dokonce věty napsané buď v kurzívě, nebo pomocí velkých písmen či tučně, jež nesplývají se zbytkem textu, ale přitahují čtenářovu pozornost. Je zajímavé, že nikde není zmíněno, kde přesně se jednotlivé příběhy odehrávají, dokonce ani není prozrazeno, zdali to byl autorky záměr či ne. Dá se tedy předpokládat, že se děj odehrává v Americe, jelikož je román psán variantou anglického jazyka, americkou angličtinou. I v tomto románu dochází k posunům v čase mezi minulostí a přítomností. Během několika vzpomínek se snaží každá z postav odhalit více podrobností o svém dětství, vztahu s adoptivními nebo pěstounskými rodiči nebo o traumatických zážitcích z minulosti.

Grace, jedna z hlavních postav, byla adoptována ihned po svém narození. Odmala tedy vyrůstala se svými adoptivními rodiči, kteří ji bezmezně milují a podporují v každé životní situaci. Když Grace otěhotněla ve svých šestnácti letech, rodiče za ní po celou dobu těhotenství stáli, starali se o ni a podpořili každé její rozhodnutí. Přesto má Grace pocit, že její otec z této situace nebyl nadšený, ačkoliv nikdy neřekl nic špatného. Kromě toho má Grace pocit, že její rodiče mají velkou tendenci ji kontrolovat nebo předstírat, že se nikdy nic špatného nestalo, a



tím pádem neustále udržovat šťastný chod rodiny za každou cenu. Mimo to má Grace problém být ke svým rodičům upřímná a svěřit se jim se svými problémy. Mezi Grace a jejími rodiči tedy velmi často převládá nedostatečná či špatná forma komunikace. Díky těmto faktorům může být tato rodina považována za nefunkční.

Toto ovšem není jediná rodina, jež je Grace součástí. Jak již bylo zmíněno výše, Grace během svého studia střední školy otěhotněla. Ovšem ihned od začátku byla pevně rozhodnutá, že ihned po narození svěří dítě do procesu adopce a vzdá se ho, jelikož se necítila připravená ani schopná vykonávat roli matky navzdory svému věku. Biologický otec se veškerých právních nároků na dítě vzdal ihned od začátku těhotenství. Tato rodina je tedy díky své neúplnosti již od začátku vnímána jako nefunkční, přesto že si Grace ke svému dítěti vytvořila velmi silné pouto a nedokáže na něj zapomenout i po porodu.

Maya, druhá hlavní postava románu, byla také adoptována krátce po narození. Vyrůstá se svými adoptivními rodiči a sestrou jež se narodila adoptivním rodičům necelý rok po její adopci. Ale ani tato rodina není příliš harmonická a je od začátku prezentována jako nefunkční. Přestože oba rodiče své děti milují, jeden k druhému mají spíše odtažitý vztah, velmi často se hádají, a to i před svými dcerami, navíc matka trpí alkoholismem. Maya je ve skrytu duše poměrně introvertní postava, a přestože je navenek velice upovídaná, ve skrytu duše má plno strachů, bolesti a trápení, které má problém s ostatními sdílet a jak sama přiznává, má i problém s komunikací. Častokrát nedokáže najít ta správná slova či fráze, jež by popsaly její pocity. Maya nemá ani příliš harmonický vztah se svou sestrou, ovšem v momentech velkého napětí se dokážou semknout a vždy drží při sobě.

Joaquin, třetí postava románu je jediný ze sourozenců, jež nebyl nikdy jako dítě adoptován. Prošel si několika dětskými domovy a různými pěstounskými péčemi s rozdílnými pěstouny, ale bohužel tyto zážitky byly častokrát velmi nepříjemné, traumatizující a Joaquina poznamenaly po zbytek jeho života. Joaquin je nejstarší ze sourozenců a momentálně se nachází v další pěstounské péči. Současní pěstouni jsou za Joaquina velice vděční, přijímají ho se všemi jeho nedostatky, bezmezně ho milují a častokrát to Joaquinovi dávají najevo. Také mu nabídnou adopci, ovšem Joaquin, který je díky své minulosti velice traumatizovaný, má problém tuto nabídku přijmout. Má strach, že by pěstounským rodičům ublížil, nedokáže s nimi otevřeně mluvit, příležitostně lže a místy dokáže být i agresivní. Přestože jsou jeho současní pěstouni v knize vyobrazeni v nejlepším možném světle, Joaquinovi problémy mohou být vnímány jako faktory, jež přispívají k nefunkčnosti této rodiny.

Tento román také realisticky znázorňuje Grace a Joaquina jako traumatizované postavy v důsledku neúspěšného procesu adopce v případě Joaquina a v důsledku vzdání se dítěte pro

adopci v případě Grace. Joaquin v dětství velmi trpěl díky časté a neustále se měnící pěstounské péči. Jeho vnímání světa se změnilo na spíše negativní, má časté deprese, cítí se nechtěný a nevhoden lásky ostatních. Joaquin občas používá k řešení svých problémů násilí. Graceino těhotenství a následovný porod byly poměrně traumatizujícím zážitkem. Přestože se jedná o události z minulosti, Grace se přes ně nemůže přenést, cítí bolest, zármutek, hněv a často jí chybí její dítě. Tyto události opětovně prožívá a trpí nočními můrami. Mimo jiné je kvůli těhotenství šikanována jedním ze spolužáků. Grace i Joaquinovi se dostává na jejich cestě uzdravení terapeutickou péčí, jež jim nakonec pomůže se přenést se přes jejich traumata a vnímat svět okolo nich v pozitivním světle.

Oba zvolené romány prezentují více témat i protagonistů a dějových linií, které lze považovat za trendy a změny typické pro současnou literaturu pro mládež. Oba romány se zabývají rodinnými vztahy, přátelstvím, smrtí, ztrátou blízké osoby, zármutkem, sebedříváním a vlastní identitou. Oba jsou psány realisticky, reprezentují protagonisty, kteří prochází obdobím přechodu z dětství do dospělosti, které jdou ruku v ruce s fyzickými i emocionálními změnami, procesem rozvíjení vlastních hodnot a názorů. Navzdory tomu, že jednotlivé příběhy nejsou vyobrazeny v nejoptimističtějším světle, nemusí to být nutně vnímáno jako překážka, nýbrž jako benefit, který může pomoci čtenářům lépe porozumět světu okolo nich, či se ztotožnit s některým z vyobrazených témat či problémů.

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