13 Reasons Why Writer: Why We Didn’t Shy Away from Hannah’s Suicide

Nic Sheff defends the controversial choice in an eloquent, exclusive op-ed about how his own dark history informed the Netflix series.

Nic Sheff  April 19, 2017 7:56 pm

Op/Ed

by

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When *13 Reasons Why* debuted on Netflix last month, it did so to warm reviews. Early assumptions based on the source material—a young adult best-seller by *Jay Asher*—and the involvement of pop singer *Selena Gomez* meant some critics were surprised to find such depth in the series, which deals unflinchingly with sexual assault and teenage suicide. But some viewers and *mental health organizations* have started to question whether *13 Reasons Why* glamorizes suicide—and if the series went too far in depicting the traumatic act on-screen.

*Writer Nic Sheff* is no stranger to self-harm. A longtime crystal-meth user and the subject of his father’s best-selling memoir, *Beautiful Boy: A Father’s Journey Through His Son’s Addiction*, *Sheff himself once tried to take his own life*. He brought that experience to his role as writer of Episode 6 of 13
Reasons Why, and to the op-ed below, in which Sheff shares why the series thought it was vital to show Hannah Baker’s entire journey—even its very upsetting end.

As soon as I read the pilot for 13 Reasons Why, I immediately knew it was a project I wanted to be involved in. I was struck by how relevant and even necessary a show like this was: offering hope to young people, letting them know that they are not alone—that somebody out there gets them. In 13 Reasons Why, the story of a high-school girl who takes her own life, I saw the opportunity to explore issues of cyberbullying, sexual assault, depression, and what it means to live in a country where women are devalued to the extent that a man who brags about sexually assaulting them can still be elected president. And, beyond all that, I recognized the potential for the show to bravely and unflinchingly explore the realities of suicide for teens and young adults—a topic I felt very strongly about.

What creator Brian Yorkey and we all accomplished in Season 1, I’m extremely proud of. The show ended up being even more impactful than I could’ve imagined. Recently, however, I’ve been reading quite a few posts by suicide-prevention advocates and other individuals expressing concern, or even outrage, at the show’s decision to depict its protagonist’s suicide on-screen. In other words, they thought it would be better to leave her character’s death to the imagination.

This response was actually quite surprising to me. From the very beginning, I agreed that we should depict the suicide with as much detail and accuracy as possible. I even argued for it—relating the story of my own suicide attempt to the other writers.

While my reasons for ending my life were far different from the protagonist’s of 13 Reasons Why, there were some similarities. We both experienced a
feeling of complete and utter defeat. Circumstances—some extreme and some 
quotidian—compiled to back us up against a wall with the feeling that nothing 
we ever did could ever repair the damage done, and that all last traces of hope 
had been blotted out completely.

For me, I’d lost everything. I couldn’t stay sober; I’d destroyed my life and 
nearly destroyed my family—and there seemed no possibility of anything ever 
getting any better. They say suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary 
problem, but the problem really didn’t seem all that temporary. In fact, it 
seemed fucking eternal.

And so I went into the bathroom. I emptied out all the pills I had. I didn’t 
write a note. I just started swallowing—chasing them down with a bottle of 
whiskey.

But then a miracle happened. Sitting there on the edge of the bathtub, I 
flashed upon a memory I had up until that point completely forgotten. I saw a 
woman’s face, covered in bruises, both eyes swollen shut. And I remembered 
her. I’d met her in the first rehab I ever checked into. Though she was in her 
30s, her speech was slurred, her arm was in a full cast, her body was sick and 
bent, and she could walk only with a cane.

She’d told her story in group one day.

She’d decided to kill herself, just as I was doing. Her plan was to drift off 
peacefully into an eternal sleep, taking copious pills and drinking copious 
amounts of wine. She lay down on the bed. An hour passed. Then her body 
reacted. Involuntarily, she sat up and began projectile vomiting blood and 
stomach fluid. In a total blackout, she ran headlong toward the bathroom, but 
instead smashed face first into the sliding glass door, shattering the glass, 
breaking her arm, pulverizing her face, and collapsing unconscious in a pool 
of blood and vomit and whatever else. She woke up next morning in a pain
unlike anything she thought was even possible. She crawled, moaning and crying, to a phone and dialed 911. She was bleeding internally, but she would live.

The whole story came back to me in heightened detail. It was an instant reminder that suicide is never peaceful and painless, but instead an excruciating, violent end to all hopes and dreams and possibilities for the future. The memory came to me like a shock. It staggered me.

And it saved my life.

The myth and mystique had been shattered in a moment’s remembering. I flushed the pills and made myself throw up. There was scratching at the bathroom door. I opened it and saw the stray hound dog I’d recently found under a truck on the outskirts of town. She’d been close to death herself when I took her in. She cried and whined now, looking up at me. It was like she could sense she’d almost lost me. And I held on to her and cried.

I felt like I was on fire in a burning building, and suicide would be like jumping from a window to end the pain. But what that woman’s story showed me was that jumping from the building isn’t the end of pain: it’s only the beginning of a still yet more unimaginable pain to come. And it stopped me just long enough to remember my dog in the other room—and to remember that if I can just hold on, and not give up, eventually, one day, it does get better. Every time.

If that woman had not told me her story, I wouldn’t be here now. I would’ve missed out on all the amazing gifts I have in my life today. Because that’s the cool thing about life: if you don’t give up, if you keep going, putting one foot in front of the other, you never know what’s going to happen next. And I have real faith today that whatever is out there, I can face and overcome. I can enjoy life, moment by moment, day by day.
So when it came time to discuss the portrayal of the protagonist’s suicide in *13 Reasons Why*, I of course immediately flashed on my own experience. It seemed to me the perfect opportunity to show what an actual suicide really looks like—to dispel the myth of the quiet drifting off, and to make viewers face the reality of what happens when you jump from a burning building into something much, much worse.

It overwhelmingly seems to me that the most irresponsible thing we could’ve done would have been not to show the death at all. In AA, they call it playing the tape: encouraging alcoholics to really think through in detail the exact sequence of events that will occur after relapse. It’s the same thing with suicide. To play the tape through is to see the ultimate reality that suicide is not a relief at all—it’s a screaming, agonizing, horror.

Of course, the fact that we’re even having these discussions speaks of real progress to me. When I was growing up in San Francisco in the 80s, we lost many of our family and friends to the AIDS epidemic. Visiting friends in the hospital, I witnessed firsthand the merciless cruelty of that disease. Back then, H.I.V. seemed to be a death sentence, and activists had coined a slogan: silence = death.

When it comes to suicide, I believe the message should be exactly the same. Facing these issues head-on—talking about them, being open about them—will always be our best defense against losing another life. I’m proud to be a part of a television series that is forcing us to have these conversations, because silence really does equal death. We need to keep talking, keep sharing, and keep showing the realities of what teens in our society are dealing with every day. To do anything else would be not only irresponsible, but dangerous.

There are many reasons I’m proud to have worked on *13 Reasons Why*. But
the thing I am the most proud of, in all honestly, is the way we decided to
depict Hannah’s suicide—specially, the way Brian Yorkey wrote it, and Kyle
Alvarez directed it.

And so I stand behind what we did 100 percent. I know it was right, because
my own life was saved when the truth of suicide was finally held up for me to
see in all its horror—and reality.

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1/7
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