

Reasons to stay alive – Matt Haig

Finally.

Finally, we have an accurate and truly accessible account of mental illness. *Reasons to stay alive* is not Matt Haig's first novel, but it is without a doubt his most personal. The book begins with a 24-year old Matt contemplating whether to jump off a cliff in beautiful Ibiza. And I'm not talking about the thrill-seeking kind of jump. This was a desperate "I cannot feel like this anymore" escape out of this world, away from the crippling effects of depression.

Luckily, the book does not end there. Instead, with each chapter, Matt provides snippets of insight – about depression, about anxiety, and about the invisible and very real hell inhabiting people's minds. There is no traditional beginning, middle and end. There are simply pieces of information, experiences and thoughts, all collated into chapters. We can read 'Things depression says to you', 'Running', 'Thoughts on time' and so on. Lists, descriptions, stories, quotes – they are all in here, carefully collected and preserved. In some ways, the book is much like a mind, Matt's mind, open and available for us to view. And this is why I loved it.

Reasons to stay alive is not a self-help book, nor is it a piece of fiction. And it definitely isn't a textbook either. It doesn't fit. But this isn't a criticism (unless perhaps you're a librarian). The very fact the book doesn't fit into a specific category or genre says a lot about our society and its relationship with mental health. Yes, bookshops and libraries have shelves of books on mental health and wellbeing, but who wrote those books? Psychologists, doctors, experts in that field. I am not in any way taking away from the value these books can bring, but we are missing something. Where are the personal accounts from the people who actually suffer from depression? Or OCD, or phobias, or GAD, or eating disorders? You get the picture. *Reasons to stay alive* is one of few books, where the author talks frankly and openly about their experience of a mental illness. But, why?

The answer, in my view, is stigma. Why would someone choose to permanently write and make public something so embarrassing and shameful? Won't everyone think they're crazy, dangerous and should be locked away?

That's a big fat NO by the way. And yes, I am shouting it. There is nothing embarrassing, shameful or crazy about Matt Haig's piece of work. In fact, *Reasons to stay alive* is the opposite – warm, beautiful and inspiring. Jo Brand was quoted saying this book is 'essential to our collective well-being', and I couldn't agree more. Haig gives us a unique and privileged insight into his internal world and, by doing so, he has put a much-needed dent in the stigma attached to mental health.

It's time to start putting pen to paper, voice to microphone, face to video.

It's time to start talking.

By Natalie