

# Southern Constellations

(An Exegesis)

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this exegesis is to provide a theoretical background for the thesis, which is a novel titled *Pale Adolescence*. To understand this piece of work it is important to comprehend the research and portrayal of the following topics:

Depression in Young Adult Fiction, Place and Space in fiction, the theme of Friendship and the tone of Loneliness.

The books most often mentioned in this exegesis have been shortened for simplicity's sake. Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* will be referred to as Perks, John Green's *Looking for Alaska* will be LFA, Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock's *The Smell of Other People's Houses* will be TSOOPH, Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* will be ATBP and Leslye Walton's *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* will be referred to as Ava Lavender.

The two main characters in my book are called Lily, who is the protagonist, and James. Both are female and 17 years old.

## **Synopsis**

*Pale Adolescence* is a Young Adult Fiction novel written from the perspective of Lily Kahika.

Lily is a 17-year-old girl who wants to make new friends, after a mysterious break up of her one and only friendship. At her local high school, Lily finds a group of likeminded people, fitting in with them immediately. Soon James, a mentally unstable, fellow member of the Film Club becomes Lily's best friend. James' mental health issues worsen and create more turmoil than Lily could have anticipated. The story takes the reader through Lily's last year of high school and the possibilities that first love and heartbreak bring.

## **Motivation**

In writing *Pale Adolescence*, I wanted to construct a story teenagers could relate to. But I didn't want it to necessarily have a typical 'happy ending' because that could be seen as unrealistic. While teenage mental health is an issue that is being tackled widely in the YA (Young Adult) genre, I wanted to write this issue from a fresh perspective, while using research in mental health in the YA genre to help me do this. There are plenty of these narratives emerging in film and in literature, but not as much as I would like to see, particularly based in New Zealand. New Zealand has one of the highest teenage suicide rates in the world, so clearly this is a subject that needs to be talked about more (Brazier, 2017). I've always been interested in YA fiction; I believe that the teenage years are a time where people encounter lots of new things while undergoing profound physical, emotional and cerebral changes. It is also a period when individuals begin to find out who they are and what the world is really like. Some manage these changes with relative ease, but I have always been interested in the stories of people who struggle.

In my high school years and beyond I battled with depression, self-harm, and suicide. These are personal issues to me that I know many people face and can relate to. It is important to me that I write a story that other people can connect with, while also staying true to my own life experiences.

Two weeks before I began my Masters I lost my one remaining immediate family member, my mother, to cancer. This greatly affected my work because I often found it difficult to write, but also when I could, I was able to write about grief more honestly. It also brought a lot of my previously mentioned issues back and so I could write my characters problems while I was also struggling. In late October 2107, I also

lost my best friend to suicide. The importance of mental health became even more personal to me. I will discuss the end result of this later in the exegesis.

### **Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction**

Mental health is a vast and complicated subject that has been addressed in a lot of YA Fiction. According to Schwartz (2014) depression “*can be based on biological factors or even stressful events.*” It is most common for mental health issues to become apparent in teen years, which is why it is a popular topic in the YA genre.

Before writing and whilst developing my thesis, *Pale Adolescence*, I read books from the YA genre and also from general drama literature to inform me on different ways mental health, in particular depression, is depicted. I read *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, *Impulse* by Ellen Hopkins and many more. I will discuss the books *Looking For Alaska* by John Green, *All The Bright Places* by Jenifer Niven and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky because they were the books that predominantly influenced me while writing *Pale Adolescence*.

I researched the different symptoms of depression and how it can manifest. I did this so that I might identify if the previously mentioned authors used these ‘signs’ in their work and also so I could use them in my own. The most common signs are feelings of sadness or frustration over small things, low self-esteem, sleeping too much or insomnia, and self-harm to name a few (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2017). I was also prompted by my memories and experiences of how I felt when I was depressed.

In *Looking For Alaska* (LFA) author John Green never states that one of his characters, Alaska, is depressed. But he alludes to it by adding clues in the scenery and showing her moody nature. *“One could read the obvious symbolism of Alaska’s volatility and unpredictability. But the candle is also a reminder that Alaska clearly spends a lot of time by herself.”* (Green, 2016).

Alaska also fixates on past failures such as her not calling the ambulance when her mother was dying. She has mood swings and can be very irritable; all of these are signs of depression. (Mental Health Foundation, 2014).

Green is a writer who has talked openly about experiencing depression in his past, which could be a reason why his character’s sorrow feels authentic;

*“I think it’s particularly difficult for her (Alaska) because she feels alone in that pain, which is what really (in my experience, anyway) makes suffering unbearable and makes one experience real despair.”* (Green, 2016).

LFA was useful in terms of developing my character James’ depression. In LFA Alaska is not the protagonist, so her depression is shown from the point of view of someone else, watching her. It is the same in *Pale Adolescence* where James’ struggles are shown via Lily’s observations.

In *All The Bright Places* (ATBP), Jenifer Niven’s two protagonists are both depressed in different ways. Violet is depressed because she was the survivor in a car crash and her sister was not. Her depression is shown by a loss of interest in normal or pleasant activities and thinking about death (Schwartz, 2014).

Finch is the second protagonist. His depression is shown by frequent thoughts of death or dying, insomnia, agitation and restlessness.

Both characters are never diagnosed with a mental disorder, however it is clear from the start that they each have individual issues. Niven is another author who has had personal experiences with mental illnesses and has been able to write about them truthfully. She has talked in interviews about her reason for writing *ATBP*, which was that she once loved a boy who was bipolar. He had many issues and never got help and he ended up committing suicide, like her character, Finch.

Schulman interviewed Niven (2014) about *ATBP* and why she wrote it;

*“It was connected to the person I knew, and other people I’ve known who have battled either undiagnosed or diagnosed mental illness, and seeing the everyday struggle it takes for them just to be in the world sometimes.”*

While Finch’s mental health issues end up being more extreme, I was inspired by Violet’s character because she was similar in personality to my protagonist. However, the reason for Violet’s depression is situational; the loss of her sister. Whereas my protagonist’s depression was due to unfulfillment in her social life, low self-esteem, and possibly a chemical imbalance. One of my other main characters, James, is depressed as well. While her depression is only seen through glimpses of the protagonist’s eyes, it is clear James’ depression is different to Lily’s. Much like Violet in *ATBP*, James has lost a family member fairly recently. This was the catalyst for James to develop depression. The symptoms that were noticeable were irritability, sadness, self-harm, and many others. So while I didn’t use Violet’s signs to model my protagonist’s, they were useful when I was creating James’ depression.

In *The Perks Of Being A Wallflower* (Perks), it is unclear exactly what mood disorder Charlie, the protagonist, has. The reader is aware that he has spent time in a psychiatric hospital. Later in the book the reader finds out that a family member

sexually abused him. His mental health issues are shown by bouts of uncontrollable crying, trouble remembering things and even blacking out for periods of time. Suicide is mentioned in *Perks*, but is not a main theme. Charlie's friend commits suicide prior to the beginning of the book, so suicide is only mentioned in passing. Author Stephen Chbosky has given very few interviews around his book so it is difficult to determine exactly what mood disorder he intended for Charlie. This was interesting to research because it made me think about if was necessary to put a label on mood disorders and what did I want for my characters. In the end I decided that I did want more clarity in my work in terms of mental health so I did not use Charlie's symptoms. *Perks* does not directly deal with mental illnesses, however they are most definitely mentioned and part of the sub-text, so I felt it was still important to research this work.

In my thesis, *Pale Adolescence*, it begins with hints that Lily, the protagonist, has been depressed in the past. In the second chapter I write,

*"They took me to the doctor because I kept falling into what they call 'pits'. I'd go days without talking, sleeping or eating."*(*Pale Adolescence*, p.58).

It is common for people to refer to depression as another name such as 'pits'. This is because depression can still be a taboo subject and make people uncomfortable. Going days without talking, eating or sleeping is a clear indication of depression (Mental Health Foundation, 2014). These signs are ones that I choose to include in *Pale Adolescence* because they correspond with Lily's passive personality. Through researching the three books *LFA*, *ATBP* and *Perks* I have seen depression and other mental health issues depicted differently. I ended up choosing signs or symptoms of depression that were parallel to my characters' personalities (as I have more than one character with mental health issues). These indications were also signs

that I showed, so I was able to write about them with honesty. Even though I ended up not using all the characters' symptoms from the previously mentioned books, the research did inform me on different approaches to mental health in literature.

In the very early stages of my first draft, I originally had the idea that Lily's depression was going to be the main mental health focus. But as I got to halfway through writing the first draft I realised that I wanted the book to be more serious than just Lily overcoming her depression. While overcoming depression is immensely important I felt that suicide was a subject I wanted to tackle too. So I began developing James' character to be more erratic and have other personality traits that aligned with depression and suicide characteristics. I thought about having Lily be the one who commits suicide, but then the reader wouldn't be able to see the fallout from it unless I switched to third person perspective after Lily's death, which I felt could read awkwardly. The fallout from suicide is of great importance as it always affects more people than the person who committed it could have imagined (Ali, 2015). So that is why I chose to have James die instead. It worked out for the best as Lily's ultimate journey in the novel was about her friendships whereas James' was her battle with life. I did consciously make these decisions, but as has been discussed in lectures, sometimes it feels as though characters take on a life on their own. They have their own personalities and I found myself thinking, 'No, Lily wouldn't do that, but James would.'

I struggled with writing James' death scene. One reason for this was because it is an emotional scene and I had to access a dark part of myself to write it. The other reason was because I originally wrote the scene in first person from James' perspective. After a discussion with my supervisor, Siobhan Harvey, I changed this

scene to a dream sequence. So the scene is still in first person but from the perspective of Lily as she watches James' suicide, but she believes she is dreaming.

Many authors speak about how experiencing depression or seeing loved ones' mental health issues has enhanced their works authenticity. I believe I was able to tell my story 'truthfully' because of my experiences. In all of these examples, my own included, depression or mental health issues are portrayed in different ways. This is because depression can look different from person to person.

### **Place and Space**

Place and Space is integral to the setting of a novel, they are one in the same. Setting is fundamental to literature as it sets up the location and time that the work takes place (Housewright, 2011). Place and Space can be used to set up tones and themes of the writing while also showing the reader what the character/s is feeling without telling them (Harvey, 2017).

Place and Space is an essential part of *The Smell of Other People's Houses* (TMOOPH) by Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock. In this novel the land is almost like a separate character in itself.

Diaz interviewed Hitchcock (2016) about the use of the landscape in her novel;

*"I love that you call Alaska another character, because that really is true. The book begins in 1959 for that reason, because growing up in a place that is also just beginning to define itself is important for the characters. The internal struggles of the characters were sort of a reflection of what they were seeing externally as Alaska tried to figure out what it meant to be the 49th state."*

While I didn't want my setting to be a 'character', TSOOPH helped me to see how important Place and Space could be, so in a way this did influence me to think about my setting more. In TSOOPH I believe the reason that people feel that the land is a character is because when the place is described, a lot of the time it is by using personification; "*The river was fighting back. It flooded its banks and rose higher and higher, grabbing everything in sight with its big, wet tongue.*" (Hitchcock, 2016, p.6).

I felt like this was a good idea because it brings more life into the words, and makes the setting feel more realistic, even though personification is not technically real. I brought personification into my work with sentences such as; "*The wavering light gives the trees' limbs life, making them look like white corpses stretching.*" (Pale Adolescence, p.116).

Another book that greatly influenced my process with Place and Space was the novel *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* (Ava Lavender) by Leslye Walton. This book is set mostly in Seattle. The Place and Space in this book is mysterious, moody and magical;

*"The cherry tree along the side of the house had bloomed a season earlier than any other on the block. Throughout January, Viviane had watched the pink blooms scatter across the snow-covered lawn. Now the tree was bursting with cherries so red they were purple, and so large and ripe their skins cracked, the juice leaking down the tree's branches and into the ground."* (Walton, 2014, p.106).

This unusual description of nature reflects on one of the character's pregnancy. I wanted the same tones in *Pale Adolescence*, which is why I originally set my novel in Seattle too.

My description was not as unusual, however I still attempted to emulate the vivid imagery in my own work, for example:

*“Their twigs are spindly fingers grasping for something higher but not in reach. The droplets that cling to the branches grip desperately, only to fall when too heavy, dissolving into the ground. They are no longer singular, but part of the earth, joining thousands of others that have gone before.”* (Pale Adolescence, p.137).

I had an interesting experience with trying to find the right backdrop for my novel. For the first six months of the year and all of my first draft, *Pale Adolescence* was set in North America. I chose this because I believed my book would appeal to an American YA audience. I originally set my novel in a fictional Pacific Northwest city, similar to Seattle. I chose this because I thought the area reflected and complimented the tones in *Pale Adolescence*, which are moody, green, wet and dark. Also I wanted it to be set a city, but one not too large.

However when I was writing, I struggled to envision the area properly as I had never been to Seattle or anywhere like it. I realised that I was avoiding writing about plants, trees, even the smell of the air because I didn't know what Seattle smelled or looked like. So while I believed that the Pacific Northwest had the right atmosphere for my work, my place and space was very vague and boring. Because my work is highly emotive, I like to rely on writing about Place and Space as a tool of Show Don't Tell, so because I wasn't using this, my work seemed flat and dull. I was also having trouble with writing in American language and vernacular. My first draft didn't sit well with me so in July after much discussion of the pros and cons with my supervisor, Siobhan Harvey; I decided to switch the setting to New Zealand. I set the novel in a fictional Dunedin. I chose Dunedin because I wanted the vast difference in

weather as in hot summers and snowy winters. I wanted this because I felt that the extreme differences in seasons reflected the intense emotions the characters feel as teenagers, such as immense happiness and colossal sorrow. I felt the South Island still retained the moody backdrop I had envisioned for my work.

Cecire, Field, Finn & Roy (2015), children's literary theorist, writes about the importance of creating an unknown space, because it gives the reader a chance to imagine the place themselves;

*“While place plays a critical role in children's literature of all types, its centrality may be magnified when the place in question does not really exist, precisely because both protagonist and reader are asked to focus their attention on the nature of the place(s) concerned.”*

I fictionalised Dunedin because I wanted a city where no reader had actually gone before and so they would have no pre-conceived knowledge of the space. When writing about a city that people already know, there is a danger of them bringing their own prejudices or knowledge of the place, this can sometimes be good or bad (Chapman, n.d). I preferred to write an entirely new town so that if someone from New Zealand or anywhere in the world were to read it, they would have to use their imagination through my words.

I did use some plants found in New Zealand when describing my setting so that it was clear to the reader that it is set somewhere in New Zealand, *“Outside the cabins are Poplar trees, their bright yellow leaves starting to coat the ground.”* (Pale Adolescence, p.106). Poplar trees are found in the North Island but much more so in the South. They are what I think of when I imagine the South Island in autumn.

In my subsequent drafts I was pleased I changed my setting to New Zealand as the description reads authentically and there is a lot more of it than in my first draft.

## **Friendship and Loneliness or Theme and Tone**

Friendship was a major theme in this book and while on this subject it also highlights one of the biggest tones of the book, which is loneliness. Friendship and loneliness go together as opposites very often do.

Friendships change a lot in high school; people become close with others they never would have expected, and some friendships suffer from estrangement. This is because teenage years are pivotal; people can develop different interests or their personalities may alter therefore friendships could naturally change too (Parenting Support Centre, 2014).

I studied various books to see how they portrayed friendships and if they tackled serious issues within the friend group, I looked at this because it relates back to my research into teenage mental health. Friendships can be very helpful in regards to support. However they can also be very unhelpful if the person in question does not feel they can confide in their friends as this could create a sense of loneliness. The books that I found the most helpful in this research were *Looking for Alaska* (LFA) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Perks).

In Perks, Charlie's friends are very close to him. They show they care and they are very accepting of his individual differences. However because they are too concerned with their own personal conflicts, they fail to see when something is wrong with him. Charlie has a breakdown and goes to hospital; luckily he is not permanently damaged. (Chbosky, 1999). I believe the issue in this book is that Charlie didn't say anything when he noticed his emotional health was declining. Charlie was always very concerned with not being a burden to his friends or family, but this became the

issue in the end. He needed to feel he was important enough to tell them when there was something wrong.

In *Pale Adolescence* the protagonist has recently been through a break up of her one and only friend. Teenage friendships can be intense and I tried to show this closeness by using flashbacks of Lily and Florence's relationship, "*On days when she was sick I felt stranded.*" (Pale Adolescence, p.45). Flashbacks are an effective way of showing information that is in the past, but is relative to the present (Keeley, 2013). I used flashbacks quite a lot in the first half of *Pale Adolescence* because I wanted to show how terrible Lily's last friendship had been so that the reader could understand what kind of friendship she would be looking for in the present.

One of the most significant parts of *Pale Adolescence* is Lily making new friends. She becomes close with these people quite quickly, especially James. I showed this by Lily opening up to James and by physical closeness between them.

*"Oh wow, I do know her. She really doesn't seem like your type. What happened between you two?" James pauses her sketch of a tree.*

*"Well... now looking back I guess there was a build-up of things," I say. "She kind of always subtly put me down. Then when I got upset she would say I was too sensitive, just stuff like that."* (Pale Adolescence, p.102).

*"James is leaning her head on Miles' shoulder while holding my hand."* (Pale Adolescence, p.111).

Even though teenage relationships can be intense and sometimes feel more like family, there was a question I wanted to explore about this closeness. The question was a lot of James' friends saw that she was in pain and hurting herself, including Lily. Even though they saw this, they never said anything until it was too

late. They supposedly loved her so much but when it came to the tough questions they weren't there. Below is an example of how I portrayed this awkwardness to confrontation.

*"I, well, I saw something that made me worry." Ari looks at me, questioningly. "A few weeks ago I saw cuts on her arm."*

*"Oh yeah," Ari looks at the floor. "She sometimes does that."*

*"She's done it before? Have you said something to her?"*

*Ari looks at me and I can't tell whether she is angry or upset, "No. It's just one of those things you can't talk or ask about."*

*"But what if she's in danger?" I ask.*

*"She's not. Look at her." Ari points to James "She's young, beautiful and yeah she gets sad sometimes but she's dealing with it." (Pale Adolescence, p.174).*

I experienced this in my own friend group. Through writing this book I began to question more why they never said anything to me when they saw obvious signs of depression and self-harm.

The answer I came up with is teenagers are scared to bridge the gap to something they don't know. Maybe they are afraid it will create a divide in their friend group or maybe it is still about depression and all things associated with it having shame or taboo surrounding it. In teen years 'fitting in' is of great importance generally, and anything that can cause conflict would be a threat (How to Parent a Teen, 2012).

In an interview by Schulman, Niven (2014) spoke about the shame surrounding depression and suicide;

*"There's such a difference between losing someone to suicide and to cancer in terms of the reaction you get, and I think that stigma has kept people from talking*

*about it. I think there's kind of a mentality that if we don't talk about it, it won't exist. And as we know, that just doesn't happen. If people feel like there's help out there and know that they're not alone, that will be such a good thing."*

In Niven's book *All the Bright Places*, she raises questions similar to mine, in that why are these critical issues not talked about more. Suicide rates are at an all time high in New Zealand (Dubicka & Brent, 2017) and people show that they care when it is too late, this needs to change.

After my second draft I concluded that I needed more scenes in which to develop my characters relationships and to perpetuate the theme of friendship, this is why I added in the school camp chapter. I felt that camp was a good backdrop for strengthening friendships because there is less adult supervision than normal, and generally camp is a fun time of year. I decided the characters would sneak alcohol in, acts of rebellion often bonds teenagers together. Then when the group do get drunk it sparks conversations they may never have had because their guards are lowered;

*We all continue chatting, but James leans over to me quietly asking, "What about you Lil? What would be your worst thing?"*

*I think for a moment before answering, "Yeah, same as Miles. Losing my friends, but also my family." (Pale Adolescence, p.111).*

As I mentioned previously, friendship and loneliness are intertwined because they are opposites. My protagonist goes through a lot of ups and downs in her friendships in this book, so naturally there are a lot of times when she feels lonely. I used research from the books *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Perks) and *The*

*Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* (Ava Lavender) to help me construct my tone of loneliness.

In Perks, Charlie gains a new friend group, and at one point loses them. This is very similar to my thesis, *Pale Adolescence*. Charlie's helplessness on how to fix his broken friendships is written so clearly that it is easy to relate to.

*"I don't know how much longer I can keep going without a friend. I used to be able to do it very easily, but that was before I knew what having a friend was like."* (Chbosky, 1999, p.144).

Because both Perks and *Pale Adolescence* have a similar break up of friendship in the middle of the books, I was able to use this as a guide. I tried to emulate the feeling of being surrounded by people but not being able to talk to the ones you really want to, is far more isolating than simply being alone.

*"The school is big enough that I don't see any of them much between classes. Occasionally I catch a glimpse of James but she stares straight ahead, not acknowledging me."* (Pale Adolescence, p.150).

Ava Lavender is a book about a family who are, for the most part, all very strange. Because of their unusualness they do not fit into normal society. This creates a lot of loneliness for the characters, each in their own different way.

*"I'd been protected my whole life, forced to watch the world through the lonely window of my bedroom while the night called to me, like a siren luring forlorn sailors onto a rocky shoal."* (Walton, 2014, p.180).

My protagonist isn't strange, but she goes through her own story of loneliness. I used my research from these two books, combined with my own experience to craft my lonely tone.

I grew up as an only child, raised by a single mother. I didn't live near any of my friends so a lot of my childhood was spent alone. Since losing my mother I feel I have been even more isolated, not of my own volition. I have pondered this, this year and a possible reason would be that people are scared of death and grief and perhaps don't know how I will be. In any case, my loneliness this year was useful when writing my story. I showed this by much of Lily's time spent by herself, in her room, staring at the walls or sky, or walking around school with no place to be. This is what I commonly did when I was depressed but also when I was lonely or grieving.

*"The school hallways seem even more suffocating and solitary than they did back in the first week of school."* (Pale Adolescence, p.150).

Loneliness is a feeling that most people have felt and therefore can empathise with. Even though it is a common feeling, it is important to me to write it authentically, as it is one of the most significant tones in the book.

Upon the death of my best friend in October 2017, I was able to observe the exact reactions to suicide from my friends and myself. They were different to how I had written my characters' responses. I wanted to go back and change *Pale Adolescence* to reflect this newfound knowledge. Such as when Lily tells Miles about James' suicide, she does so over the phone. I now believe that this is not over the phone news, and so I would have gotten Lily to tell Miles in person. Also in my thesis, post-suicide, there is a lot of crying and grief, and upon reflection I feel I need to add more shock to everyone's mentality, as of course, no one expected this death. I wanted to re-write all of this but I found it much too difficult to touch these chapters in which the devastation from suicide is shown. In time I plan to re-write them with the appropriate changes.

## **Conclusion**

My journey since beginning my masters has been long, and like my thesis, it has had its ups and downs. I've learnt a lot, and I know there is so much more I want to do with my work. I realised while writing my exegesis that all my topics in some way came back to the importance of mental health. Through researching all the different aspects I have mentioned in my exegesis, and my now all too real experience, I have realised how critical it is to create more conversations around mental health, and I hope to continue researching this. Fiction is another vessel in which to continue the voyage to empathy and understanding, which everyone could do with a little more.

Next year I plan to continue working on *Pale Adolescence*, using the feedback from my examiners to help improve it. From there I intend to get published.

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