

Book review of 'Wales High School: First Diagnosis'

Dennis Relajo-Howell

Psychreg
United Kingdom

Correspondence: drelojo.howell@gmail.com

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In the US, only 40% of students with emotional, behavioural, and mental health disorders progress from high school, compared to the national average of 76% (US Department of Education, 2001). Meanwhile, over 50% of students with emotional and behavioural disabilities ages 14 and older, drop out of high school. This is the highest dropout rate of any disability group (Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health, 2005)

Wales High School: First Diagnosis (Peters, 2020), as the new point of departure in the Peters' book series, calls upon lovers of creative young adult fiction, memoirs, case studies, and autobiography. First and foremost, there's a lot to appreciate in *Wales High School*. This book is for anyone who has been diagnosed with a mental health condition for the first time. For people with serious mental illness, getting the services or treatment needed to deal with mental health symptoms can be elusive. People in crisis can inappropriately end up on a waiting list before beginning critically needed treatment.

This is an altogether different protagonist than the young adult depicted in J. Peters' first authored book *University on Watch: Crisis in the Academy*. Since then, J. Peters has published several new editions of his first work and two other books in the three-part series. I can confirm this book also stands on its own as well. Similar to his first two works, *Wales High School* shares several similarities in style, delivery, form, and inventive language. In the same way these commonalities can be traced throughout the J. Peters series. Even more subtle, and at times, not so subtle differences, emerge for the reader to bear witness. These sometimes stark, and at other times, seemingly intuitive differences signal to the reader this is a very different story than ever before.

Like I noted earlier, Jacques Peters truly isn't the same as he reads in either preceding books in the series. While the differences are artfully nuanced. The biggest difference is the author's scientific accounting of stages of human development and its invariable impact on behaviour. This time, Jacques is raging through his adolescence. This makes the narrative more organic as Jacques' speech is very much congruent with his stage of development. In this sense Jacques's age is captured well in the writing when it comes to dialogue. This can be seen in the simplicity and elegance of the book's language. So, the higher-level rhetoric offered in *University on Watch*, and the snarky, bitter intellectualization of young adult themes as seen in *Small Fingernails* is not present in this book.

Like J. Peters other two books, the first chapter continues to be screenshots of Jacques unresolved complex and memorable traumas from previous years. The book therefore follows the same formula at its departure in the first chapter and its conclusion. *Wales High School* begins with a Jacques' past

experiences in Middle School as an ineffective Middle School student council president now decidedly finding himself at the bottom rung of the social ladder as a freshman in High School. In this manner, *Wales High School* extends these screenshots of Jacques memories and rolls them out into the same iconic vignettes this author has mastered throughout the book series.

In terms of relevance, the contemporary reader will appreciate the strength of the narrative. The book very cleanly builds into a fever pitch culminating in the protagonist's hospitalisation. I cannot emphasise how much I enjoyed reading this new Peters book. Specifically, I really enjoyed the glimpses of Jacques' thought processes and the opportunity to better understand where these types of impulses originate. To me, this story felt very believable and relatable.

There is quite a bit of conflict in this piece; whether it's emotional, physical, or situational. A teenage Peters spends most of the book in conflict with himself. In doing so, Peters is caught between what he wants and his own limitations which prevent him from getting that. However, he also comes into conflict with nearly every other character in the book (his grandmother being an important and notable exception) and this is an important part of his journey. This troubling aspect of Peters' life and burgeoning mental health condition becomes increasingly obvious to the reader as the tension mounts that Jacques will do anything in his power to achieve what he wants. This is both exciting and terrifying. Interestingly, there is not a clear point at which the conflict ends for Peters. While his internal conflicts seem to settle a bit in the last few chapters, he continues to have negative interactions with others and even the last lines allude to ongoing conflict.

The falling action of this story is very satisfying. There are no threads left unfinished. I liked the messages of recognising who is truly there for you and controlling what you can and stepping away from what you cannot. I identified themes of isolation, attention-seeking, and reality vs illusion.

There is no question that the very same passion that set the stage for Peters' adult adventure into language is visible during *Wales High School* in what his youthful and most vulnerable phase of life is – adolescence. Here, the reader will witness first-hand how this iconic literary character gained the transformative power to transgress with such ease, albeit to his own demise, and ultimately, setting the path to his near distant future at New London University. This book also gets underneath the root of *Small Fingernails* (Peters, 2019), elaborating on the urgency of Peters' mission to New London University and the new life he sought to establish for himself after his heart-wrenching experience in Wales High School.

It was such a privilege to read this story and get lost in the tumultuous life of Peters – I feel like I know him now (and know myself a little bit better too). This book sheds light on issues of access and stigma, making visible the challenges people with mental illness face in society. People with mental health disorders are more than a diagnostic code or a clinical definition (First et al., 2015).

The author's intent, as indicated in the book's dedication, was for the reader to better understand how the mental health system works. In doing so, if people find themselves with a diagnosis, they are more prepared to find the help they will need is abundantly clear within the book. Readers should be prepared for joy, hope, grief, and laboured panic-stricken horror as this book unfolds. Ultimately, a great read.

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