

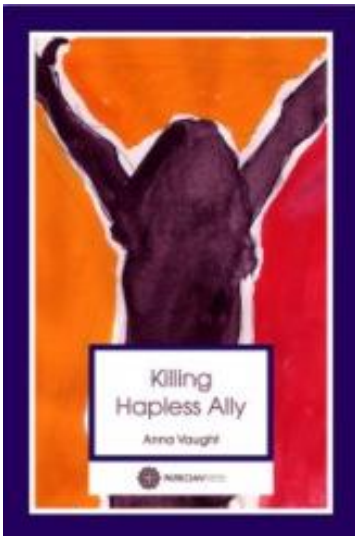
Killing Hapless Ally by Anna Vaught

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A darkly funny account of a woman's courageous battle to regain her sense of identity following a lifetime of self-doubt

Alison has always had plenty of friends. Unfortunately, they are all in her head. With a conspiratorial smile, she invites the reader into her world as a confidante, providing an occasionally harrowing, often hilarious but always vivid insight into life in the grip of mental illness.

'Behind the chintz curtains, it was hell.'



We join Alison on a journey through her lonely childhood, schooldays and early romances, witnessing horrible Christmases, disastrous holidays, unhappy birthdays and 'many angry cooked breakfasts.' She shares her wedding day ('not the happiest day of Alison's life but at least it was undeniably funny'), honeymoon (featuring a visit to a relative in a psychiatric unit) and the births of her children; events interspersed with her own treatment at various NHS mental health centres.

Alison's popular mother enjoys nothing more than destroying her daughter's confidence behind closed doors. Her father, a respected headmaster, advises parents to 'never crush a child's spirit' whilst doing exactly that to Alison on a daily basis. Her dad is also a 'caravan-fancier' while her mother hates caravans, but these ill-matched parents are united in loathing their daughter.

'My parents? Well, they are pillars of the community, we are a middle class family and that...is how they get away with it.'

Trapped in an unhappy home, Alison invents a buffoonish alter ego called Hapless Ally in an attempt to hide her ostensibly unworthy true self. Hapless Ally fills the hole where self-esteem should be, providing a protective layer 'as an alternative to feeling skin-off vulnerable.' However, as Alison starts to lose control, her alter-ego threatens to take over.

This bold, unique novel challenges and inspires the reader with many references to scholarly greats including Sartre and Camus alongside more accessible and familiar creative artists from the literary and music worlds. Alison's eclectic mix of imaginary friends includes Sylvia Plath, John Keats and Dolly Parton. They pop up on a regular basis to cheer her on, providing words of comfort during difficult times.

'A little hand with long shiny nails was placed firmly on her arm. It was small, but mighty, and Alison knew that Dolly was the big sister she had always wanted.'

Alison's troubled past occasionally sabotages the present as 'tentacular memories' ensnare her. Unfortunate events are described in darkly funny anecdotes, such as the time her distant, inscrutable father accidentally severs his own toe in a freak lawn-mowing accident and the young Alison agonizes over whether frozen blackberries are an appropriate substitute for peas to keep it chilled on the way to hospital.

Attempting to define herself, Alison exclaims: 'I'm potentially bipolar, a depressive, with several anxiety conditions... psychoses... possibly obsessive compulsive and definitely with an attachment disorder'. Society's misperceptions of 'madness and badness' are further highlighted as Alison seeks a label to help her tidy up the 'strange, amorphous shape' of her internal mind but naturally does not fit into a narrow definition. What finally helps her is the acknowledgment that there could be a solution that works; that things can change, including her thought patterns and, subsequently, her feelings. That realisation, and the special team of NHS superheroes who come to her aid as members of the Mental Health Recovery Squad, enable her to bravely set out to regain control over her life, seizing back autonomy from Hapless Ally.

This is a novel with an important message of hope: that mental health problems are nothing to be ashamed of and may be worked through and overcome in whatever way works best for the individual.

'For Alison, it took a couple of particularly sequinned imaginary friends, because she didn't know how to make...conventional friendships.'

It challenges the stigma associated with mental illness and demonstrates that it is OK to be different. It is a testament to Alison's own strength and an inspiration to others that she emerges from a history of self-harm and suicide attempts with a survivor's determination to face up to and surpass her traumatic past.

About the author

Anna Vaught is an English teacher, mother of three and campaigner for improved mental health services. Killing Hapless Ally is her first novel. She is currently writing her second book, A Life of Almost.

About the publisher

The Patrician Press started in 2012 and promotes writers of fiction and poetry. They represent unique literary voices and believe it is 'imperative to uphold and maintain the quality of contemporary literature in today's challenging, competitive and ever changing technological world.'

About the reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, dog lover, and reviewer of books. A huge Dolly Parton fan, she dreams of one day going to Dollywood. Follow her on Twitter: @BeckyD123