

Reviews

tv review: 13 Reasons Why

13 *Reasons Why* topped Jumpshot's analysis of most-watched original shows on Netflix in the US when released in 2017.¹ The series chronicles the final year of the life of Hannah Baker, a high school senior, who takes her own life. She leaves behind 13 cassette tapes to be passed around her peers after she dies. Each episode covers one tape, which focuses on one person, and Hannah's view of their role in her suicide.

Popular also in the UK, the show was cited as a key topic of teenage discussion by the local youth counselling service at a GP training day I attended recently. Though critics responses were very positive, a broader range of reactions were seen in the Christian and medical spheres.

Some Christians advocated outright avoidance of this series,² while others were more balanced.³ A respected journal linked the show to an increase in online searches for suicide in the days following the series' release.⁴ The article noted that World Health Organization guidelines on suicide suggest warning messages and helpline numbers should be shown with such material, none of which were present initially.

I found the tragic story quite believable and barring the odd trans-Atlantic difference largely consistent with what I see in general practice in London.

How might we respond to this series?

■ **Be aware of such programmes.** Some Christians may not like them, but they are watched by many of those we look after. If we have watched, we will engage better with teenage patients sharing similar problems who've also seen it, although those for whom on screen depictions of suicide, sexual assault or substance misuse will cause problems would be



better to avoid this series.

■ **Question it.** Some truths are depicted. The tapes suggest that no single issue triggered Hannah's suicide. Lots of things built up over a year.

But a well-executed series can lead us unquestioningly to accept its underlying ideas. Does Hannah really have the deep insight into events suggested by her tapes? Has she really got her revenge on those who were involved, now that she has died and left the recordings? Even if she was wronged, did it really

justify all her actions? The second series questions these things, but still left a sense that Hannah had taken control by ending her own life. Is that really ever the case?

■ **Learn.** The setting resonates with many teenagers: oblivious school authorities; large parts of life with apparently little involvement of parents; the focus on here and now and God conspicuous by his absence (aside from a brief, rather stereotyped priest in series two). The contrast to our lives may be stark for some, but series like this are often popular just because they reflect reality to a degree.

13 Reasons Why undoubtedly has artistic merit. Even though the underlying message and some of the content may concern us, questioning and thoughtful viewing will help us understand the background behind some of the patients who present to us. ■

Laurence Crutchlow is CMF Associate Head of Student Ministries and a GP in London

REFERENCES

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2. For a particularly forthright example see: 13 reasons why: one Christian's response. *Graceful Abandon* bit.ly/2CPXO14
3. TV review. *Plugged in* bit.ly/2x9YjXy
4. Ayres JW et al. Internet Searches for Suicide following the release of *13 Reasons Why*. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2017; October 177(10):1527-9 bit.ly/2x9AHTL