

**“CAN HUMAN SUFFERING BE TOO MUCH?”  
HANYA YANAGIHARA, *A LITTLE LIFE***

1. *A Little Life*, by the American author Hanya Yanagihara, was published in 2015.
  - 1.1. The novel explores the life of Jude St. Francis, a talented and successful lawyer in New York City, as he struggles to cope with his traumatic childhood.
  - 1.2. It is mainly a meditation on the psychology of trauma, depicting the ways in which suffering can derail a life beyond recovery.

**Plot summary<sup>1</sup>**

2. Initially, none of characters of the novel knows anything specific about Jude’s background—his family history, his sexuality, or even his race; he is an elusive and mysterious character – until he injures himself badly in what looks suspiciously like a suicide attempt despite his denials, creating the first glimpse into his troubled psyche.
3. Soon the reader learns that Jude habitually cuts himself and about his traumatic past. Abandoned by his parents outside a drugstore as a baby, he was taken in and raised by monks, some of whom sexually abused him. He also suffered a terrible injury that resulted in permanent spine damage that causes him leg pain.
4. Gradually Jude develops a close relationship with one of his law professors, Harold, who, with his wife, adopts him.
5. Jude takes a job at a prestigious law firm and become very wealthy, but his legs are getting worse, causing him so much pain that he often has to spend many consecutive days in his wheelchair.
6. Jude enters in a relationship with a man named Caleb who quickly becomes abusive. Caleb treats Jude’s disability with cruelty, accusing him of weakness, and eventually beats him. The worst, final beating leaves Jude unconscious and badly injured, needing hospitalization and bedrest for weeks afterward.
7. Eventually, the trauma from this relationship becomes too much to bear, and Jude attempts suicide but is discovered before he dies.
8. In flashbacks, the reader discovers that one of the monks at the monastery, Brother Luke, convinced Jude to run away with him, regularly raped and prostituted him.
9. Jude and one of the other characters, Willem, transition from a friendship to a romantic relationship. As they attempt to work through Jude’s continued cutting and fear of physical intimacy, Jude’s physical health declines, and a bone infection leads to the amputation of his lower legs.
10. Through new flashbacks, the reader learns that after escaping Brother Luke, Jude was sent to a home for parentless children, where counselors again sexually abused him. From there, he ran away and was forced to trade sexual favors in exchange for cross-country rides from truckers. He was kidnapped by Dr. Traylor, who kept him imprisoned in his

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.supersummary.com/a-little-life/summary/>

basement and raped him regularly. Jude only escaped after Traylor ran him over with his car, causing the spinal issues that affected Jude for the rest of his life.

11. Willem (Jude's partner and the only person who has managed to really get close to him) dies tragically and Jude finds himself unable to process his grief. Eventually, he decides to try to kill himself. His friends again save him and force him to hospitalize. One evening he lashes out violently at his adoptive parents, Harold and Julia, and finds solace in the fact that they love him anyway; he cannot push them away despite his best attempts.
12. The last part of the novel is a first-person narration by the adoptive father Harold who reveals that Jude has killed himself. Despite reaching a relative balance after Willem's death he never recovered emotionally from this loss or from his childhood trauma. Harold also relates that before dying Jude left notes for his loved ones, including to whom he finally reveals the whole story of his past, apologizing for it as if they would think less of him upon learning it.

### How the novel works

13. The novel has been praised by some for its emotional intensity and yet berated for its relentless and at times unbearable portrayal of trauma and self-violence.
14. Yanagihara pursues a double narrative strategy:
 

[She] brings the reader into unnervingly close proximity to Jude's suffering, while at the same time withholding the perspective into his experience through a first-person narrator.<sup>2</sup>

Jude's horrific suffering may not ever be comprehended cognitively due to its overwhelming nature. [...] It can only be transmitted in its inherently unrepresentable quality.<sup>3</sup>
15. At the same time the constant description of self-harm is meant to convey the compulsive aspect of traumatic experience – something which cannot be really understood unless one is *forced* to witness its relentless character:

Just as Jude cannot help but relive and re-enact the overwhelming events of his traumatic childhood, so too can the reader not help but bear witness to this often-unbearable re-enactment, a narratively intrusive and complicit premise that appears to have moved and appalled readers in equal measures.<sup>4</sup>

The experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will.<sup>5</sup>

“Jude,” I said, “why do you do this to yourself?” For a long time, he was quiet, and I was quiet too. I listened to the sea. Finally, he said, “A few reasons.” “Like what?” “Sometimes it's because I feel so awful, or ashamed, and I need to make physical what I feel,” he began, and glanced at me before looking down again. “And sometimes it's because I feel so many things and I need to

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<sup>2</sup> Jonas Kellermann, “Witnessing Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*”, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 62:3 (2021), 334-346, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1858750>, 342.

<sup>3</sup> Jonas Kellermann, 341.

<sup>4</sup> Jonas Kellermann, 340.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press 1995, 2.

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

feel nothing at all—it helps clear them away. And sometimes it’s because I feel happy, and I have to remind myself that I shouldn’t.” (360)<sup>6</sup>

“He was never able to explain to Willem what the cutting did for him in a way he’d understand: [. . .] how it made him feel like his body, his life, was truly his and no one else’s” (490).

16. What tempers this gruesome aspect of the novel is the love that surrounds Jude – from his friends and especially from Willem
  - 16.1. They learn how to love him as somehow not to intrude in his suffering
  - 16.2. At several point Jude seems to get better
  - 16.3. He seems to have found a balance in his relationship with Willem
  - 16.4. Even after Willem’s death, he appears to get better – only to commit suicide in the end.
17. In this way the novel keeps the reader (like Jude’s friends) hoping for the possibility that Jude might recover from his trauma and the self-destructive behavior associated to it. This is what makes all the more poignant Jude’s eventual inability to heal.

### Some quotes from the novel

18. Jude is unknowable

We never see him [Jude] with anyone, we don’t know what race he is, we don’t know anything about him. Post-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past. [...] The post-man. Jude the Postman. (94)

“He [Jude] was always lying to Willem: big lies, small lies. Their entire relationship was a lie—Willem thought he was one person, and really, he wasn’t.” (386)

- 18.1. At one point Andy, one of the characters, tries to warn Jude against this

If you ruin this, Jude—if you keep lying to someone who loves you, who really loves you, who has only ever wanted to see you exact as you are—then you will only have yourself to blame. It will be your fault. And it’ll be your fault not because of who you are or what you look like, but because of how you behave, because you won’t trust Willem enough to talk to him honestly, to extend to him the same sort of generosity and faith that he has always, always extended to you. I know you think you’re sparing him, but you’re not. You’re selfish. You’re selfish and you’re stubborn and you’re proud and you’re going to ruin the best thing that has happened to you. Don’t you understand that? (513)

19. In other words, because of their love for him, Jude’s friends consider that his inability of overcoming the compulsions caused by his trauma are a form of selfishness, of ‘not really wanting to get better’, of self-pity. This feeds Jude’s self-loathing and guilt:

The person I was will always be the person I am, he [Jude] realizes. The context may have changed: he may be in his apartment, and he may have a job that he enjoys and that pays him well, and he may have parents and friends he loves. He may be respected; in court, he may even be feared. But

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<sup>6</sup> Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life: A Novel*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015.

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

fundamentally, he is the same person, a person who inspires disgust, a person meant to be hated. (340)

20. An exception seems to be Willem. Somehow he learns to accept that wanting Jude to get better is not helpful:

[Willem's] feelings for Jude were complicated. He loved him—that part was simple—and feared for him, and sometimes felt as much his older brother and protector as his friend. [...]

They all loved Jude, and admired him, but he [Willem] often felt that Jude had let him see a little more of him—just a little—than he had shown the others, and was unsure what he was supposed to do with that knowledge. (18)

21. Willem learns that often he has to let Willem deal with his pain alone:

They were talking, but Jude's eyes were closed, and Willem knew—from the constant, hummingbird-flutter of his eyelids and the way his hand was curled into a fist so tight that Willem could see the ocean-green threads of his veins jumping under the back of his hand—that he was in pain. He knew from how rigid Jude was holding his legs, which were resting atop a box of books, that the pain was severe, and knew too that there was nothing he could do for him. [...]

So finally, he did what they had all learned over the years to do when Jude's legs were hurting him, which was to make some excuse, get up, and leave the room, so Jude could lie perfectly still and wait for the pain to pass without having to make conversation or expend energy pretending that everything was fine and that he was just tired, or had a cramp, or whatever feeble explanation he was able to invent. (17)

22. Jude gives the impression of getting better:

No one was there, he realized. The room was his. He felt the creature inside him—which he pictured as slight and raggedy and lemurlike, quick-reflexed and ready to sprint, its dark wet eyes forever scanning the landscape for future dangers—relax and sag to the ground. It was at these moments that he found college most enjoyable: he was in a warm room, and the next day he would have three meals and eat as much as he wanted, and in between he would go to classes, and no one would try to hurt him or make him do anything he didn't want to do. Somewhere nearby were his roommates—his friends—and he had survived another day without divulging any of his secrets, and placed another day between the person he once was and the person he was now. It seemed, always, an accomplishment worthy of sleep, and so he did, closing his eyes and readying himself for another day in the world. (99)

Later that evening, when everyone had left and they were in bed, he had told Willem that he was right. "I'm glad you know your life has meaning," he told him. "I'm glad it's not something I have to convince you of. I'm glad you know how wonderful you are." "But your life has just as much meaning as mine," Willem had said. "You're wonderful, too. Don't you know that, Jude?"

At the time, he had muttered something, something that Willem might interpret as an agreement, but as Willem slept, he lay awake. It had always

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

seemed to him a very plush kind of problem, a privilege, really, to consider whether life was meaningful or not. He didn't think his was. But this didn't bother him so much.

And although he hadn't fretted over whether his life was worthwhile, he had always wondered why he, why so many others, went on living at all; it had been difficult to convince himself at times, and yet so many people, so many millions, billions of people, lived in misery he couldn't fathom, with deprivations and illnesses that were obscene in their extremity. And yet on and on and on they went. So was the determination to keep living not a choice at all, but an evolutionary implementation? Was there something in the mind itself, a constellation of neurons as toughened and scarred as tendon, that prevented humans from doing what logic so often argued they should? And yet that instinct wasn't infallible—he had overcome it once. But what had happened to it after? Had it weakened, or become more resilient? Was his life even his to choose to live any longer? He had known, ever since the hospital, that it was impossible to convince someone to live for his own sake. But he often thought it would be a more effective treatment to make people feel more urgently the necessity of living for others: that, to him, was always the most compelling argument. The fact was, he did owe Harold. He did owe Willem. And if they wanted him to stay alive, then he would. At the time, as he slogged through day after day, his motivations had been murky to him, but now he could recognize that he had done it for them, and that rare selflessness had been something he could be proud of after all. He hadn't understood why they wanted him to stay alive, only that they had, and so he had done it. Eventually, he had learned how to rediscover contentment, joy, even. (688f)

23. And yet the ambiguity in the attitude of Jude's friends and even Willem's persists: they cannot help wanting to 'repair' him

"Dear Jude," Harold wrote, "thank you for your beautiful (if unnecessary) note. I appreciate everything in it. You're right; that mug means a lot to me. But you mean more. So please stop torturing yourself. "If I were a different kind of person, I might say that this whole incident is a metaphor for life in general: things get broken, and sometimes they get repaired, and in most cases, you realize that no matter what gets damaged, life rearranges itself to compensate for your loss, sometimes wonderfully. "Actually—maybe I am that kind of person after all. "Love, Harold." (133f)

Somehow in the past seven months he [Willem] had decided that he was going to repair Jude, that he was going to fix him, when really, he didn't need fixing. Jude had always taken him at face value; he needed to try to do the same for him. (476)

Patience; stubbornness; love: he [Willem] had to believe these would be enough. He had to believe that they would be stronger than any habit of Jude's, no matter how long or diligently practiced. (520)

24. Jude tries – but he has to come to the realization that nothing can repair him – and that even therapy is useless:

He had never before questioned that therapy was, at worst, a benign treatment: when he was younger, he had even considered it a form of luxury, this right to speak about his life, essentially uninterrupted, for fifty minutes proof that he had somehow become someone whose life deserved such lengthy consideration, such an indulgent listener. But now, he was conscious of his own impatience with what he had begun to see as the sinister pedantry of therapy, its suggestion that life was somehow reparable, that there existed a societal norm and that the patient was being guided toward conforming to it. (566)

25. In the end, the novel leads the readers to ask themselves the “question whether a self that has been systematically destroyed an endless amount of times has any chance of rebuilding itself afterward”.<sup>7</sup>
26. Not even the purity and selflessness of Harold’s and Willem’s love for Jude can ultimately undo the damage done to him in the past:<sup>8</sup>

That he died so alone is more than I can think; that he died thinking he owed us an apology is worse; that he died still stubbornly believing everything he was taught about himself – after you, after me, after all of us who loved him – makes me think that my life has been a failure after all, that I have failed at the one thing that counted. (719)

## Trauma

27. The Greek trauma means a “wound or injury inflicted on a body” but it has come to be used for a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.

It is not like “the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again”.<sup>9</sup>

[It is the bodily response to an] overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events [that] occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.<sup>10</sup>

What returns to haunt the victim [...] is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.<sup>11</sup>

28. There is a difference between the experience of suffering and a trauma:

Every human person will experience suffering during their lifetimes but not everyone will experience trauma.

- Experiences of suffering, no matter how difficult, are eventually integrated into one’s identity.
- But experiences of trauma resist this integration. The traumatized person experiences ruptures in their bodily integrity and identity, hyper-aroused nervous systems, ruptures in language and cognition such that they do not

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<sup>7</sup> Jonas Kellermann, 339.

<sup>8</sup> Jonas Kellermann, 339.

<sup>9</sup> Cathy Caruth, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Cathy Caruth, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Cathy Caruth, 6.

necessarily remember or cannot articulate their trauma experience(s). [These traumatic experiences] push into the present through hallucinations, nightmares, and flashbacks.<sup>12</sup>

29. The role played by the body in the traumatic experience is key

No amount of talking therapies alone can ‘cure’ trauma. We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body [...]

We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually it is not enough. The act of telling the story doesn’t necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hyper vigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time. For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and live in the reality of the present.<sup>13</sup>

It is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.<sup>14</sup>

Traumatic experience [...] is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs. [It] defies and demands our witness.<sup>15</sup>

**Meaning of empathy and compassion**

30. With respect to the ambiguities in the attitude of Jude’s friends, we are led to question the real meaning of empathy and compassion towards people afflicted by trauma or more generally by overwhelming experience of suffering and pain:

“*A Little Life* brings the reader face to face with something so profoundly disturbing that one cannot help but take a moral stance toward it,

- either developing an intensely emotional bond toward the characters – feeling not only *with*, but *for* them –
- or being appalled by this confrontation and seeking to reclaim the very distance that the novel deliberately refuses.

In this interplay between compassionate proximity and distance, Yanagihara also sheds some [...] light on the distinction between

- trauma narratives, that is [...] accounts of recovery, of dealing with the effects of a traumatic experience”.<sup>16</sup>
- and narratives *of* trauma.

31. Yanagihara is intent on crafting a *narrative of trauma*, that is

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<sup>12</sup> O'Donnell, Karen, “Trauma Theology”, *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al 2023. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TraumaTheology>

<sup>13</sup> Karen O'Donnell.

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Caruth, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Cathy Caruth, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Jonas Kellermann, 343.

the way [the trauma] slowly but surely peels away any hope of Jude's recovery or redemption.

[...] The clashing juxtaposition between the loving sentiments by Jude's friends toward him on the one hand and his own sense of hatred and revulsion toward himself on the other makes fully manifest the damage that his past has done to him, a damage so profound that in the end no therapeutic means are able to heal him.

[The narrative] serves to strengthen and make accessible the internal profoundness of Jude's irreparable wounds.<sup>17</sup>

### Can human suffering be too much?

32. In the attempt to offer a preliminary map to the question of evil and suffering, Yanagihara's novel
- 32.1. exposes the ways evil hides in the depth of our psyche and body, resists verbalization, explanation, solution.
  - 32.2. We might not be aware on a personal level of traumatic experiences that disrupt our lives and impact our behaviours in ways that are destructive of ourselves and of others – but this is how evil 'works'. It leaves an imprint that is not conscious, resists explanation or verbalization, and generates compulsive behaviours.
33. If we connect Yanagihara's novel to William Golding's *Lord of The Flies* we find similar traits
- 33.1. Initially the boys who survive the plane accident on the island do not show any sign of being particularly prone to post-traumatic self-destructive behaviours.
  - 33.2. The equivalent of Jude's suicidal or self-harming behaviour however appears when fear and will to power lead the boys
    - i. to relinquish the only means of survival, the fire,
    - ii. silence -by murder- the voices that can help them to overcome their animal instincts and their fears (Piggy, representing reason, and Simon, representing spiritual resources)
    - iii. destroy their entire habitat by setting the island on fire.
  - 33.3. We saw above that "trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body" – that we are not aware of this imprint until it starts influencing our behavior in compulsive (self)-destructive ways, and that it resists 'therapy' and attempts to prevent or 'repair' the damage.
  - 33.4. However problematic the Christian doctrine of original sin might be, it gestures towards something similar: a traumatic experience at some formative point of the history of humanity that conditions our life in the present. The fact that we do not remember it, that there is no historical record of it, that it is *forgotten* (or repressed) is what it makes it a 'trauma', gives it power to disrupt us in the present in ways that are (to some degree at least) compulsive.
34. Finally, Yanagihara's novel invites us to reflect on the notion of compassion in the presence of suffering – and especially on our urge to think that suffering (whether of other

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<sup>17</sup> Jonas Kellermann, 343.



## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

people or ours) can be given meaning only if it ushers in some level of healing or repairing.

- 34.1. There is the tragic possibility that suffering is too much, that it damages people beyond the possibility of healing and repairing.
  - 34.2. We should not forget that this is exactly the kind of suffering presented by the Gospels' passion narrative.
  - 34.3. Even the disciples' attitude after Jesus' death on the cross presents some of the traits of a traumatic experience – they are afraid, paralysed, scattered, and have lost hope.
35. Christian faith is pervaded by a potent hope for healing (cf. Jesus' miracles) and yet is not afraid of facing a suffering that, as with the cross, annihilates lives.
36. It might not be intentional, but the name of the main character of Hanya Yanagihara's novel is Jude St Francis.
- 36.1. St Francis is the saint of the stigmata (the marks in his flesh resembling the wounds on the crucified body of Jesus Christ).
  - 36.2. It suggests that Jude's self-harming can be seen as a form of stigmata.
  - 36.3. It might be a form of irony on the part of the novelist – but it can also point to the paradox represented by Christianity: faith in a character, Jesus, whose life like Jude St Francis' was damaged beyond repair.