

# Reading for Mental Health in the New Year with *Ab(solutely) Normal*

By Chea Parton

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The beginning of every new year is an interesting time—especially for our mental health. It's a time to start anew but that doesn't mean we can shed everything that has happened before. No matter how hard we try, our accumulated experiences of years past follow our "new year, new me" proclamations and resolutions. It's a time when we may feel hopeful while still simultaneously dealing with (or running from) any mental health struggles we may have been facing.

The 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health revealed that approximately 7.7 million rural adults reported having a mental illness which accounts for about 20.5% of rural adults. Additionally, 25% of rural youth reported experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety. Although urban and rural areas report similar prevalence of mental illness, the services available can be quite different. Rural areas often face issues related to accessibility, availability, affordability, and acceptability.

**Accessibility**—Rural folks often have to travel long distances to receive mental health services, they're less likely to be insured for mental health services, and primary care providers are less likely to recognize a mental illness.

**Availability**—Rural communities tend to have chronic shortages of mental health providers because providers are more likely to practice in urban centers.

**Affordability**—Because they're less likely to be insured for mental health services, the out-of-pocket costs are often too much for rural residents.

**Acceptability**—The movements and lives of rural people are more visible in smaller communities and thus rural people may be more susceptible to the stigmas surrounding needing and/or receiving mental healthcare. Fewer trained professionals and believing that everybody knows everybody can lead to a lack of faith in confidentiality and higher reliance on nonprofessional care from family members, close friends, and religious leaders.

As an example: One of my rural friends was in a car accident the day we were supposed to meet up. I checked in with her a couple of days after to see how she was doing, and she was already back at work.

We met up shortly after and reflected on how we experienced a lot of silence around dealing with trauma. To her, it felt like an indulgence to process what happened in the accident and felt like a weakness that

she dreaded (and was scared) to get back behind the wheel. In our conversation she noted the difficulty of accessing mental health resources and providers as well as the stigma associated with them but that she was trying to unlearn those ways of (not) dealing with trauma in order to process the accident and its lingering effects on her mental health in a healthier way.

Facing this adversity in taking care of our mental health, what can rural folks do?

One way to help young folks grappling with mental illness is through bibliotherapy—by giving them access to stories that show characters grappling and living with mental illness.

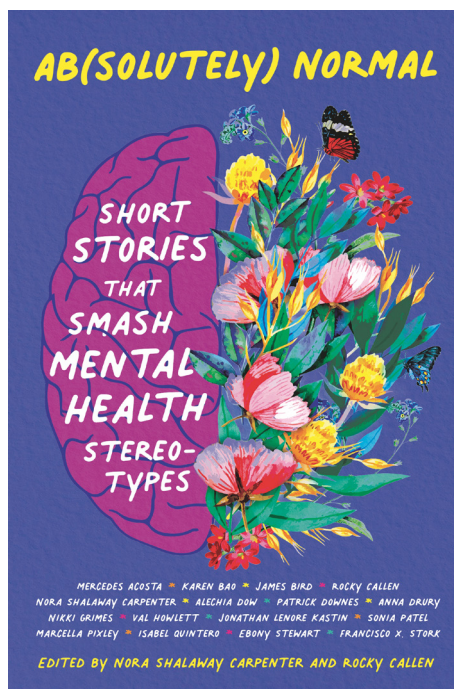
Nora Shalaway Carpenter, contributing editor of *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions of Small-Town America*, has put together a new collection of stories that do just that. It's called *Ab(solutely) Normal: Short Stories That Smash Mental Health Stereotypes* and though it may not be explicitly a "rural book" it features stories that can be helpful to rural readers.

From the book jacket: A teen activist wrestles with protest-related anxiety and PTSD. A socially anxious vampire learns he has to save his town by (gulp) working with people. As part of her teshuvah, a girl writes letters to the ex-boyfriend she still loves, revealing that her struggle with angry outbursts is related to PMDD. A boy sheds uncontrollable tears but finds that in doing so he's helping to enable another's healing. In this inspiring, unflinching, and hope-filled mixed-genre collection, sixteen diverse and notable authors draw on their own lived experiences with mental

health conditions to create stunning works of fiction that will uplift and empower you, break your heart and stitch it back together stronger than before. Through powerful prose, verse, and graphics, the characters in this anthology defy stereotypes as they remind readers that living with a mental health condition doesn't mean that you're defined by it. Each story is followed by a note from its author to the reader, and comprehensive back matter includes bios for the contributors as well as a collection of relevant resources.

The collection features stories by dynamite contributors Nikki Grimes, Francisco X. Stork, Mercedes Acosta, Sonia Patel, James Bird, Marcella Pixley, Ebony Stewart, Jonathan Lenore Kastin, Alechia Dow, Karen Bao, Val Howlett, Isabel Quintero, Anna Drury, and Patrick Downes, Rocky Callen, and Nora Shalaway Carpenter.

Professionally-produced Readers' Guide, Parents' Guide, and Mental Health Professionals' Guide will be available online upon publication. Anyone who preorders



***Ab(solutely) Normal* is a young adult short story anthology helping to shed light on mental health stereotypes.**

Courtesy of Penguin Random House



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the anthology also receives a VideoChat between Carpenter, fellow contributing editor Rocky Callen (a behavioral coach for ten years), contributor Sonia Patel, M.D. (a practicing child psychiatrist), and contributor Marcella Pixley (an eighth grade English educator with over two decades experience) on how to talk about mental health in the classroom and handle difficult moments that might come up.

I sat down to talk with Carpenter about the collection and how she, as a rural person, envisions its usefulness to and importance for rural young people.

**Chea Parton (CP):** Nora, can you tell me about what led you to want to put together this collection?

**Nora Shalaway Carpenter (NSC):** As a reader, I wanted this book. When I learned none like it existed, I recognized the need immediately. Rocky Callen and I debuted together (her *A Breath Too Late* involves suicidal ideation and my *The Edge of Anything* centers on OCD) and had bonded around our shared passion for normalizing mental health struggles. I am forever grateful she immediately said yes to this project.

**CP:** As a rural person yourself, I'm wondering how you envision this collection to be helpful to rural readers? Are there any stories in particular you think will strike a chord?

**NSC:** Many rural readers may particularly identify with Isabel Quintero's protagonist Marichu in "Back of the Truck." Marichu's family doesn't understand that her anxiety and panic attacks aren't just Marichu being "dramatic."

Nikki Grimes' verse story "Avalanche" speaks to anyone who has ever felt the very rural mentality of just needing to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." Unfortunately, as you mentioned earlier, there is often a real problem with "acceptability" of mental health care in rural places. One of my own family members went through this, neglecting her mental health for decades because the one provider in town didn't fully understand mental health care and as she explained, "everyone would know if she drove to another town for therapy." Thankfully, a younger provider eventually took over and was a vocal mental health advocate, recognizing symptoms in my older relative and enabling her to find support. No

one should have to suffer because of fear of stigma and ridicule, but that's an unfortunate reality for so many in rural communities. Lack of access combined with lack of information and popular media stereotypes leads some rural people—particularly older generations—to equate receiving treatment with weakness. In reality, medical care for mental health is no different from receiving medical care for physical health. And because of the stigma, it takes incredible strength to seek out that care.

The beauty of this collection is that it enables readers to see myriad versions of what getting help looks like. So, for example, someone who is terrified about a therapist visit can find a lot of comfort in Mercedes Acosta's graphic short "My Sister Rafaela is a Good Person." A person worried about telling others about their struggles will want to read Rocky Callen's "They Call Me Hurricane," Francisco X. Stork's "The Call: A One Act Play," Sonia Patel's "Nothing Feels No Pain," and James Bird's "River Boy." Readers unsure of medicine's efficacy with mental health will definitely want to check out Anna Drury's swoony "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" and my story "Spidey Sense."

**CP:** Is there anything you want to say to teachers/students before they read the collection? Anything you want them to know?

**NSC:** No matter what you are experiencing, and no matter how certain you are that no one else has ever felt what you're feeling, I can assure you that you are not alone. Also, if you are fortunate enough to not endure mental health challenges, please know this book is just as much for you. Every single story—notably not by design—includes an ally character, someone who enables the protagonist to flourish. We often need help learning how to be allies, and *AB(solutely) NORMAL* provides numerous examples.

Educators, I know discussions about mental health can be daunting. There can be a tendency to avoid these discussions for fear of "getting it wrong." The reality is that teens are desperate for these conversations and more likely than not, you will soon find yourself in one whether you're prepared or not. Please use the many e-resources that *AB(solutely) NORMAL* includes. You can also reach out to me at [noracarpenterwrites@gmail.com](mailto:noracarpenterwrites@gmail.com) or my co-editor Rocky Callen at [hellorockycallen@gmail.com](mailto:hellorockycallen@gmail.com) and we will



Nora Shalaway Carpenter is the contributing editor of the critically acclaimed YA short story anthology *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America*, which was named an NPR Best Book of the Year, a YALSA Best Fiction YA selection, a TAYSHAS list selection, and a Bank Street Best Book of the Year, among numerous other honors. Her debut YA novel *The Edge of Anything* was named a Bank Street Best Book, a Kirkus Reviews Best book, and a *Mighty Girl* Best Book of the Year. Her next anthology, *Ab(solutely) Normal*, is forthcoming from Candlewick and her next rural novel, *Fault Lines*, is forthcoming from Running Press Teen. She holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Connect with her at [noracarpenterwrites.com](http://noracarpenterwrites.com), on TikTok @norashalawaycarpenter, or on Instagram @noracarpenterwrites.

connect you with additional resources you may need.

I'm grateful for this collection and to Carpenter for taking the time to chat with me about it. I highly recommend it for both rural book clubs and secondary classrooms. It's not out until April 11, but it's available for preorder now. Send preorder receipts to [absolutelynormalanthology@gmail.com](mailto:absolutelynormalanthology@gmail.com) to receive the educator VideoChat and all of the book's e-resources.

