

WE SEE MENTAL ILLNESS portrayed in popular culture all the time, whether or not we're aware of it. Sometimes it's at the center of the story, and sometimes it's on the sidelines. There are times when mental illness is well rendered, but there are also times when it is portrayed in disturbing and/or damaging ways. In either case, as well as the many cases in between, popular culture can be a window into mental illness. It can also serve as a mirror, in which those who do struggle with their mental health may finally see pieces of themselves and their experiences reflected.

Of course, it's not only in *popular* culture that we find depictions of and beliefs surrounding mental health. It exists in all facets of culture: our family, our friends, our heritage, our education, and every other piece of the story that makes us who we are.

From representations of hysteria in horror movies to the unrealistic depiction of women in music and television, and from intergenerational pain to the aftermath of a school shooting, the conversation surrounding mental health in culture and pop culture is wide and varied—and crucial for

continuing the dialogue about mental health.

THE DEVIL INSIDE

by Christine Heppermann

To call me a timid child would be putting it mildly. I was the scariest of scaredy-cats. I was a thumb-sucking ball of irrational fears in a smock dress. My most vivid childhood memories involve running away from things. I ran panicked down the sidewalk because, no matter how hard my parents worked to convince me that Frizzy, the neighbors' elderly schnauzer, wanted only to play, to me his wagging tail signaled a savage desire to leap the chain-link fence and chew my face off. I sprinted through the crosswalk at school every day, crying, because I refused to believe the cars would stop. They were so big and powerful. I was so small. Clearly a few measly crossing guards—kids, just like me—could never prevent a bloodthirsty Oldsmobile from mowing me down.

I usually fled the TV room during commercials for scary movies, but something about the ad for *The Exorcist* intrigued me. I don't remember much about it except for a few relatively benign images—fog, shadowy figures under a lamppost, a looming house, tinkly theme music. That was enough to send me running, but not too far. I stood in the hallway, right

outside the door, and listened.

That summer, during a visit with relatives in Missouri, I learned that my aunt and her boyfriend had seen *The Exorcist*. I *begged* her to tell me about it. Because she didn't want me crawling into bed with her every night, too scared to sleep on my own, she said no.

"Pleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease?" (For a timid child, I could be incredibly persistent.)

Finally, probably to get me to leave her alone, she relented and gave me a basic recap.

Big mistake.

There's no running away from the devil, especially if he is inside you.

I spent the next, oh, seven or eight years in near constant terror, convinced that, like Regan, the girl in the movie, I would be possessed. How could I possibly escape such a fate? I needed to remain vigilant, to stay awake—literally and figuratively—and keep Satan out.

It's not hard to see why this phobia took hold and refused to let go. I was Catholic. I attended Catholic school. I went to Mass with my family every Sunday and on holy days of obligation. To me the devil wasn't just a fake movie monster, like Freddy Krueger and Chucky. Satan was real, and, according to the Church, his sole reason for existing was to mess with people's heads—to trick them into doing Bad Things.

A case in point: in 1977, the news broke that the recently apprehended "Son of Sam" serial murderer David Berkowitz blamed his crimes on a demonically possessed black Labrador retriever that ordered him to kill. Most people, I assume, thought, *Wow, what a nut.* Me? Let's just say my suspicions about Frizzy took on a whole new dimension.

My fear peaked the year I turned twelve, the same age as Regan, whose increasingly disturbing behavior prompts her frantic mother to call in the priests. In addition to the typical middle school activities of scanning one's chin for pimples and pubic area for sprouting hairs, I steeled myself for other, even more disturbing changes. Would I sear my flesh with holy water? Scream profanities in math class? Turn to guard an opponent during a soccer game and rotate my head 180 degrees? I still hadn't seen *The Exorcist*, but, contrary to my own self-interest, had found out more about it. (Not from my aunt! She had learned her lesson.) I didn't enjoy torturing myself by obsessing over every gruesome detail . . . Or did I? Maybe I did, because, it seemed, I couldn't stop.

My religious faith both reassured me and made everything worse. Supposedly, it protected me against evil, but, in my understanding, it also taped a big fat "Come and Get Her" sign to my back. If Satan wanted nothing more than to corrupt believers and lead them to

damnation, then I was Satan bait. I fretted over every “sin,” no matter how small, sure that even the narrowest crack in my virtue gave the devil an entrance. But I couldn’t seem to stop sinning. I’d go to confession, obtain absolution from the priest, and then tap-dance right back to the edge of the fiery pit. I’d play with a Ouija board at sleepovers—that’s how the demon Pazuzu, aka Captain Howdy, begins communicating with Regan—and then spend the rest of the night lying petrified in my sleeping bag, pleading with God for forgiveness.

Once, when I was walking back to my classroom after an all-school Mass, Sister Alice, the principal, pulled me out of line. She dragged me down to her office and confronted me about the novelty comb sticking out of my back pocket. On the comb’s long yellow handle, red bubble letters spelled out the words “Cheap Thrill.” I had bought it as a joke from the cheesy mall store Spencer’s Gifts, but Sister Alice didn’t see the humor. I remember her face, red with fury, as she screamed at me for daring to bring something so vulgar and disrespectful into church. Had I no shame? Well, it turns out, I did: I burst into tears and later prayed—and prayed and prayed and prayed—that Satan hadn’t noticed all the commotion and marked me down for a house call.

Flash forward to now: I’m not a practicing Catholic.

There are things I really miss about the religion, such as the rituals that filled me with awe and the sense of belonging to a supportive community united by shared beliefs. But, ultimately, the cycle of fear and guilt wore me down. I realize that not all Catholics berate and second-guess themselves quite as, um, intensely as I did. But looking back now at my fearful childhood self, I see her as trapped in a pattern that exists not only in the Church but in the culture at large, a pattern that encourages girls and women to view themselves as, if not the devil, then certainly members of his team.

Back in middle school, along with my taboo comb, I had a T-shirt, also purchased at the mall and without my parents’ knowledge, emblazoned with “Good Girls Go to Heaven, But Bad Girls Go Everywhere.” Sometimes I wore it secretly under my school-uniform blouse, like a superhero concealing her true identity beneath a bland veneer. I liked my comb; I liked my T-shirt; I liked the (mild) sense of freedom and exploration they represented—but I knew I wasn’t supposed to. To avoid reproach, I learned how to pose as a Good Girl, but even that persona couldn’t completely shield me. It seemed that, for girls, there was no such thing as “good” enough.

The example of Sister Alice notwithstanding, the Catholic Church gives women little power. It has no place for women in its official hierarchy. Bishops make

all the rules, and guess what? Bishops are men. Celibate men, for the most part. Men who, over the centuries, have had much to say about women's minds and women's bodies and what women should and should not do with them. Now I find it ironic that I spent so many years with a fear of being possessed by Satan, when, all that time, without realizing it, I was already being controlled.

Leaving the Church didn't give me an automatic "Get Out of The Patriarchy Free" card. Obviously, *The Exorcist* didn't reflect just upon Catholicism. It was part of pop culture, and its portrayal of evil as a girl on the cusp of turning, physically, into a woman seemed—and continues to seem—all too familiar. *Help me*, Regan manages to scrawl on the skin of her stomach for Father Damien to read. In other words: *Save me from myself. Rescue the Good Girl from the Bad Girl within.*

In 1968, the year I was born, Hollywood produced the mother of all devil-inside horror movies, *Rosemary's Baby*, based on the popular novel by Ira Levin. Rosemary, played by Mia Farrow, is pregnant and worries that something is horribly wrong, either with her or the baby or both of them. It turns out that she's right, but she doesn't discover the full truth of her situation until days after giving birth, when she sees her son for the first time and stares into his glowing yellow

eyes.

Lucky for me, I somehow avoided *Rosemary's Baby* as a kid. Otherwise, it would surely have added vivid new rooms to my mental chamber of torture as I imagined myself, for instance, slurping down raw chicken hearts and rocking a black bassinet beneath an upside-down crucifix.

I also would have been too young to grasp what makes Rosemary's story chilling to the core. Forget the spooky tropes. What keeps me up at night now is thinking about how the state of women's rights, fifty years after the movie's release, is still so precarious. Isn't that the real evil? That after decades of what we'd thought was feminist progress, the image of a woman manipulated into giving up control of her own body, her own desires, seems routine.

Who really preys upon Rosemary? Satan rapes her, but only after her husband, her doctor, and others create the conditions for that to happen. They're secretly using her while pretending to have her best interests at heart. What *she* wants, what *she* feels, doesn't matter to them. And when she begins to voice suspicions, they shoot them down. They tell her over and over that she doesn't know what's good for her—they do.

If you're really in the mood for a scare, watch the scene in which Rosemary wakes up groggy and confused after the rape and turns to her husband, Guy,

for answers. Guy is a struggling actor who's sick of struggling. Does he fire his agent, maybe take classes to improve his craft? Nope! He offers his wife's womb to a satanic cult, without her knowledge, in exchange for career success. To cover up what he's done, he lies—and lies and lies. When Rosemary asks him about the scratch marks on her chest and the bruises on her thighs, he tells her that she drank too much the night before and passed out. (The second part of his explanation is true—he drugged her dessert.) But, he says, he had sex with her anyway because that's what she wanted, right? Because she wants a baby, and, he claims, he wants one, too. About the sex they supposedly had, he jokes, "It was kinda fun in a necrophile sort of way." And even though Rosemary still feels uneasy, she lets him convince her that he did what he did—what he *says* he did—out of love. That if she has any misgivings about what happened to her body, she's overreacting.

Now consider another classic movie about a husband messing with his wife's mind. In the 1944 American film *Gaslight*, a man doesn't want his wife to find out that he's a murderous jewel thief. So he orchestrates an elaborate scheme to trick her into believing that she's going insane. The film's title has become a term for a form of psychological abuse. To "gaslight" someone is

to manipulate her into questioning her sanity—as if to signal, "I'm not the one with the problem, honey—it's you! I'm in the right, you're in the wrong."

Guy tries to gaslight Rosemary into believing that everything is fine, that she's crazy if she thinks otherwise. In constant stabbing pain during the early months of her pregnancy, she finally breaks down sobbing to female friends. They surround her, comfort her, denounce her obstetrician for dismissing her suffering as normal. They urge her to see a different doctor as soon as possible. In that fleeting moment, with the support of other women, Rosemary has clarity. She has power. Something is indeed very wrong, and she is determined to fix it. But when she tells Guy that she's going to seek a second opinion, he gaslights her yet again. He calls her friends "a bunch of not-very-bright bitches." He's basically saying, "They're the Bad Girls who shouldn't be trusted. Keep them out of your business, out of the room, out of power, under control. Don't let them lead you astray."

I haven't quite figured out whether it's a case of life imitating art or the other way around that Roman Polanski, the director of *Rosemary's Baby*, was arrested in 1977 on charges of drugging and raping a thirteen-year-old model he was photographing for a magazine. The tactics of Polanski's defenders—and there were, and are, many, especially in the entertainment industry

—could have come straight from Guy’s playbook: claim the victim wanted it, despite her insistence that she repeatedly begged Polanski to stop and take her home; blame the girl’s mother for allowing her to go with him, as if, instead of sending her daughter out on a modeling job under adult supervision, she had sold her into prostitution. Polanski eventually pled guilty to the charge of unlawful sex with a minor (statutory rape), but he fled the country before sentencing and has since lived in Europe, where he continues to make movies. In 2002, he won an Academy Award for Best Director for *The Pianist*.

“You were crazy. You were really ka-pow out of your mind,” Guy tells Rosemary after she tries but fails to run away. Well, thanks for sharing, dude, but that’s just not true. As Guy’s actions demonstrate, there are things in the world that women should fear. Maybe Frizzy was a sweetheart, but some dogs *do* bite. Some men in power strive to deny women basic health care, equality in the workplace, and reproductive rights. Some men follow us home, or slip things into our drinks, or ask us over to “talk business.” Afterward, they try to convince us that what they did to our bodies wasn’t a crime because we “wanted it”; otherwise, why would we have worn that dress/had that drink/accepted the invitation? They force-feed us lies about ourselves until it seems we have no choice but to swallow them.

Pretending to be a good, obedient girl, Rosemary lies quietly in bed while Guy feeds her his explanation. And then, after he leaves—when the moment feels right—she gets up and walks down the hall. She opens the door and enters the room where her captors have gathered. No longer will she let them possess her. They can jabber on all day long, telling her she’s wrong or bad or out of her mind, but she won’t listen. Finally, she’s not afraid. She knows what she knows.

These days, when fear or doubt or shame starts to creep in, I resist the impulse to run. I try to have faith in myself and stand my ground. I think about what singer-songwriter Florence Welch of the band Florence and the Machine says about dancing with the devil on your back—it’s too hard. So you know what you have to do, right?

Shake him off.