

PTSD in Children's Fiction

Many people have experienced some form of trauma in their lives: losing a loved one, surviving a natural disaster, facing violence or abuse, enduring serious injuries or accidents, or being bullied. Fiction often mirrors life, with characters shaped by their traumatic pasts. Yet, it is rare for books, movies, or comics to explicitly mention PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) or explore what it truly entails.

While trauma and its effects are often well-represented in fiction, PTSD itself is seldom addressed directly. This lack of overt representation leaves an important gap in storytelling, especially for young audiences.

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a psychiatric disorder that can occur after a person witnessed or experienced a traumatic event of sorts. These events usually are either emotionally or physically harmful and affect the person's mental, social, physical and/or spiritual well-being.

As already mentioned, these traumatic events can be many things but some of the most common causes for PTSD are:

- Natural disaster (e.g. floods, landslides, tsunamis, hurricanes)
- Serious accidents (e.g. motor vehicle accidents, severe burns, animal attacks)
- Loss of a loved one in a violent/sudden way (e.g. murder, accidents)
- War
- Sexual assault
- Physical and emotional abuse

But not everyone reacts in the same way to these traumatic events. There are many symptoms that indicate someone is suffering from PTSD. These symptoms differ depending on the traumatic event, the age of the affected person and how they deal with the trauma. However the most common symptoms are:

- Flashbacks and nightmares
- Avoidance of things related to or that remind of the trauma (people, places, objects, activities)
- Selective amnesia (forgetting details or aspects of the event and related things)
- Distorted memories and feelings (shift of blame from others to oneself and vice versa)
- Ongoing feelings of fear, anger, horror, guilt or shame
- Emotional outbursts
- Paranoia
- Concentration and sleeping issues
- Development of phobias related to trauma (e.g. often after animal attacks)
- Separation anxiety
- Loss of developmental skills in children (e.g. muteness, ability to use the bathroom)
- Reenactment of trauma through drawings, play or verbalization (common for children)

However, these symptoms are also common among people without PTSD in the days after a traumatic event. For a PTSD diagnosis to be considered, the symptoms must last for more than a month and cause problems for the person in their everyday life.

But Why Is It Important to Talk More About PTSD in Children's Fiction?

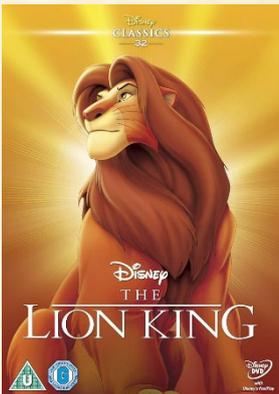
PTSD can affect anyone, including children and teenagers. So, it only makes sense for it to be represented in children's fiction. Especially considering that for children fiction often shapes their understanding of the world.

This is why PTSD should be more outright discussed beyond just implying that a character may suffer from symptoms. It would help make the topic less of a taboo and encourage readers to talk about their own traumatic experiences. If children see that a character is strong and brave while also talking about their feelings and trauma, it will hopefully teach them to seek out help as well.

In general, it would likely help children and teenagers to feel validated and show them that they are not alone with their struggles. Representation has become a big topic where fiction is concerned after all. Many authors want to raise awareness of many different topics, so why should PTSD be any different.

Examples of PTSD in Fiction

Simba (The Lion King)



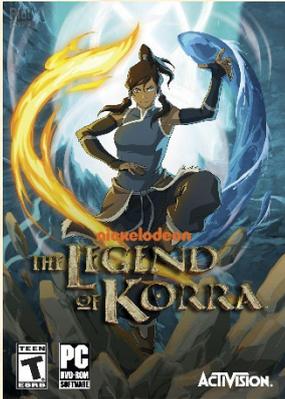
The first movie already showed a lot about Simba's trauma due to the death/murder of his father. He ran away from home and didn't look back for years in an attempt to avoid anything that could remind him of his father and the event and refused to talk about it. In addition, Simba had distorted memories, blaming himself from his father's death even though he did nothing wrong and feeling guilty. In the second movie Simba also suffers from nightmares about his father's death and is extremely suspicious of Kovu because of his relation and similarity to his uncle, Scar. He is paranoid and reacts irrationally and overprotective at times because he is afraid of losing anyone else.

Jessie (Toy Story)



Jessie is introduced in the second *Toy Story* movie and suffers from separation anxiety and claustrophobia, both likely post-traumatic in nature. She was abandoned in a box on the side of the road by her former owner and ended up being stored in a box for years. This led to her being afraid of small spaces and being left behind again.

Korra (*The Legend of Korra*)



The entire fourth season of the *Legend of Korra* deals with Korra's PTSD. At the end of season 3, Korra was almost killed by a man named Zaheer and his group of extremists, the Red Lotus. She is shown to suffer from flashbacks and depression even three years after the event. She also lost the ability to use the avatar state, a skill she developed at the end of the first season. In addition to all of this, Korra also pulled away from her friends and family within the three-year time skip, only sending an occasional letter to her friend, and later lover, Asami.

Other Notable Examples

- Erik Lehnsherr/Magneto (*X-Men Franchise*)
- Bucky Barnes/The Winter Soldier (*Marvel*)
- Obi Wan Kenobi (*Star Wars*)
- Ahsoka Tano (*Star Wars*)
- Marlin (*Finding Nemo*)
- Nublar Six (*Camp Cretaceous & Chaos Theory*)
- Firestar (*Warrior Cats*)
- Po (*Kung Fu Panda*)
- Levi Ackerman (*Attack on Titan*)
- Hunger Games victors (*Hunger Games*)

Conclusion

While there is representation of PTSD in children's and young adult fiction, it is often implicit. Rarely do stories name the disorder or delve deeply into its implications. Introducing the term "PTSD" and discussing trauma openly in fiction could help normalize these conversations, especially in young adult literature.

For children's fiction, even the use of terms like "trauma" could make a significant difference in helping young audiences understand and process their experiences. Fiction has the power to validate, educate, and inspire — and it's time for PTSD to become a more visible part of that narrative.