

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## [Fiction's Truth Telling About Mental Illness](#)

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*It was Albert Camus who said, "Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth." So it is that fictional characters like Tim, Etsuko, Em, Nkiru, and Solomon whose stories are highlighted below, and multitudes of others from around the world, share their intimate experience, provide insight and lend perspective to readers about living with mental illness. The stories below are filled with lies that tell the truth about mental illness - with brilliance, compassion, and eloquence. If you are looking to learn more about mental illness and/or just love a great story, the characters and their narratives below will surely transport you to greater understanding.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*"Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth" - Camus*

**1. *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien** is one of the preeminent pieces of Vietnam War literature that draws on O'Brien's own experience in the 23rd infantry Division. For most of us, this is a world that is outside the realm of personal experience. O'Brien's characters are people we could know, and their stories bring home the profound psychological effects of war, including post-traumatic stress disorder. It is prescient storytelling for the mental health concerns we are grappling with among our military today.

**2. *Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro.** This is Ishiguro's first and award winning novel. The lives of Etsuko and her daughters are intentionally conflated with the lives of Sachiko and her daughter, Mariko as the novel unfolds. Etsuko has moved to England, and the particular existential issues of identity and loss that can characterize the immigrant's experience of being alone in the face of adversity create emotional turmoil and a profoundly moving psychological journey. In classic Japanese storytelling style virtually nothing happens in the book, and yet it is a riveting tale that takes you inside the minds of these women and their search for understanding and meaning.

**3. *Em and the Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto** is the story of a mother with psychosis in late 20th century India. Pinto won the Windham-Campbell Prize for this novel that is largely told through dialogue among Em and her two children. At first you feel like you are sitting with them in their family apartment in Bombay, but it actually turns out to be Ward 33 (Psychiatric), Sir JJ Hospital. It is the story of how mental illness washes over an entire family - the dark moments, the funny moments and the strength required for a family to band together at such times.

**4. *Highly Illogical Behavior* by John Corey Whaley** is the story of sixteen-year-old Solomon who has agoraphobia and has not left the house for three years. When a girl named Lisa descends on his life, a story of friendship and love unfolds. It is still relatively uncommon to find a novel with a male protagonist that is focused on mental health issues outside of war-related trauma. This "young adult" novel does just that. Given that so many mental health problems emerge during adolescence, *Highly Illogical Behavior* models how to talk about mental illness among young people today.

**5. *Contamination* by Chinelo Okparanta.** Born in Nigeria, Okparanta is a much acclaimed, upcoming author whose story, *Contamination*, is part of a collection of short stories entitled *Happiness, Like Water*.

Contamination is the story of Nkiru's descent into mental illness, this time with obsessive compulsive disorder. The lack of understanding and lack of available treatments renders her increasingly incapacitated.

*Together, these these novels tell lies that tell the truth about the need to expand the narrative on mental illness and mental health - to reduce the stigma, enhance understanding, and increase capacity to care for those with mental illness.*