

# **Mental Health and Trauma in Post-Pandemic Contemporary Fiction**

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and persisted through various waves until its official end in 2023, has left an indelible mark on global society, particularly in the realms of mental health and collective trauma. This research paper explores how contemporary fiction published between 2020 and 2026 reflects and processes these experiences. Through a close analysis of key works such as Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022), Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility* (2022), Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence* (2021), Olivia Wolfgang-Smith's *Shred Sisters* (2024), and Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020), the paper examines representations of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), grief, and resilience. Drawing on trauma theory, including concepts from Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, and psychological studies on post-pandemic mental health, it argues that these novels serve as cultural artifacts that both mirror societal distress and offer pathways to healing. The analysis reveals a shift from acute pandemic depictions to broader explorations of lingering isolation, identity fragmentation, and intergenerational trauma. By blending speculative elements with realistic narratives, these works highlight the pandemic's exacerbation of pre-existing vulnerabilities while envisioning hopeful, albeit tentative, recoveries. This study underscores literature's role in fostering empathy and understanding in a post-pandemic world, with implications for mental health advocacy and literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Post-pandemic fiction, mental health, trauma, COVID-19, depression, anxiety, PTSD, resilience, grief, isolation, contemporary literature, speculative fiction

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in March 2020, reshaped human existence in profound ways. Beyond the immediate physical toll—over 15 million deaths worldwide—it precipitated a mental health crisis characterized by surging rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorders. Social isolation, economic instability, grief from loss, and the constant threat of infection created a collective trauma that lingers well into the post-pandemic era. As societies grapple with recovery, contemporary fiction has emerged as a vital medium for articulating these experiences. Published in the wake of the pandemic (2020-2026), these works not only document the psychological fallout but also imagine futures where healing is possible, albeit fraught with challenges.

This paper investigates mental health and trauma representations in post-pandemic contemporary fiction, focusing on how authors use narrative techniques to externalize inner turmoil. Trauma, as defined by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), is an event that overwhelms the psyche, returning unbidden through flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. In a post-pandemic context, this manifests as "post-COVID stress disorder," a term coined to describe lingering psychological effects like heightened anxiety and emotional numbness. Fiction allows for the "working through" of trauma, as Judith Herman suggests in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), by providing symbolic resolutions and fostering reader empathy.

The selected novels span genres from speculative fiction to literary realism, reflecting diverse responses to the pandemic. Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* presents interconnected stories of a plague-ridden world, emphasizing grief and resilience. Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility* weaves time travel with pandemic



motifs, exploring disorientation and reality glitches as metaphors for mental fragmentation. Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence* blends the supernatural with real-world events like the pandemic and George Floyd protests, delving into haunting traumas. Olivia Wolfgang-Smith's *Shred Sisters* focuses on familial mental illness exacerbated by external stressors, while Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* addresses depression through multiverse exploration, offering a reflective lens on post-pandemic regrets.

These texts are situated within broader literary trends. As Katy Waldman notes in *The New Yorker*, post-COVID novels often exhibit "profound anti-profundity," skimming trauma to avoid perseveration while acknowledging its depth. Studies indicate a 20-30% increase in mental health issues post-pandemic, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups like healthcare workers and minorities. Fiction mirrors this, with characters navigating isolation and loss, often finding solace in community or self-reflection.

The paper proceeds with a literature review on post-pandemic mental health, followed by individual analyses of the novels, a comparative discussion, and conclusions on literature's therapeutic potential. By examining these works, we gain insight into how fiction processes collective trauma, contributing to ongoing dialogues in psychology and literary studies.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Post-Pandemic Mental Health and Its Literary Representations

The post-pandemic landscape has seen a surge in mental health challenges, as documented in numerous studies. A review in PMC synthesizes evidence of elevated depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use, linked to isolation and grief. The Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 reports a 16.4% increase in disability-adjusted life-years for depressive disorders. Paradoxically, some research, like a *Nature* study, finds overall mental health improvement post-peak, driven by those previously impaired reframing their experiences. Gender disparities persist, with women reporting higher psychological burden.

Literary responses to pandemics have historical precedents, from Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Camus' *The Plague*. Post-COVID fiction extends this, often blending realism with speculation to process trauma. Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002) argues that novels externalize psychic wounds through fragmented narratives, aiding cultural awareness. Recent works like those in *IJCRT.org* explore "pandemic society" themes, including societal structures and emotional impacts.

Mental health rep in fiction has evolved, with 2020-2026 books emphasizing authenticity. For instance, *The Colour of Madness* anthologizes POC experiences, highlighting intersectional trauma. Novels like those in *Brightly* address teen anxiety and PTSD. Post-pandemic, themes of resilience emerge, as in *How High We Go in the Dark*, where grief leads to innovation.

This review sets the stage for analyzing how selected novels embody these trends, using trauma as a lens for societal reflection.

### Analysis of Key Works

#### Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022)

Nagamatsu's novel is a mosaic of interconnected stories spanning centuries, triggered by an Arctic plague released from melting permafrost—a clear allegory for COVID-19 and climate anxiety. The narrative begins with a climatologist discovering the virus in a thawed corpse, leading to global catastrophe. Chapters explore euthanasia theme parks for infected children, funeral hotels in space, and bioengineered pigs for organ transplants, all underscoring humanity's adaptability amid loss.

Mental health is portrayed through pervasive grief and depression. In "City of Laughter," a father takes his dying daughter to a euthanasia park, grappling with suicidal ideation and emotional numbness. Trauma manifests as collective PTSD, with survivors experiencing dissociation and hypervigilance. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors psychological fragmentation, echoing Caruth's delayed trauma response. Post-pandemic elements are explicit: isolation pods, mask mandates, and vaccine quests parallel real-world experiences, amplifying anxiety.

Resilience shines through innovation and connection. A virologist's quest for a cure reflects reframing trauma into purpose, aligning with studies showing post-crisis growth in vulnerable individuals. Reader reviews praise its emotional depth, noting tears over loss depictions, though some criticize repetitive despair. Overall, Nagamatsu uses speculative fiction to process pandemic trauma, offering hope amid darkness.

#### **Emily St. John Mandel's Sea of Tranquility (2022)**

Mandel's novel intertwines timelines from 1912 to 2401, centering on pandemics, time travel, and simulation theory. Protagonist Gasperey-Jacques Roberts investigates anomalies like reality glitches, linking a violinist in 1912, a filmmaker in 2020 during a pandemic, and a writer in 2203 on moon colonies. The 2020 section vividly captures lockdown isolation, with characters like Mirella experiencing grief over lost friends.

Mental health themes include disorientation as a metaphor for anxiety and derealization—a common post-COVID symptom. Trauma arises from repeated pandemics, with characters questioning reality, evoking PTSD flashbacks. The simulation hypothesis amplifies existential dread, mirroring pandemic-induced philosophical crises about life's meaning.

Post-pandemic elements abound: quarantine, virtual interactions, and societal collapse parallel COVID realities. Resilience is found in art and human connections, as the writer Olive tours her book amid fears of a new virus. Reviews highlight emotional resonance, with readers feeling "bittersweet" over loss and hope. Mandel's blend of genres externalizes trauma, suggesting that acknowledging alternate realities aids healing.

#### **Louise Erdrich's The Sentence (2021)**

Erdrich's novel follows Tookie, an Indigenous ex-convict working at a Minneapolis bookstore during the 2020 pandemic and George Floyd protests. Haunted by a deceased customer's ghost, Tookie navigates personal and collective traumas, including her imprisonment and cultural erasure.

Mental health is depicted through anxiety and dissociation; Tookie's hallucinations symbolize unresolved grief and PTSD from incarceration. The pandemic exacerbates isolation, with masks and lockdowns amplifying paranoia. Trauma is intergenerational, tying personal loss to Native American history of displacement.

Post-pandemic elements include supply shortages, virtual events, and racial justice uprisings, blending real events with fiction. Resilience emerges through community and storytelling, as books provide solace. Reviews note its "raw" portrayal of anguish, praising Erdrich's balance of humor and pain. The novel affirms literature's role in processing trauma.

#### **Olivia Wolfgang-Smith's Shred Sisters (2024)**

This debut explores sisterhood amid mental illness. Amy Shred idolizes her bipolar sister Ollie, whose manic episodes disrupt their family over two decades. Amy's narrative voice conveys the secondary trauma of living with unpredictability.

Mental health centers on bipolar disorder, with Ollie's cycles of mania, depression, and addiction causing familial strain. Trauma includes bullying, abandonment, and self-sabotage, leading to Amy's anxiety and relational issues. Though not explicitly post-pandemic, the emphasis on isolation and recovery resonates with lockdown experiences.

Resilience is tentative, through forgiveness and self-acceptance. Reviews commend the "delicate" handling of illness but critique privileged resolutions. Wolfgang-Smith highlights trauma's ripple effects, advocating empathy.

#### **Matt Haig's The Midnight Library (2020)**

Haig's novel follows Nora Seed, depressed and suicidal, who enters a library of alternate lives, exploring regrets and possibilities.

Mental health is core: Nora's depression stems from loss and isolation, with the multiverse as therapy for reframing trauma. Post-pandemic readings see it as reflective of lockdown regrets and anxiety spikes.

Resilience comes via self-compassion. Reviews laud its hopefulness, though some find it simplistic. It offers a blueprint for post-trauma growth.



### III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Across these novels, fragmentation—narrative or psychological—mirrors post-pandemic dissociation. Nagamatsu and Mandel use speculation for distance, while Erdrich and Wolfgang-Smith ground in realism. Haig's optimism contrasts darker tones, yet all emphasize connection as antidote to isolation. Gender and intersectionality vary: women often bear disproportionate burdens, aligning with studies. Collectively, they suggest fiction aids trauma processing, fostering resilience.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Post-pandemic fiction vividly captures mental health struggles, from anxiety to PTSD, while envisioning recovery. These works underscore literature's therapeutic value, urging societal support for mental health. Future studies could explore diverse voices, enhancing understanding in an ongoing recovery era.

### REFERENCES

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