

'It's Kind of a Funny Story,' by Ned Vizzini

Review by TANYA LEE STONE
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"It's Kind of a Funny Story" may seem like an odd title for a book with such weighty themes as adolescent depression and "suicidal ideation," until you recall the last time you burst out laughing at a solemn or inappropriate moment. Laughter is one way to cope with pressure, and that's what Ned Vizzini's insightful and utterly authentic new novel is all about—the insidious kind of pressure teenagers face in a success-oriented society that values product over process, scores over scholarship and extracurriculars over extra innings.

Vizzini's first book, "Teen Angst? Naaah . . ." was a collection of pieces about his years at Manhattan's [Stuyvesant High School](#); he was 19 when it was published. The author, now 25, also drew on parts of his life for his second book, a novel, "Be More Chill." His new novel takes us into heavy autobiographical territory: it's based on Vizzini's brief stay in a psychiatric hospital. His protagonist, however, has a strong and clear voice of his own. Craig Gilner is a palpably real character worthy of a place in the reader's long-term memory.

Craig becomes dysfunctional and severely depressed after driving himself relentlessly to get accepted into Executive Pre-Professional High School, "set up to create the leaders of tomorrow." Graduates of this pressure cooker "end up being, like, president," if they don't end up on the psych ward first. Once he's admitted to the school, Craig realizes that staying there is the true challenge. Just reading about his assignments is anxiety-producing—nine classes, unbearable reading lists, four hours of home work a night. One class requires reading two hefty daily newspapers and analyses of the stock market. Within months Craig has "stress vomiting for the first time." The more behind he gets, the more paralyzed he is, until he contemplates jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. Instead, he calls 1-800-SUICIDE and checks himself into a nearby hospital. His mom's response when he calls from the E.R. is touching: "I am so proud of you . . . This is the bravest thing you've ever done."

Vizzini's humor runs deep, focused not only on the comic impact of any given line, but on the role of humor itself, the necessity of laughter and the realization that it's O.K., even necessary, to lighten up when things seem bad. When Craig starts to share a laugh about a fellow patient, he stops himself. "I bite my tongue. I can't help it. I shouldn't be laughing at any of these people . . . but maybe it's O.K., somewhere, somehow, because we're enjoying life?" Insights abound, from the profound (everybody has problems, some people just hide it better than others) to the entertaining: "When a man puts on his first piece of jewelry, there's no turning back." And when Craig discovers drawing as an outlet for healing, his art takes a refreshingly original form, creating beauty from confusion.

For some, it may not ring true that Craig adjusts so quickly to life on the ward, falling into the rhythm of the patients' various shticks with ease, though his relief-based high from jumping off the treadmill could explain it. That he achieves so much during a five-day stay—inspiring a perpetual sleeper to join the living, starting a (possibly unwise) relationship with a skittish girl—also pushes the limits of believability. The most obvious solution to Craig's problem doesn't occur to him until the end, but that is entirely plausible, as it's his entanglement in the responsibility of meeting expectations that has made him lose sight of other options.

One of the most disturbing realities present in this novel is the many characters who need meds to cope with getting through school. We root for Craig to heal, and we root for all the others in the same boat—perhaps piloted by much more demanding parents than Craig's. This is an important book,

not only because it will help teenagers recognize unhealthy expectations and know there are alternative choices, but also because it could enlighten adults who are making their kids crazy. Of course, these grownups may not know who they are— so if you do, be sure to give them this book.

Tanya Lee Stone is the author, most recently, of "A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl," a young adult novel.