

“I Don’t Know Why This Is”

A Book Review of *Perks of Being a Wallflower*

By Clarissa Krueger (Literary Arts 2025)

My first experience with *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was when my close friend read me a portion of it out loud. It was a suicide note set to poetry, and I found it really frightening. I think this is a really good example of how I kind of went into the book; anything I end up enjoying I initially resisted for whatever reason. I find that this relates to the greater themes I’d like to discuss revolving around that sense of fear, layered on top of the themes of childhood, love, and the traditional “coming of age.” Charlie, at the end of the day, is on the sidelines of these concepts and is balanced on the fringes, and it is a raw and unique perspective.

I think it is the curiosity Charlie holds that seems so childlike and instinctive to me. He asks questions to his teacher about these grand concepts such as “why do people love others who hurt them?” and to be able to do that is very introspective. As people we kind of assume this mindset of “things just are the way they are”, however Charlie thinks in a much more abstract way. He wants to understand and so you watch him learn to understand. In the beginning of the book he talks about how *To Kill a Mockingbird* is his most recently read book. He says it is his favorite, but “whatever I read last tends to be my favorite.” This again, shows this bright outlook on what he sees and enjoys from the world, while also showing that he might be perceived as someone who has simply not found themselves yet.

He also lives hopefully and vicariously through media, in a dazed and daydreamy manner that amplifies how he seemingly hasn’t *created* his full existence yet. He

discusses music and bands, but without analysis of lyrics or the sound. He says *“It would have been great to have written one of those songs.”* But he hasn’t. For the time being he is hopeful and appreciative like a kid who purely admires the breadth of the world.

In the book Charlie says “I don’t know how much longer I can go without a friend. I used to do it very easily, but that was before I knew what having a friend was like” and I think this kind of relates to his ability to step back and perceive himself, while also voicing this side of loneliness that comes across in a uniquely pitiless way. He can recognize himself as someone who has grown to need other people, but also knows what a privilege it is to have anyone at all. He does not have any sense of anger at himself or others, only that childlike hopeful/hopeless mindset. I don’t think there is any better or more positive-sounding word to describe it, so I think it is important to note that “childlike” means his observational and curious nature. After all, in the novel, his close friend Patrick describes him as a “wallflower, who sees things and understands them.” Yet, there is never any pushed conformity. He is existing as his unchanged self and as if he was the raw base of a person who should not and would not be forced to change. However, This comes with an unfortunate and very human parallel. There is a scene in which Charlie is asked to kiss the prettiest girl at a group event. Instead of kissing his girlfriend, he kisses his friend Sam. Embarrassment somewhat radiates from the page despite Charlie’s choice being far from accidental. He doesn’t comprehend the depth of what is going on, as he sees Sam as an unachievable goal and as a concept. He is confused by the way everyone is operating; they seem to be existing on this different

plane of existence. He is not used to “participating in life,” but even more so than just an introverted person.

He once described her eyes as “the type of green that doesn’t make a big deal about itself,” which has this tone of romanticization. He is assigning an idea of her eyes being dull in a beautiful way with a meaning attached. This is not to suggest that what he sees isn’t genuine; he does truly find her to be an incredible person, but again, the hopeful and beautiful lens he has seems childlike. It is as if he is viewing “love” in its most simple and human form. He simply appreciates someone without any strings attached. Although he, again, sees Sam as conceptual, he does not see Sam as an object. Sam is dating a man named Craig. In the book it is implied that Craig is at least 3 years their senior, as he is in college. Charlie never expresses pity for himself or how he wishes he could have Sam instead of Craig; he simply talks about how Sam is simply beautiful. Neither does he see Sam as someone who could “fix” him. He uses journaling for expressing what he feels. This again brings up how his appreciation is incredibly genuine; he does not see Sam as a potential tool, nor someone to own.

However, Charlie's close friend Patrick does point out how people might use others as a tool. Patrick only comes to Charlie when he is loneliest. There are many different points in time where Charlie talks about how Patrick will drag him to parties, only to then ditch him. He even drives Charlie to a park near the end of the book, drunk and lost after breaking up with his boyfriend. Patrick kisses him and it isn’t implied to be fully consensual, let alone something Charlie enjoyed. Patrick took it upon himself to use Charlie as some remedy for the loneliness Charlie was once friends with. However,

once again, Charlie's reaction isn't something of pity or hatred. He still admires Patrick and describes him as "happy-go-lucky" throughout the book.

The aspect of trauma is dealt with in the book through subtlety. You would never anticipate from Charlie, this quiet and observational kid, that his friend had just committed suicide and that he was the victim of sexual abuse. This always seems to be the case, and everyone sees themselves as an iceberg with much more lying below. However, this book doesn't scream it in your face. There's no "it's okay not to be okay" billboard above the text. Everything Charlie went through is ingrained in his posture towards life. He is someone who is just now leaving "survival mode"- of course he is awkward and observational. Of course his manner rings as childlike and hopeful. The way his trauma is specifically shown is in moments such as when he could not bring himself to reject Mary Elizabeth. After all, processing a kind but firm "no" is not the priority of someone who is aiming to stay alive.

On top of this, the concept of Charlie not fitting in, and being someone who exists on the skirts of existence, can be explained slightly through the consistent examples of toxic masculinity. His older brother, Chris, used to be a football star, of whom he is consistently compared to by teachers. His brother and father are both homophobic, talking poorly about Patrick during different points in the novel. A horrific but simple scene, is when in the beginning, Charlie cries over his best friend's suicide. In response, his brother puts an arm around him and tells him to "get it out of his system." The impact of this on Charlie's mind is not shown directly, but perhaps through the essence of who he is. He does not express things to anyone; only his journal. He writes about how he watched his father move out of the living room to cry over a TV show finale,

whilst his mother and sister cried together. The simplicity of this contrasts how substantial it is in a heart breaking way. It is not at all foreign or a shocking moment for the reader, although the core of it is just that. Through being friends with Patrick, who is a gay man, Charlie is somewhat rebelling against this narrative and finding a mold for himself. This makes perfect sense for who he is as a person. Once again, he is just leaving survival mode. As his nature is so hopeful and open minded, with less of a “head in the clouds” tone, he is finding role models in the souls of brand new people. In conclusion, I think *Perks* is a truly unique and important book. Charlie is molded as a “sidelines” person who is anything but. The narrative that truly living your life includes something out of an adventure novel is abandoned. The author very intentionally embraces how Charlie is living life through his observational lens. I suppose that the way he is “childlike” is the trait of seeing little things as adventurous. All while also dealing with the fact that trauma makes small things overwhelming, as if it is your first shot at life.

Although a lot of his sentences end with “*I don’t know why this is,*” Charlie possesses this trait of a simplistically beautiful eye and intelligent mind. The perspective of someone who is suddenly leaving survival mode is genuine, yet complex. I am reluctant to describe it as a coming-of-age story, as it is something more of a coming-of-mind story. It goes beyond age despite hitting so many topics that ring as age-exclusive. It soars over the beauty and pain of the details of existence, which are forgotten by people who have never had it taken from them. Time and time again it is incredible to read how Charlie ingests these parts of life, without it ever trampling him.