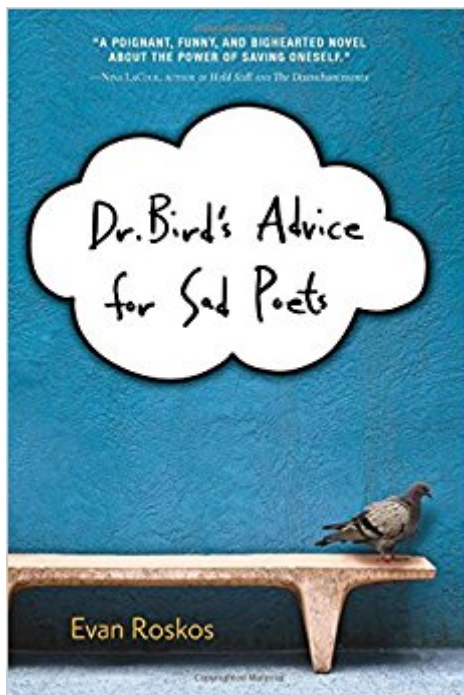


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# Dr. Bird's Advice For Sad Poets



## Synopsis

2014 Morris Award finalist  
“I hate myself but I love Walt Whitman, the kook. Always positive. I need to be more positive, so I wake myself up every morning with a song of myself.”  
Sixteen-year-old James Whitman has been yawping (à la Whitman) at his abusive father ever since he kicked his beloved older sister, Jorie, out of the house. James’s painful struggle with anxiety and depression along with his ongoing quest to understand what led to his self-destructive sister’s exile make for a heart-rending read, but his wild, exuberant Whitmanization of the world and keen sense of humor keep this emotionally charged debut novel buoyant.

## Book Information

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Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Family > Parents

## Customer Reviews

Gr 9 Up-James Whitman tries to adopt the spirit of Walt Whitman, loving nature and sounding a loud YAWP to show proof of his existence, but he is having a rough time keeping his poetic chin up lately. His older sister, Jorie, has been expelled from their high school and his abusive parents throw her out of their house. James is feeling guilty about not standing up for her and is depressed about his own life. He is the kind of teen who will run into traffic to try and save an injured bird, but he’s also an introspective poet who has frequent suicidal thoughts. His own internal therapist is a pigeon he calls Dr. Bird, and since James is a smart guy, she offers good advice. But since James is also, as he puts it, "wired funny," he does not always listen to Dr. Bird. Since he lives in his head so much, the novel’s pace can be a bit slow. Roskos perfectly captures the voice of a teen, but this boy

is unbelievably self-aware. Readers only see tiny bits of his parents through his eyes. This is problematic, as James is not the most reliable of narrators, but that certainly adds to readers' empathy. Although Jorie cuts herself and James has suicidal thoughts, the narrative points in a slightly more positive direction for them both by the end as James is able to confront his parents and demand their assistance in getting him help. -Geri Diorio, Ridgefield Library, CT (c) Copyright 2011. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

Sixteen-year-old James Whitman is paranoid, depressed, and confused. He despises his stressful homelife; has a crush on a bright, artistic girl who has a jerk for a boyfriend; and is desperately trying to discern why his older sister, Jorie, got kicked out of school and their house. James deals with his feelings of guilt, sadness, and anxiety by avoiding his parents, quoting Walt Whitman, hugging trees, and silently conversing with an imaginary therapist who is a bird, all while nursing a secret hope that he can make everything okay. Roskos's first novel is rich with hilarity and realistic inner dialogue, although James's first-person narrative doesn't always feel wholly authentic. This title may take some booktalking and hand-selling due to its strange title, eccentric cover featuring a pigeon, and Whitman conceit, but the right readers may find it lifesaving. Give this darkly funny debut to fans of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). Grades 9-12. --Candice Mack

James is very depressed, but not sure why. He loves Walt Whitman. His parents are horrible. And he really wants to know why his sister Jorie was expelled from school leading to her being kicked out of their house. He learns that Jorie was cutting, talks to people about the day she was expelled, and visits a real therapist (in addition to the giant pigeon Dr. Bird in his head) to help himself feel better, and then finally talks to Jorie herself. The book reads fast and was mostly stream of consciousness. Occasionally things happened, but mostly it was just James worrying and trying to figure things out. The speed at which he got better at the end didn't ring true, however. It seemed rushed like the author ran out of things to say or had to finish up to meet a deadline or just felt the need to have a happy ending. Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets is worth reading, but doesn't need to be at the top of a to read pile.

As a HS English teacher and lover of Walt Whitman, I can't express how much I loved this book. It tackles some tough subjects but never ever does it in a way that feels preachy or

clinical. Roskos's writing is honest and authentic; it makes the reader want to follow James on his journey and root for him. I'm always looking for a good book that addresses depression in a realistic way and is relatable to students. This book does both of those things. The main character, James, deals with thoughts and issues that many of my students do, and I could see bits of them in him. He isn't perfect and the reader follows him as he stumbles, falls, triumphs and tries to figure out his place in the world and who he is. He doesn't have all the answers and his journey is one that is realistic and true. I can definitely see my students identifying with him and finding a safe place to see pieces of themselves within this story. I have to say that my favorite part of this book with James's love toward his sister. He cares for her ferociously, despite her faults, and it made me love his character even more. This book will appeal greatly to my boy readers (which is often a hard feat to do!). Roskos tells this story with humor and I found myself laughing out loud often throughout the book. It's not easily to write about difficult subjects with humor, but Roskos nails it. This is one of those books that is important to teens and can speak to them, and I plan to get it into the hands of as many of my students as I can.

James Whitman is a troubled teen whose way of dealing with a dreadful home life isn't to head down some slippery slope of self-destruction, but to hug trees, find solace in the poetry of Walt (namesake) Whitman - and to get advice from his Inner Therapist, who happens to be...a bird. Dr. Bird, an invention born of James's angst, is a big part of what makes him such a lovable character. His first-person narrative is full of brilliant flashes of humor, which on the surface of it, soften the pain of his situation. I say "on the surface" because for me, the effect was actually to bring the coldness of James's home life into sharper relief, his intelligence and wit making him a more credible witness to it. He's not infallible (is any good protagonist?), but he is sincere and believable. Kudos to author Evan Roskos for striking that balance. A few human relationships help James on his journey - one being with big sis Jorie, who's left home and school for reasons that don't become entirely clear till the final chapters. But James's biggest ally is his own determination to heal. He's a wonderful example for kids to find their own brand of quirky genius to help them through similar struggles.

It wasn't long after I'd seen Jeffrey Skinner's "The 6.5 Practices of Moderately Successful Poets" that I noticed this title displayed in the library where our writers' group meets. I stopped long enough on the way out to scribble down the title and author, then ordered both books. I had no idea what

the "Dr. Bird..." book was about, only that it was YA and it dealt with poets. I began reading it on a Thursday night, realized the thrust, and knew that a friend who was writing a story for high interest-low skill youth, would love to read this. Well, except for the language, drugs, sex and alcohol. I spent the next night finishing it so I could give it to her the following day. It was a fast read in a pleasing format. I don't think I'd recommend it to teenagers, but my three 20-something grandchildren would handle it OK. Good treatment of depression and a positive way to use poetry to work toward a solution.

Never have I read a book about a character so closely relatable to my personality, mental process, and even habits. It was a bit of déjà vu reading this and was somewhat an emotional read for me on a personal level. James Whitman is such a like-able protagonist in this novel and it is a really entertaining read. The pages flew by me and after I was done, I had the meanest "book-hangover" ever and could not read for weeks. If you're a fan of John Green's work, I highly recommend this.

Evan Roskos has managed to portray emotion in words so well that you feel it coming off the page. His debut novel is nothing short of excellent literary work. It is not just for teens but for individuals of all ages. One of the best books I have ever read.

The author finely drew the main character and those who interacted with him. My heart goes out to the struggling main character who needs a pigeon to help him navigate rough waters (though she does quite well for him!). I loved how it all came together too, especially since I did not anticipate the result.

Wonderful book!

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