

Black Mirror by Nancy Werlin



What's It About?

Frances Leventhal refuses to look in the mirror; she can't bear to face her reflection. She has hidden from herself and everyone around her for such a long time, and now that her brother Daniel has committed suicide, she can't help thinking that it's somehow her fault. If she hadn't been so caught up in her own pain, maybe she would have noticed her brother's. It's time to stop hiding—to reach out to Daniel's friends at their private school. Daniel had been deeply involved in Unity Service, the charitable group on campus, and Frances is determined to join the group and to make amends.

But something's not quite right about Unity, and soon Frances finds herself in the middle of a puzzle too ominous to ignore. Exactly what are the Unity members trying so hard to hide? And why does no one else on campus, adult or teen, seem suspicious of them? This time Frances won't scurry away to hide. The memory of her brother is at stake.

- “Not just a coming-of-age book but an edge-of-your-seat thriller.”
—The Washington Post
- Starred reviews from *Booklist*, *Kirkus*, and *School Library Journal*.

Inspiration

This was a hard book to write. They're all difficult—I'm a writer who prefers having written to the actual task of writing—but *Black Mirror* was especially tough.

Frances is in such despair. I had to write my way into that place and, in fact, the words that begin the book—*Have you ever been in a state of pain so intense it was like a living creature wound tightly around your ribcage and shoulders and neck?*—originally appeared halfway through the first draft. It was only during revision that I understood that Frances does not work her way into a so-called “dark night of the soul.” She lives there. She begins there.

So the book had to begin there as well. And from the start we know that there is no possible way to make things right in the end for Frances. Her brother is dead, and that cannot be undone. And she's not good at being an adolescent or a high school student. Her best bet seems to be simply to endure.

But of course, *Black Mirror* is a suspense thriller, not a novel of adolescent angst, and that helped considerably, because Frances cannot afford to be completely passive, as she'd prefer. She has a criminal conspiracy to deal with ... and a new, vulnerable friend to protect. Life turns deadly around her, and what she does matters. So, as the novel picks up speed, her internal despair and the weird stuff happening at The Pettengill School shift from parallel tracks onto a collision course. In increasing tension, they balance each other. Or at least, I hope they do.

And that is why I like writing YA novels that are also suspense thrillers. It seems to me that putting a teen beset by serious emotional pain into external danger as well forces them to show me—or rather, to discover for themselves—who they really are. In the end, that is what Frances must face: her own self. She must look truthfully into a mirror. She is unwilling to do it; she is afraid of the darkness there. I believe that, if we are honest, so are we all.

Discussion Questions

(By Jennifer Richard Jacobson)

- When describing herself, Frances says, “I drew anything. Everything. Doodles at first. But I had a knack for reproducing what I saw, and soon my paper and pencil – and then later my paints and charcoals – formed a strong, protective wall around me.” How does a skill or talent become a wall? What other talents might serve as a means of separation?
- Daniel tells Frances, “Art doesn’t help anyone, you know. It doesn’t give people jobs, or food, or clothes, or opportunities.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Frances, while thinking about Eleanor Roosevelt, wonders if a person ever truly gets over the feeling of inferiority. Do you think one can? What contributes to Frances’ low self-esteem? Do you think she still feels this way by book’s end?
- Author Nancy Werlin is known for her subtle foreshadowing. Think of instances when she foreshadowed an event. How does foreshadowing affect the reading experience?
- When accusing James of selling her brother smack, Frances asks him if he abides by the philosophy that “he’s not my brother’s keeper.” What does this mean? Do you believe we have a responsibility to others? When do these lines become blurry?
- When James asks Frances if she feels responsible for Daniel’s death, she slaps him. Why? What is Werlin revealing with this gesture? Was she, as James insinuates, creating an opportunity for violence?
- Discuss the friendship between Frances and Andy Jankowski. Why do you think Frances seeks Andy’s company before the company of others? Do you believe their friendship is genuine? Why or why not?
- Ms. Wiles shows Picasso’s paintings in her art class. Why did Werlin choose Picasso and not another artist?
- Frances wonders what Ms. Wiles was trying to teach them. Was it: “If you think you already know what you’re looking at, then you can’t possibly see that something else is

really there”? What does this mean? How does it relate to the story? Can you think of an instance in your life when this was true?

- Frances and Saskia have a complicated relationship. At what points in the plot did their attitudes toward one another seem to shift? Do you think the two girls could ever be friends? Explain.
- How would you define Frances’s relationship with her brother Daniel? In what ways are they similar? Different? What are the experiences in their lives that helped to shape these similarities and differences?
- Ms. Wiles states, “The best leadership doesn’t always come from the people you’d pick as your friends, Frances. Sometimes you have to be able to work with – and for – someone you dislike for the purposes of a higher goal.” Do you agree with this statement? Is there a time in your life you chose to work with or for someone whom you didn’t respect? Why? Do you think Ms. Wiles (Sorenson) had a right to ask Frances to work for Patrick Leyden?
- Both Daniel and Saskia accuse Frances of being naïve. Do you think this is true? Identify places in the story that support your opinion.
- When Frances describes her paintings, she says, “Beneath that coat of paint are all my secret emotions, expressed fully and frankly. You can’t see them at all in the finished paintings -- except you can. You can feel them.” What, do you imagine, are the hidden emotions? Where did these emotions come from?
- Discuss the importance of setting in this story. Consider the town, the weather, Frances’ dorm room. Why is Frances so reluctant to have Saskia enter her room?
- In the end, Saskia defends her actions by saying, “I still only see one way.” Do you believe there was only one way? Did Saskia need to sacrifice one to save many? Imagine that you are the one sitting with her on the daybed. How would your conversation differ from the one that Frances had with Saskia?
- Why did Frances move the covered mirror from Bubbe’s house to her dorm room? Beyond the Jewish custom of shivah, what does the mirror represent for Frances? And in the end, what has been revealed?

Publication Info

Age 13 and up.

First USA publication 2001.

Published by Penguin in ebook and physical book..

Awards and Reviews

- An ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- A Booklist Top 10 Mysteries for Youth
- Texas Tayshas High School Reading List, 2002-2003

- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age
- Michigan Library Association Thumbs Up! Award for YA Fiction nominee, 2002
- Missouri Gateway Readers' Choice Award list, 2003-2004
- Virginia Young Readers Program master list, High School Level, 2003-04
- Tennessee Volunteer State reading list, YA division, 2004-2005
- An ALA Popular Paperback choice, 2005
- “The story's twists will keep the reader guessing from beginning to end. A skillfully wrought plot with fully developed characters and rich themes.”—*Kirkus*, starred review, July 1, 2001
- “Thrilling.”—*Booklist*, starred review, Sept. 15, 2001
- “A well-written and masterfully developed novel. A can't-put-it-down mystery thriller.”—*School Library Journal*, starred review, Sept. 2001
- “An enjoyable tale of false fronts, dangerous secrets, and a girl's struggle to find the truth in a world gone awry.”—*The Bulletin*, recommended, Oct. 2001
- “Poignant ... Even readers who think they have it all figured out will still find surprises at the end.”—*Horn Book*, Sept/Oct 2001
- “[A] chilling and well-constructed mystery.”—*Publishers Weekly*, Nov. 12, 2001
- On the Miami Herald's list of Best Books of 2001 —*Sue Corbett*, *Miami Herald*, Nov. 27, 2001
- “A very tasty cake of a plot.”—*Marvin Hoffman*, *Houston Chronicle*, Dec. 7, 2001
- “Not just a coming-of-age book but an edge-of-your-seat thriller.”—*Elizabeth Ward*, *The Washington Post*, Dec. 9, 2001