“13 Reasons Why” Ends on a “Potentially Traumatic” HIV Twist

Fans on Twitter are not having it.

June 10, 2020 By Trent Straube

SPOILER ALERT! Stop reading if you don’t want to know about the big HIV plot twist in season 4 of 13 Reasons Why, the hit Netflix teen series set in a seemingly bucolic small town.

Based on Jay Asher’s young-adult novel of the same name, the high school drama debuted on Netflix in 2017. The book follows a group of teens dealing with the shocking suicide of Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford). Notably, her friend Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette) receives a box of 13 cassette tapes she recorded outlining the reasons for her choice and laying bare the dark secrets of their small town.

The show was a massive hit but also met with controversy. Detractors claimed it glamorized suicide—for example, by showing Hannah exerting power over her friends after her death and by depicting her suicide in graphic detail. Because of the show’s success, the story was extended beyond the source material. The fourth and final season debuted June 5. You can watch the official trailer at the top of this article.

“The series shape-shifted from a teen drama to a courtroom saga to a noirish murder mystery to, finally, a psychological thriller in its final season,” writes Robyn Bahr in a Hollywood Reporter review. “Season 4 is the sloggiest of them all, begging the audience to love and sympathize with a nightmare clique of high school students, who are, yes, traumatized by all the kitchen-sink realism creator Brian Yorkey has thrown at them, but are also arrogant and self-righteous coldblooded killers.”

Along the way, the show attempted to address hot-button issues such as bullying, depression, sexual consent, and drug and alcohol abuse. Netflix posted additional educational content online and directed viewers to help lines.

In the final season the producers added HIV to the mix. How well did they handle the topic? A brief summary of the relevant plotline offers all the answers you need: Bisexual teen Justin Foley (Brandon Flynn, who is openly gay) is rushed to the hospital after collapsing at his prom. As his condition deteriorates, he undergoes a series of tests, and it turns out he has AIDS—and then he dies.

From all the characters of #13ReasonsWhy Justin had the biggest character development.He finally got a family and was some kind of happy to have them and what they did just killed him
They had chance to show that someone can be better even after having HIV,But what they did ????
pic.twitter.com/vR2gTpqm8E
— Abhishek B Waghmare (@ab_waghmare) June 9, 2020

Writers should really research the diseases in their tv plots because there are so many inaccuracies in the HIV/AIDS plot in 13 Reasons Why ????
— Mallory Marie (@mallorymcauthen) June 9, 2020

The backstory is that he was a homeless survivor of sex abuse and a sex worker who injected drugs, all of which translates to higher HIV risk, but he had turned his life around and was seemingly healthy. Viewers quickly took to Twitter to point out the flaws in this storyline—and why it's so damaging.

"#13ReasonsWhy producers had an amazing opportunity to teach people that HIV is no longer a death sentence. Instead, they chose to kill Justin off, after they gave him the biggest character development???" tweeted @coleeyolee.

Wrote this for @RadioTimes. TV plays a huge role in shaping attitudes towards HIV and breaking stigma.

That’s why it’s so disappointing #13ReasonsWhy chose to kill off a character instead of educating a younger audience that HIV is no longer a death sentence. https://t.co/akOn3LzwDe

— Liam Beattie (@Liam_Beattie) June 9, 2020

“#13ReasonsWhy killing off a character via #AIDS is kinda bothersome and potentially traumatic,” added @SnowAndBeach. “The HIV/AIDS storyline for a character with a redeemable arc on this show, would have been a great opportunity to show having HIV/AIDS isn’t a death sentence in the 21st century!”

“It’s really not sitting right with me that #13ReasonsWhy and #Netflix decided to show a kid dying from AIDS-related complications in 2020,” wrote @ECritty. “Yes, AIDS-related deaths are still very much a real issue but it feels as just another lazy attempt to sensationalize HIV.”

It’s been a couple days since I finished @13ReasonsWhy & I am dumbfounded by their choice to abruptly kill Justin with AIDS. They tried to redeem a rapist but the only actual redeemable character, they kill with AIDS. Wtf? Could’ve just given him HIV& sent him off to college ????

— Brittany Wilkins (@HarlotSlaughter) June 8, 2020

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/13-reason-ends-lazy-potential-traumatic-hiv-twist