

# Movie Review: *Boy Interrupted*

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Evan Perry was 15 years old when he committed suicide by jumping out the window of a New York City apartment in 2005. The HBO documentary [Boy Interrupted](#) tells the story of a young boy who suffered from adolescent bipolar disorder. Filmmakers by trade and affluent by nature, Evan's parents record his childhood through the ups and downs, including several incidences of disturbing behavior. On vacation Evan looks to the cameraman and remarks without emotion "I have a rifle, I'm going to shoot you." At school he writes a screenplay where attendees at a funeral mourn the loss of the protagonist played by Evan. He frequently mentions plans to kill himself and is preoccupied with death. His mother takes pictures of him pretending to hang himself as proof of her son's despair because none of her friends will otherwise believe her. Evan's moods are evident through his facial and body language which are captured poignantly in photographs and on film. The parents consult a psychiatrist when Evan is five years old. There is a history of mental illness on both sides of the family. Evan's paternal uncle suffered from depression and committed suicide at the family's estate at 21. Evan is also diagnosed with depression and prescribed fluoxetine. His moods continue to fluctuate in spite of his medication regimen.

At age 11 Evan threatens to attempt suicide while standing on the roof of his primary school. A teacher eventually coaxes him to come back down. This is a turning point where his parents believe Evan needs more serious treatment and he is hospitalized in a psychiatric facility. While under acute observation, psychiatrists change Evan's diagnosis to bipolar disorder. He is eventually placed on lithium and sent to the specialized treatment facility named WellSpring. Partaking in a unique, structured treatment called milieu therapy, Evan shows drastic improvement: he plays, makes friends, and laughs. His parents are so impressed they bring Evan back home to New York after only a few months despite the hesitancy expressed by the treatment team. He remains stable for years. When Evan is in high school his half-brother describes Evan as appearing "drugged-up" on lithium and relays his concerns about the social stigma of being on a mood stabilizer at a time when fitting in is crucial. Meanwhile, Evan seems to be faring better

emotionally. The psychiatrist decides to discontinue the lithium completely. Evan's mood quickly becomes erratic. He avoids his friends and gets into verbal fights with his parents. Alarmed by his behavior and suspecting his illness may have re-emerged, the parents schedule another appointment with his psychiatrist. A few days before his scheduled appointment, Evan jumps out of his bedroom window.

The most alarming aspects of *Boy Interrupted* are the actions and attitudes of the psychiatrist. He sees Evan's suicide as unavoidable, claiming bipolar disorder is the "cancer" of mental health. From the first appointment with Evan the psychiatrist lowers expectations and shrugs responsibility, calling him "the scariest kid I ever met." The psychiatrist's decision to eventually discontinue the lithium without tapering it down or replacing it with another mood stabilizer appears unusual and possibly irresponsible. Oddly, Evan's parents do not appear to have any anger towards this psychiatrist. Most of their anger seems to be turned inward towards themselves. His parents are not perfect. Their profession as filmmakers sometimes translates to how they behave as parents: they often play the role of the observer, rarely interfering with the actions of their children. They have a tendency to idolize Evan's uncle after his suicide. Interviews are awkwardly recorded in front of a painting of the uncle. Even Evan's middle name Scott is in honor of the deceased uncle. However, Evan's parents clearly care about him, making his actions heart-wrenching. Their sorrow is evident throughout the movie. The father admits he made the movie as a means to deal with the death of his child, just as the uncle committed suicide years earlier. This film underscores the difficulties and complexities of childhood bipolar disorder. It also brings attention to the misguided belief that once individuals with mental illness improve they no longer need treatment. Hopefully, Evan's story can bring awareness to the debilitating nature of bipolar disorder and how medication adherence is crucial in treating the disease.

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