



The Weight of Zero

Karen Fortunati

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Seventeen-year-old Cath knows Zero is coming for her. Zero, the devastating depression born of Catherine's bipolar disease, has almost triumphed once, propelling Catherine to her first suicide attempt. With Zero only temporarily restrained by the latest med du jour, time is running out. In an old ballet shoebox, Catherine stockpiles meds, preparing to take her own life when Zero next arrives.

But Zero's return is delayed. Unexpected relationships along with the care of a new psychiatrist start to alter Catherine's perception of her diagnosis. But will this be enough? This is a story of loss and grief and hope and how the many shapes of love – maternal, romantic and platonic – impact a young woman's struggle with mental illness.

The manuscript was awarded the 2014 SCBWI Work-in-Progress Grant in the Contemporary YA category, named a finalist in the 2015 Tassey-Walden Awards and won the Serendipity Literary Agency 2013 YA First Page/Novel Discovery Contest.

The Weight of Zero Details

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From Reader Review *The Weight of Zero* for online ebook

Nina (Every Word A Doorway) says

3.5 stars

***The Weight of Zero* by Karen Fortunati offers a sensitive take on the daily struggles of a teen living with the prospect of a chronic mental illness. Besides highlighting the impact Catherine's bipolar disorder has on her life, such as attending intensive group therapy, and the grim expectations she has for her future, the book tackles subjects such as the burden that rests on parents of mentally ill children, the image of mental health in society, bullying, and first love.**

This debut on a girl suffering from bipolar disorder had been on my radar for months. I am aware that YA fiction has a habit of misportraying mental illnesses, sacrificing psychiatric accuracy for drama effects, romantic subplots, and happy endings. Nonetheless, I was really excited to get my hands on a YA contemporary featuring such a severe mental disorder, for I feel like bipolar does not get the literary attention it deserves with, according to the World Health Organisation, roughly 60 million people being affected worldwide. **The reason I wish more YA books, not just contemporaries but also fantasy and dystopian novels, would focus and/or include mental illnesses is because many of these have their onset during adolescence, therefore making it a topic of utmost relevance.**

CATHERINE PULASKI–CELEXA 40 mg, CATHERINE PULASKI–PROZAC 20 mg, CATHERINE PULASKI–ABILIFY 10 mg, PAXIL, ZOLOFT and LEXAPRO -- *my stockpile of old prescriptions. By day, they're stationed in a box under my bed, camouflaged under old ballet shoes, unopened packages of tights and crumpled recital flyers. But every night, I take them out. They soothe me.*

From a psychiatric point of view, *The Weight of Zero* is well written, the amount of researched Fortunati did on bipolar disorder and its impacts being noticeable throughout the book. It becomes clear that Fortunati spent a lot of time getting acquainted with the symptoms of bipolar disorder, the different forms of therapy, and the possible medication. Besides the predominantly accurate depiction of the disorder itself (as far as I can assess as a Clinical Psychology major), the author realistically portrays Catherine's introspection. **Her fears and hopelessness in the face of a chronic illness are believable to a fault.** Bipolar being characterised by episodes of mania and depression, Catherine refers to the depression as Zero, and after her last manic episode, she notices a decline in her spirits and she knows Zero is coming for her. But this time, she'll be ready. **She stockpiles meds, planning on taking her own life before Zero can turn it into hell on earth again.**

I'm sick of the hiding, and I'm sick of constantly anticipating Zero. He went away for a while, but I know he's back, circling ever closer. And now one of Zero's four horsemen, disrupted sleep, is here. But I don't say any of this.
"Things are okay," I answer.

In Catherine's growing friendship with a bulimic girl at the *Intensive Outpatient Program* she attends, she also experiences what it means to be friends with people who suffer from mental illnesses, experiencing an

entirely different form of helplessness and cluelessness. The book sensitively shows how the burden of a mental disorder is subjective and depends a lot on the person who's dealing with it. Catherine, who is affected by a disorder which is considered a life-long companion, often regards herself as defenceless, as a victim of a genetic defect and an event that triggered the onset of her disorder. **Her daily life entails a lot of hiding away, for she feels ashamed of the burden she carries on her shoulders, afraid of how people may react to her life between two affective extremes, depression and mania.**

I am so fucked. By a disease that isolates me with its stigma. That not only taints my reasoning but also limits any relationship that I could have.

I really appreciated how the mental health aspect was addressed in *The Weight of Zero*, and I enjoyed Catherine as a main character (and, of course, I enjoyed grandma Pitoscia). Furthermore, Fortunati writes with a lot of dark humour, a touch of teen slang, makes use of emojis in text messages (legit, right?), and introduces a pinch of Italian family dynamics. The latter I had already immensely enjoyed about *Saving Francesca* by Melina Marchetta. It is noticeable that Fortunati uses a lot of Italian last names for the people Catherine encounters in her daily life. Due to the love interest's Italian roots, Fortunati was able to explore the dealings with an Italian grandmother in this book, and grandma Pitoscia – or, as she is referred to, *Nonny* – is incredibly funny and sweet. She definitely carries that Italian spirit with her, addressing issues very directly and yet manages to be uplifting. **In spite of many positive things I have to say about the book, *The Weight of Zero* failed to captivate me as an overall work of art.** The plot was slow-going at times, especially with the inclusion of history due to Catherine's school project, and seemed to be headed nowhere sometimes. **The romantic subplot didn't convince me at all.** Apart from the lack of chemistry, the whole foundation of Catherine and Michael's romance was weird, as it came completely out of nowhere. The climax was really subtle, and I'm not sure how realistic Catherine's final revelation was, but because everything else with regard to her mental illness was well founded, I'm willing to turn a blind eye.

All in all, I'd say this is a solid contemporary novel, one of its strengths being the accuracy of how it dealt with a mental illness. For me to pester my friends to read this, however, the book was not convincing enough as a literary work of art and a means of entertainment. It goes without saying that, should you be suffering from bipolar or having suicidal thoughts, *The Weight of Zero* could be triggering, though its message is one of hope and strength.

Should you be struggling in any way, be it a sadness you cannot explain or a compulsion you cannot suppress or an anxiety you cannot control, please contact a mental health care service, as help is available and you are not alone. If you're harbouring thoughts about wanting to end your life, please call your general practitioner, seek out an emergency department, or contact someone at the websites provided below immediately.

For mental health care in the **US**, contact someone at the Health and Human Services department. For **Canada**, contact someone at the Canadian Mental Health Association. For the **UK**, contact someone at the National Health Services. For **Australia**, contact someone at the Mental Health Services. All of these websites are run and/or approved by the respective governments.

Jeannine says

Resigned, hopeful, tormented, conflicted, guilty, loved: these are just some of the emotions portrayed in the *Weight of Zero* and author Karen Fortunati does an outstanding job of attaching the reader to every emotion that barrels down on Catherine Pulaski. Reaching into the world of the everyday teenager is an almost impossible task; however, Fortunati somehow manages to not only do this, but also take us on the rollercoaster journey of a bipolar teen.

The voice is so authentic, I felt the breath of the bully that sat in the school desk behind Catherine, as he whispered his daily mocking. And the despair when Catherine's two best friends betrayed her. I loved the layering in the novel: the history project, the mother's pain, the dynamics of the therapy group, Catherine's grief over losing her grandmother, the bossy, funny nature of her boyfriend's grandmother, the agony of finding the right medication, and the unfolding of Catherine's relationship with her boyfriend. Clearly, this is a story of survival, hope, and the light that can come through darkness. As Catherine herself stated, "I am still innocent." Indeed she is, and readers will want to simultaneously hug her and let themselves exhale.

Rachael (RachaelRexds) says

(Thank you to Penguin Random House for sending me a copy for review! Trigger warning for suicide and grief)

The *Weight Of Zero* has definitely become one of my favourite reads of 2016. It was a beautiful, heartbreaking, bittersweet and realistic story about the journey of our main character, Catherine, as she battles her bipolar disorder and depression. As this is more of a character driven novel, I won't be talking much about the plot but focusing more on Catherine instead.

Throughout the story, you're following Catherine's life very closely and it makes you feel like you're her close friend. You're following the happy, sad, confused, angry, memorable moments of her life and you just feel as though you have a close connection to her. As mentioned above, she struggles with her bipolar disorder, depression and grief. I'm unable to relate to the grief she feels from an incident and her bipolar disorder but I could strong relate to the depression aspect. In the novel, depression is characterised as " Zero " and there are some days where " Zero " leaves Catherine alone but there are also days where " Zero " hits Catherine hard. I've been battling with depression for almost 4 years now and it's an ongoing battle. Sometimes the depression isn't there but some days it stays with you and doesn't leave, just like what Catherine experienced. Reading this novel brought me to tears at time because of how real it was and I didn't feel alone.

There was also a really adorable romance in the novel and I really appreciated the fact that the romance didn't overpower the whole story and the romance wasn't always rainbows and butterflies. I also really really loved the friendship aspect in the novel and it was just really wonderful seeing Catherine have a friend that would always be there for her. The ending of the novel was really bittersweet. Closing the book was like saying goodbye to a character you've seen grow as a person and it just makes you want to hold on to Catherine and not let her go.

Overall, *The Weight Of Zero* is such a wonderful story and I hope that this review pushed you to pick up a copy for yourself and experience this beautiful story and the journey it takes you. Thank you, Karen, for writing this novel that changed my life.

Kathy Temean says

Wow! I think this book should be considered for a Newbury Award. When I read the first chapter, I thought Wow! Karen really nailed that first chapter. But the book continues to draw you in with a heartfelt story. I laughed, I cried, and I wanted to spend time with the wonderful characters occupying the pages. I ended the book saying the same thing I did after the first chapter - WOW! This is a must read. The Weight of Zero is destined to win many awards.

Allison says

Truly amazing. I rarely agree with the Indies Introduce titles but this one deserves to be the headliner.

Elvina Zafril says

Updated review:

Incredibly amazing. The Weight of Zero is heart-breaking. I'm glad that I picked up this book. I really appreciated how the mental health aspect was addressed in this book and I loved the main character, Catherine. I loved the writing style.

The Weight of Zero is about a girl named Catherine Pulaski, a 17-year-old who has withdrawn from the world because of her bipolar disorder. She spends her days living in dread of horrible depression that will eventually return. She feels that suicide might be the answer to end everything that she feels. When she enters the junior year, everything seems to be changed and she might change her mind.

I really loved my journey throughout this book. It's like I have a close connection with the main character. However, I'm unable to relate the situation she faces, like from an incident and her bipolar disorder. But I can relate to her depression.

There was also romance in this book. But I feel like there's a lack of chemistry between Catherine and Michael. I liked that it didn't overpower the whole story. The friendship that the author portrayed in this book was just really wonderful. Because Catherine has a friend who always be there for her. I feel pretty sad that the story ended. I liked Catherine so much. I even loved her.

Overall, The Weight of Zero is such a wonderful story. I hope you will add or pick up this book for your next read.

Margot Harrison says

This is a book that promises to be about the realities of living day to day with a mental illness. No rejection of meds or therapy by the protagonist. No "saved by the love of the perfect person" plot.

It delivers. And it makes those grinding realities into a touching, absorbing story with a hopeful message about living with a chronic condition.

The novel's greatest asset is Catherine's believably teenage voice: She's depressed to the point of planning her suicide, yet she hasn't lost her dark sense of humor or her irreverent view of the world. Those qualities reveal a certain strength and resilience, even if she doesn't recognize it. I worried about her, but I liked spending time with her. As a result, I found it believable when other characters, like Michael and Kristal, wanted to spend time with her, too.

What this book is NOT (to my relief): full of long descriptions of one-on-one therapy sessions. Catherine attends group therapy, and the focus is on her interactions with the other kids, especially a budding friendship.

Fortunati keeps the pace lively; I almost never felt like some authoritative adult character was lecturing Catherine (and the reader) on how to think about mental illness. Important information is presented, but it isn't spoon-fed to us. Catherine has an active BS meter, but she doesn't reject therapy that really has the power to help her—therapy that may come in many forms.

Another element I loved was how previous stories figured in the novel. Catherine falls into despair after she reads a certain beloved coming-of-age book because the protagonist seems to have a "reason" for his depression, and she doesn't. Later, Catherine researches the story of someone else with whom she empathizes, and that work helps draw her away from Zero and into a healing engagement with the world.

I hope this important book will have the same effect on readers — to waken empathy and remind them that no one's life is without hope. While we know a real-life challenge like Catherine's illness can't have a simple dramatic resolution, we turn pages quickly anyway, eager to see her realize that life still has so much to offer her.

Karen Hattrup says

THE WEIGHT OF ZERO is the story of Catherine Pulaski, a 17-year-old who has retreated from the world because of her bipolar disorder, and spends her days living in fear of the horrible depression that she knows will eventually return. She believes that when that happens, suicide may be the only answer, but when little rays of light begin to enter her life junior year, there seems to be a chance for her to change her mind. . .

In this moving and beautiful book, Fortunati shuns clichés and melodrama in favor of something more powerful: a compelling story about a girl who discovers new hope thanks to medication, therapy, and meaningful relationships. Catherine's struggles and her clear, funny voice are the heart of the book, but it is also buoyed by amazing supporting characters. A sweet first love, a charismatic new friend, a devoted mother, a dedicated therapist, an inspiring history teacher, a pulls-no-punches grandma: these are the people who help Catherine to save herself from the darkness that threatens. They bring love and laughter into her life, and, in the process, remind us all what a difference we can make when we come to others with kindness, openness, and constancy.

And while this is first and foremost Catherine's story, in the process of her journey, we are shown a number of wider truths. Fortunati does a lovely job illustrating that what often holds us back from true intimacy is not, in fact, the judgments or shortcomings of others, but our own fears and insecurities. And time and again,

she demonstrates the power that comes with honesty, with opening up and sharing our true feelings, however difficult it may be.

A lovely and important read!

I received an ARC in exchange for an honest review.

Miranda Kenneally says

Such an emotional read and a great book overall. Add this one to your radar!

Emily France says

Oh, this book. The story follows Cath who calls her bipolar depression--and its suffocating darkness--"Zero." And she knows it will return like it always does. She's stockpiled meds to take her life when it rears its ugly head once more. Fortunati does such an expert job of portraying Zero's hold on Cath that it literally took my breath away. I found myself clutching my heart as I read. Through a compelling voice and sharp description, I could feel Cath's struggle on every page. What I love most is the message of hope and the real start-and-stop complex nature of recovery from mental illness that is portrayed in this book. It rings so true. This is an important and beautiful book, and I'm so glad it's in the world!

Stephanie Elliot says

The Weight of Zero is heartbreaking and heroic with a cast of characters that run the gamut – you've got bullies and the bullied, the damaged and the ruined, the Queen Bees, and the wanna-bes, and everyone in between. And Catherine, who has tried to commit suicide once and is fearing that Zero will come back for her again, and this time, when he does she will do the job right.

But because of an Intensive Outpatient Program, some new friends, a boy, some new meds, and a new therapist, Zero isn't meddling in her life as much anymore and things are starting to look up. She's starting to feel ... NORMAL?

Could this thing called LIFE be getting better?

I absolutely loved this book about a girl with a diagnosis of bipolar, and finished in record time, wanting to find out what happened. Would Zero come back for Catherine? What would happen to her and the boy who she has decided might be 'the one'? Would her mom ever give her some space? Would she stop getting bullied by the complete jerk in her history class (I LOATHED him!!), and would she get rid of 'the troops'? (You'll have to read the book to find out what I mean! :)

This novel has all the pieces I adore in a YA contemporary – it has heart and honesty, compelling characters that are real and flawed yet funny and full of spirit and soul. It has adults who are compassionate and true-to-life (Oh my gosh, wait till you meet Nonny – she is hilarious!)

THE WEIGHT OF ZERO is a book that teens and adults will relate to, understand, and love. It's one of those books that after you read it, you'll need to sit for a while, because it's just so well done you need to let it simmer in your soul.

Everly Frost says

I'm going to try to find words adequate to describe Karen Fortunati's THE WEIGHT OF ZERO.

Kind

Accepting

Hopeful

Deeply sad, but the kind of sad that makes me value even one moment of happy

Catherine Pulaski has bipolar disorder. Her so-called friends deserted her when they found out about it and became her worst tormentors at school. Her only friends are the bottles of pills she lines up like soldiers on her bedside table every night—bottles that should be empty but aren't because Catherine has a plan. Although her mother closely monitors her medication after Catherine's last suicide attempt almost succeeded, Catherine has managed to hide away a few extra pills. Stockpiling them. Her escape plan.

But she doesn't plan on finding others who know the same pain she does. Others who are as fragile as she is and with every small step of trust, Catherine's plan changes.

This is not a book about a boy saving a girl. Or a friend saving a girl. Or even of a mother saving her daughter. Although every single one of them makes an impact. This is a story about a girl walking her own path.

Catherine Pulaski owns her own path in all its complications and all its hurt and despite it being such a difficult path to walk and it will never be any easier because there is no changing her diagnosis. Still, she walks it and she keeps walking it.

I'm adding Courage to the list of words above. This book is about courage.

Five enormous stars that, in Catherine's words, amount to a ten for me.

Darlene says

Catherine – Cat – Pulaski is a high school junior navigating the ups and downs of adolescent friendships and relationships. She's also preparing herself for the dreaded appearance of Zero by stockpiling medicine for its inevitable return. Cat is bipolar and Zero is the crippling depression that makes it impossible to live a normal life. A life that isn't defined by her mother's constant monitoring, therapy sessions, and a mood rating scale from 0-10. Zero found her once right after her grandmother died. Cat is determined not to let it get her again without a plan.

This amazing YA debut gives an honest and true voice to the silent and often un talked about world of

mental illness. It is a story with humor, heart and hope. A story that will stay with you for a long time. It should be required reading for all high school students.

Adriana Mather says

This is a beautiful, heart-wrenching story of love and loss.

The protagonist, Catherine (Cath) Pulaski, is a 17-year-old girl who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder shortly after the devastating death of her beloved grandmother. Her first suicide attempt has left her mother traumatized. Zero is Cath's name for the crippling depression that overwhelmed her. She has a plan, though. She is collecting enough pills to defeat Zero if it comes for her again.

Fortunati's portrayal of the impact of chronic mental illness is fierce and honest. Her treatment of the subject is deft. This is an especially important coming-of-age story. I loved this book so much.

Diane says

I work with people who are coping with mental illness and I see that their stories are ones of courage, hope and humor so it was with great joy that I read *Weight of Zero* by Karen Fortunati. She did a wonderful job of capturing the reality of a young woman with bi-polar disease. I particularly liked her ability to create a relatable mother /daughter relationship and also believable teen friendships. This is a wonderful book for young adults and the rest of us as well.
