Suicide Movies: Social Patterns 1900 - 2009
by Steven Stack & B Bowman (Hogrefe Publishing, 2012)
Reviewed by: April Foreman, Ph.D.

“…The presentation of social patterns, such as those of Randy ‘the Ram’ in The Wrestler (2008), while common in film, are not points of emphasis in research studies on suicide.” (pg. x)

What happens when Sociologists conduct the first and only review of the treatment of suicide in the movies? Well, 1, 158 movies and 1,377 portrayals of suicide later, we get to finally read a systemic review of something all of us will see in the movies and on television nearly every week: A clear description of how our society collectively views and portrays suicide.

Considering how often it is said that suicide is a taboo subject, it is intriguing to note that Stack and Bowman find that it is a topic frequently portrayed in film (as it is in the arts throughout history). They guide the reader through a detailed, and painstakingly thorough methodology for coding and analyzing suicide movies. Their premise, throughout, appears to be that the arts can enhance science’s understanding of suicide. Similarly, at every opportunity, research about real-life trends in suicide is laid next to artistic trends seen in films. This often leads the reader to insightful (and well-supported) conclusions about how social perceptions of suicide either enhance or diverge from the real world facts.

One of the most thought provoking conclusions reached in Suicide Movies is the extent to which general society appears to focus on external, social causes for suicide. This powerful theme is shown in high relief to the overwhelming focus on internal (intrapsychic) factors found in most research on suicide.

The juxtaposition of the numerous reviews of movies, and themes in comparison with the corresponding data about the authors’ analysis and extensive literature review makes this book a compelling read for lovers of the arts, and data junkies alike (and for those of us who are both). The information in this book can be fairly meaty at times. Consider reading it in bits, thoughtfully, as its level of detail provides many moments for reflection. This book is guaranteed to have something new and insight provoking for both people who are new to Suicidology as a field, and those who have been contributing to it for years.