

# Introduction

## Mainstreaming Literature for Young People

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In 2006, Lennard Davis lamented that although disability studies was “on the map,” it remained difficult to pinpoint. As guest editors, we would like to begin by recognizing the ever-humble David Bolt for being a geographical and intellectual guide and a driving force behind making disability studies increasingly prominent and accessible. He not only launched this journal and remains its editor-in-chief, but continues actively to encourage scholars already on the path, as well as those who have only just unfolded their map. As many readers of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies (JLCDS)* will know, among many other roles, Bolt is also the director of the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies (CCDS) at Liverpool Hope University, UK. Participating in or even simply reading the programs associated with the conferences and symposia, one acquires an even stronger sense of the momentum that he has generated for global and interdisciplinary disability studies.

Bolt’s invitation to edit this special issue on contemporary young adult and children’s literature for *JLCDS* exemplifies his encouraging and galvanizing spirit. The larger than anticipated number of proposals we were privileged to read demonstrates the renown and worth of this journal. We are honored to introduce six essays from a truly international and multidisciplinary mix of scholars exploring disability in literature and other media intended for young people from a range of perspectives and cultural backgrounds.

Disability and deafness have long featured in texts for young people; however, as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder astutely document, they have traditionally functioned as prosthetics to uphold storylines. In the past, child characters with disabilities served as educational toys for their able-bodied peers or, like Tiny Tim, as moral barometers for adult protagonists. Disability and Deaf literature for young readers has boomed. Best-sellers like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Wonder*, and *Wonderstruck* have been adapted for the stage and screen, indicating a growing audience for disability narratives. The easy availability of audiobooks has opened up pleasure reading to young listeners with disabilities like blindness

and dyslexia. Although they will not be considered here, we should note that texts written in Braille, tactile, interactive, and digital formats have also become much more widely available. Our contributors in this issue reconsider the history of disability in literature for young readers in light of this twenty-first century publishing boom.

Children are often on the front lines of the struggle over the meanings of disability. Literature for young readers lends itself to the exploration of disability because it documents the transformations of personal and social identity most young people experience. For young people, both with and without disabilities, the works they encounter provide long-lasting frames of reference for understanding bodymind diversity. It is especially important that scholars well-versed in disability rights and theory critique the literature and texts that children will experience in and out of schools. Do they catalyze charity, sentiment, and continued marginalization? Or do they cultivate better understandings of disability? The work of Rudine Sims Bishop throws light on the need for all young readers to see themselves in texts, explore known and foreign worlds—be these real or fantastic—and cross the threshold of imagination. This renowned African American children's literature scholar employs the metaphors, "mirrors," "windows," and "sliding glass doors" to illustrate such human literary needs. The contributors to this special issue ask *what* and *how* do these texts teach? Are their authors building mirrors where individuals with disabilities can reflect on their own lives and value? Are they building windows through which readers can see their own biases as well as a panorama of human perspectives? Are some of the windows also sliding doors into new worlds? The articles we have included ask what younger readers will discover about themselves in addition to the plurality of lived experiences, viewpoints, and contributions of disabled people.

As guest editors, we also sought commentary on an array of texts and genres. In this special issue, readers encounter contemporary children's picture books and young adult literature, pedagogical texts used to support literacy and language learning, allegorical verse, as well as stories told on screen. Exploring fantasy, dystopias, mystery, misfit romance, sick lit, and realistic fiction, the contributors discuss disability as it is conceived in real and imagined worlds. Examining works by authors from a variety of nations and races, critics ponder how ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and the oppressions experienced in war and during disasters overlap, complement, or contradict the disability narrative. Hailing from Austria, Canada, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, these scholars express local and transnational perspectives. With careers in art, art history, creative writing,

disability studies, general and special education, foreign language learning, literature, and museum education, they offer insights and explore texts from diverse perspectives.

As the literature of disability has changed, its criticism has changed as well. Over the last decade scholars have taken literary disability studies into new directions reflected in this issue. One significant new direction is the intersectionality of disability with identities such as race and sexuality. For example, in her article, Nicole Markotić cross-examines the intersections of disability and queerness in Brian Francis's *Fruit: a novel about a boy and his nipples* and Mariko Tamaki's *(You) Set Me on Fire* to show how "each category of disabled and queer informs and even sways the other" (237). Literary disability studies has also moved beyond distinguishing between good representations and bad representations to consider the ways disability operates more globally and metaphorically in texts. As Michael Bérubé has argued, critics must move beyond diagnosing accurate or inaccurate character portrayals to consider how disabilities serve as "narrative strategies, devices for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action" (2). Yayoi Mashimo's article "If Lessons Are to Be Learned" takes this nuanced approach to examine how Japanese picture books have deployed physical differences in children's hands as part of the nation's political dialogue about nuclear risk.

Mashimo's article, however, along with several others in this issue, shows the continued need to distinguish between good representations and bad representations. Mashimo critiques a popular children's picture book on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant crisis in 2011, which portrays children with disabilities as "shocking and tragic icons" (178) to galvanize anti-nuclear activism. As long as old stereotypes persist, critics will need to call out bad representations. Even in an age of inclusion, newer, didactic texts designed ostensibly to teach diversity lessons and cultivate empathy often result in merely showcasing marginalized bodies and minds.

The special issue opens with three articles that explore disability through a pedagogical lens. In surveying representations of disability in Japanese picture books, Mashimo, an artist who researches and teaches art history and museum education, finds that although positive portrayals have become more common in recent times, covert, negative lessons still prevail. Mashimo's mindful article highlights the dangers of ableism even in its subtlest forms and shows how adults often return to discriminatory teachings as their point of reference when they find themselves in fearful situations. She traces a history of crises which illustrate how Japanese activists, in the name of protest, have retaught disturbing disability lessons to promulgate panic. A number of contemporary

children's and adult texts published after this calamity use disability allegorically—as a metaphor to signal impending radioactive doom. This first article not only reveals the failure of such literature to function as a mirror, window, or sliding door, it also emphasizes unsettling tensions at the intersection of disability rights and other social justice movements.

In the second article, Janelle Mathis and Polly Vaughan draw attention to the voices and viewpoints of teenage readers with psychiatric disabilities. At the 2015 Disability and Disciplines Conference at the CCDS, Peter Beresford delivered an impassioned keynote address calling for changes in psychiatric care informed by the feelings, experiences, and wishes of mental health “service users/survivors.” He presented findings from the user-controlled Joseph Rowntree Foundation report demonstrating the urgent need to shift from narrow medical models of care with an over-emphasis on drug treatments, to holistic models that would include discussion and genuinely listening to people. Janelle Mathis, whose scholarship focuses on critical literacy and reader response, and Polly Vaughan, who works directly with teenage boys labeled with “emotional disabilities and identified suicidal ideation” (187), collaborate on research that provides a forum for honest dialogue. Their article presents lessons learned from adolescents who engage in critical analyses of sick lit in reading communities. Their conversations reveal teenagers' expertise in commenting on the status quo, normalcy, marginalization, and agency as they critique the texts for authenticity. The article offers an imaginative approach to pedagogy that underscores the benefits of listening to service users in school settings.

Tanja Aho and Grit Alter synthesize their work in cultural and literary studies and English as a foreign language (EFL), to explore narratives of a didactic nature. Their critique considers both contemporary picture books intended to support inclusion in elementary classrooms as well as EFL textbooks. Rather than making a spectacle out of disability to incite fear, their analysis pinpoints authors and illustrators who choose to minimize disability in their naïve attempts to normalize it and ease discomfort among non-disabled children and EFL students. For example, in the stories that Aho and Grit analyze, disability may remain hidden until the denouement when, with any luck, “normal” young readers will have learned the lesson that disabled children are “just like me, just like you.” Such narratives reinforce disability as the problem and cater to the anxiety Ato Quayson calls “aesthetic nervousness.” These contributors also observe interesting parallels with the superficial insertion of ethnicity in literature for young people. Ultimately, well-intentioned narrative elision precludes already marginalized youth from seeing themselves or their

contributions in texts. One might ask whether so-called mainstream readers will ever reflect on their own biases or consider new perspectives. How will they ever imagine a different future or world unless they engage in critical questions?

In the first three articles, many of the texts analyzed imply that disability is identifiable, understood, and agreed upon. Overt and subtle didactic messages in literature for young people and the practice of labeling children in educational settings reinforce disability as a category or class of people. In the subsequent articles, the contributors explore children's and young adult literature where disability is less definable. In her study of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Francisco Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World*, Monica Orlando discusses neurodiverse protagonists who think, communicate, and interact with others "differently," but do not necessarily associate their differences with impairment or disability. Orlando contrasts the novels' protagonists, concluding that "neurodiversity as it is represented in the character of Marcelo is more nuanced and demonstrates that neurodiverse individuals can both be valued by and contribute to society while not having to change who they are" (221). These nuances affect how the characters view themselves in their internal worlds, how others perceive them in real worlds created in the novels, and how we see them as readers. Orlando's article underscores the continued need to define the elements of a good disability representation.

Nicole Markotić's critique of two Canadian young adult texts also begs the question, "What is disability?" Drawing on the work of Robert McRuer, the article examines the intersectionality between the oppressions of queerness and disability. Belonging to the contemporary realistic fiction genre, the queer protagonists in both novels grapple with their sexual orientation and sexual desires. Both characters not only feel a need to repress their queerness, but also yearn to fix the corporeal differences—obesity and burns—from which they "suffer." Estranged from their bodies, they ache to "cure" their inner revulsion and their social stigmatization. The old discourse of cure continues to hold sway over young psyches and still requires critique.

The final contribution to the special issue also deals with stigmatization as it appears in a fantastic world. Cath Nichols evaluates Cressida Cowell's debut *How to Train Your Dragon* book, subsequent titles and screen adaptations that all became best-sellers. She critiques the representation of real disabilities (characters with missing limbs), insinuated disabilities (protagonists who are markedly clumsy and physically inept), and imaginary disabilities (a dragon who needs a prosthetic tail) in the children's books, television series, and film

versions. Nichols highlights notions of stigma that appear in the more recent texts when prisoners are branded with “slave-marks.” Her article also explores the roles that disability and increasingly prostheticized bodies signify in the different versions. Does disability connote outsider status that incites fear or pity, or does it help young audiences embrace McRuer’s dreams in *Crip Theory*, where disability might become welcome, even desirable? How does fantasy move us into the realms of the posthuman and transhuman?

We leave readers to enjoy these timely contributions and the stimulating questions that the articles raise.

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