

Disability In Children's Literature

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I became disabled at the age of 10 and so experienced childhood and schooling both as disabled and non-disabled. The books I came across in my childhood education carried profound importance for my capacity to live alongside disabled people and to develop a valued identity as a disabled person.

In my more recent involvement with the disability movement, it has become apparent to me that my experiences are shared by huge numbers of people. The portrayal of disability in children's books has important implications for everyone, disabled or not. Bear in mind that if you pick any school year, some of those children will be disabled, and of those who are not disabled, some will become disabled. Over a lifetime, you can expect at least one in ten of the children in that year to be disabled, so that's roughly three per class. And a much larger number of the remaining children will have close involvement with a disabled person through family, friends, partners, their own children, colleagues, and so on. Clearly it makes no sense at all to continue misinforming children about disability.

Despite the numbers of people - a majority population - detrimentally affected by the current portrayal of disability, the content and use of children's books continue to fail us.

Disability is not simply under-represented in children's literature, it is consistently *mis*-represented, and that misrepresentation goes largely unquestioned. In analysing books □ and all manner of media, for children and adults - a very small number of themes emerges, to be used repeatedly:

"Disabled people are menacing and dangerous" - (remember Captain Hook?)

"Disabled people are innocent and saintly" - (remember Tiny Tim?)

"Disabled people are an inspiration to us all" - (remember biographies of Helen Keller and Douglas Bader?)

As one critic put it: books are "intended for readers who, thinking of themselves as non-disabled, are able to regard the disabled as essentially alien, absolute others".

Disabled people in books are almost never real - never whole people with varied lifestyles and personalities. My schooling gave no sense that there was a history of disability or a growing political movement campaigning for disability rights, nothing of the lifestyles of disabled people. Books rarely represent disabled people constructively. Restrictive

portrayals of disability go beyond the printed page to restrict real-life opportunities for disabled people. Children frequently have only this misinformation to call upon in their contacts with disabled people or in their own experiences of disability. It has serious consequences for *all* of us, disabled or not.

Similar criticisms have been leveled at the literary representation of other groups. An increasing number of 'positive image' books are now being produced, particularly representing Black people and women. This is, without doubt, an area we also need to move towards: producing strong images of disabled people, including disabled people who belong to multiple minority groups.

However, the production of new books tends to be presented as *the* solution in literature, whereas I feel it goes only part-way. Regardless of how many excellent new books are produced and circulated, they will never fully replace negative portrayals, especially as many of these exist in books considered to be literary 'classics'. Besides, deeming a book 'positive' or 'negative' is too simplistic - whilst some may be irredeemably 'negative', few are categorically 'positive'.

If you bear in mind that the majority of teachers have gained their misinformation about disability from the same education system and even from the they are using today, and that few are themselves disabled, there are not many teachers currently in a position to confidently and accurately judge what is a 'good' or 'bad' portrayal of disability.

Alongside the production of 'positive' books we need to begin teaching teachers (as well as writers, illustrators, publishers and others) methods and skills which will enable them independently to evaluate books.

No such method currently exists, although I'm hoping the next 18 months will change that! So I'll continue now to outline my proposal for developing such a scheme.

What is needed is an evaluative tool which will enable teachers to recognise and understand what is acceptable, constructive, offensive, and so on, in books.

By analysing a wide range of children's literature I am planning to develop stage-by-stage guidelines, which can be applied to specific books to evaluate and rate a range of features. The evaluation process will provide guidelines for teachers to help them recognise positive indicators, and will also include the following questions:

- How is disability used?

More often than not, it is used as a *device* by authors. The fact that the character is disabled is almost by the by; disability creates a useful diversion to the main plot or it produces a hook on which to hang a point, a good metaphor for what the author really wanted to say.

- Does the book take a medical or social perspective?

Most books approach disability as a problem of physical and personal adjustment, rather than as a human rights issue. This ignores the social causes and realities of denied access to public transport, housing, schooling, and so on, which are by far the main concern of disabled people.

- What message is given?

Most disabled people in books fall within one of two stereotypes: defeated, angry people who require help, or 'never-say-die' types who embrace disability as a 'physical challenge' and go out to conquer the world. The first character-type resists assistance out of angry pigheadedness, and the second rejects it out of strength of character.

- How real are the disabled characters & lifestyles?

Real disabled people may work in a variety of jobs, use day centres, have partners and children, be women, be lesbian or gay, use personal assistance, travel abroad, help other people, and so on. Yet most books portray disabled people in very narrow terms, totally dependent on other people, isolated and with empty lives, ignorant, uncultured, and submissive. Few incorporate experiences of life with disability, the extra time required for daily living, the intricacies of using Dial-a-Ride or the identity and involvement with a community of disabled people.

- What language and images are used?

Language and images generally reinforce the central stereotypes of the book. Often those books with relatively 'positive' themes do not question their use of language and images, even though this may end up undermining their original message.

- How does the book portray related issues, including race, sex, and sexuality?

Most disabled people in books are white, middle-class and heterosexual men. Other non-disabled characters are often portrayed stereotypically. I would recommend one particular book unequivocally for its disability portrayal, but have huge reservations because of its sexist characterisation of the disabled child's over-protective mother.

- What is the author's or illustrator's experience of disability?

There is a natural and righteous anger which accompanies traumatic change or imposed limitations, and which is relatively easy to synthesise and depict. Non-disabled authors and illustrators, however, have to rely on imagining 'how it feels', rather than basing their work on reality.

There are several other features which will also be considered within this evaluation method. The guidelines will recommend particular books and features for use, but will not recommend the total exclusion of books which are extremely negative in their portrayal of disability. Instead it will allow teachers to make their own decisions in greater knowledge and then to consciously **use** positive and negative aspects of books as positive discussion

material. Teachers will therefore be able to assist children to develop a critique of what they are reading, and to link their reading to wider curriculum areas and to life beyond.

The possibilities for such a project are endless. There is scope for:

- Expansion of guidelines to other areas of the curriculum, topic work, reference books, assemblies, geography, craft and technology, and so on
- Publication of children's books by disabled authors and illustrators
- Role model books specifically for groups of disabled people
- Generic books with a disability theme for disabled and non-disabled children to use together
- Books and materials which integrate communication forms, print, Braille, tape and British Sign Language
- And much more.

We have to start acknowledging that books reach:

- Today's disabled and non-disabled children
- And tomorrow's parents, employers, teachers, policy-makers, disabled and non-disabled.

It's time to start including and confronting the portrayal of disability throughout children's education.