

BREAKING STEREOTYPES WITH CHILDREN'S FICTION: SEEKING PROTAGONISTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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North American children's authors have not been inclusive of characters with special needs when it comes to assigning the role of protagonist. While books with depictions of characters with identified exceptionalities have appeared on bookstore shelves and awards' lists, these characters have generally been relegated to subsidiary positions, assisting other main characters in their growth and development without demonstrating parallel learning. Children require book collections which explore a broad array of characters, encouraging them to discover real life heroes within and among themselves.

Scanning the list of American Newbery and Canadian Governor General's Award winners for English text over the last twenty years, it's interesting to note that while a number of titles for children contain characters with identifiable special needs, in all but two cases these characters are relegated to subsidiary positions. Their main purpose thus appears to be supporting the protagonist's learning and growth, without an exploration of their own potential to develop throughout the course of the story. If these characters are created sensitively, they do not propagate stereotypes based on narrow thinking related to their particular issues or disabilities; as subsidiary characters, however, they also do not serve to correct stereotypes related to perceptions of people with exceptional needs as incapable of leadership or heroism.

It is no simple oversight that books centering on characters with special needs have missed the awards lists. In fact, there is a dearth of children's titles which illuminate characters with disabilities, in anything beyond secondary positions. Thus, while individual characters may not support stereotypes, the larger body of work for children, due to the absence of main characters with special needs, serves to continue the marginalization of people with disabilities. In books, as in society, people with challenges have been passed over for the role of *hero* in favour of someone whom popular culture perceives as more able to get the job done.

Common stereotypes include the idea that people with exceptionalities are generally not capable, persistent, or independent, have communication difficulties, lack a sense of humour, and that a single disability is somehow all encompassing. In public, this is evidenced by someone speaking louder to a new acquaintance in a wheelchair, assuming that somehow because they are on wheels their hearing is also affected. It is apparent in the manner in which communication attempts are initially attempted through a companion, rather than directly to a person with visible differences. It has been apparent in the workplace, where people with disabilities have not historically had fair opportunities to demonstrate their worth.

Rachna Gilmore's *A Screaming Kind of Day*, winner of the 1999 Canadian Governor General's Literary Award for children's English text, uses a striking picture-book format to follow the story of Scully, a child with a hearing disability, who longs for release from what she predicts is going to be a bad day. *It's a screaming kind of day. I can tell the minute I open my eyes—Leo's inches from my nose, making that cross-eyed, twisty-mouth face. He yanks my braid. I don't bother to put in my hearing aids, I leap out of bed. I scream and chase him. He turns around long enough for me to see his lips say, "Can't hear."* Banished to her room, Scully watches a downpour and longs for release, *to dance, dance with the rain, to shout with the green.* But after she sneaks out, Mom catches her and Scully's day goes from bad to worse... This character inspires a moving story without sentimentality or didacticism, and different though she is from children

without hearing impairments, the experiences she offers in the story are universal, engaging all readers with common perceptions of childhood.

Pamela Porter's junior novel *The Crazy Man*, winner of the 2005 Governor General's Literary Award in the category of English children's literature, is the story of a girl's recovery from a terrible accident, her adjustment to a physical disability, and her developing relationship with Charlie, a farm hand from the local mental institution who has schizophrenia. How these two characters learn and grow through the course of the book makes for an emotional and satisfying read.

Among award-winning titles, there are a number of carefully drawn characters with disabilities who appear to assist the main character in a journey of one sort or another. Crane-man in Linda Sue Park's *A Single Shard* becomes a supportive companion to Tree-ear, the book's protagonist. Mrs. Olinski, coaching from her wheelchair, has tremendous impact on the kids in E.L. Konigsburg's *The View From Saturday*. The maxims from Phoebe's visually impaired neighbour, Mrs. Partridge, are cryptic and illuminative, in Sharon Creech's novel *Walk Two Moons*. In Sarah Ellis's *Pick-Up Sticks*, the friendship of Ernie, the landlord's son who is mentally disabled, is one of the things Polly misses when she moves from her childhood home in Vancouver. Julie Johnson strives for psychological and medical accuracy in her portrayal of Keely's elder brother in *Hero of Lesser Causes*, a victim of polio whose suicidal tendencies incite his sister to action. In *Looking for X*, Deborah Ellis brings minor characters into play as Khyber's twin brothers' autism precipitates their mother into seeking the supports of a group home. Chantelle, a girl with a physical disability, is befriended by Travis, the main character of Glen Huser's *Stitches*. Charlie's friend, Edward, in Pamela Porter's *The Crazy Man*, has schizophrenia. It is not a problem that a character with special needs assists another character throughout the course of a story, just as more typical characters support their assigned protagonists. What is a problem is that there isn't a viable body of work about characters with special needs, defining their unique patterns of individuality and human growth, in addition to utilizing them in subsidiary roles.

The few titles which are available, however, are well worth attention. In Canada, Jean Little's personal body of work celebrates the abilities of characters with special needs, many of whom experience visual challenges similar to Little's own. In the United States, Jack Gantos' memorable *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, as well as its three sequels, deal with ADHD and offer the potential of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in the depiction of the title character. Cynthia Lord's *Rules*, a 2007 Newbery Honor Book, presents a non-verbal character with cerebral palsy, breaking a long silence in American literature regarding this particular challenge. Although Jason isn't the story's narrator, he becomes a close friend of Catherine's, and more than that, a character in his own right—growing and changing throughout the course of the story—transcending what happens with most characters perceived as *special ed* and whose potential for development remains untapped.

People with disabilities have, to some extent, been invisible historically in North American society as well as in its literature. Early death and institutionalization are partly to blame, and, until the mid to latter part of the 19th century, children with certain disabilities were not educated in neighbourhood schools, if indeed they went to school at all. In addition to having limited hopes for children born with particular exceptionalities, the stigma attached to disability—some religions even attribute it to punishment for sin—has caused discomfort among those who misunderstand or fear someone's differences. Hitler's philosophy of elimination of individuals with disabilities is certainly one of the most publicly recognized and horrific examples of this type of prejudice. Current North American attitudes continue to be mixed towards people with visible differences, and misunderstanding and prejudice against this population, whether from ignorance or stigma, continues to be apparent although political forces are evident which advocate for fairness to all people.

In Canada in the 1970s, a disability rights' movement began that resembled the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Large numbers of people with disabilities, and other advocates, joined together to argue their rightful place in society. This eventually resulted in the inclusion of *physical and mental disability* in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and, subsequently, in provincial Human Rights' legislation.

In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 2004, does not require inclusion. Instead, the law indicates that children with disabilities be educated in the *least restrictive environment appropriate* to meet their *unique needs*. The IDEA implies that the *least restrictive environment* analysis will begin with the regular education classroom. In Canada, at the provincial and territorial level, there are compulsory education laws supporting the inclusion and accommodation of students with special needs. Similar to the mandates within IDEA, the existence of these laws would suggest that all students with exceptionalities should receive appropriate accommodations within Canadian educational systems. Educational practice now provides more opportunities than in the past for children of diverse learning needs to participate in co-operative educational settings.

There is no time better than the present for utilizing books which sensitively depict characters with special needs, educating children with typical needs towards a fuller understanding of others who share their classrooms and communities, and allowing children who have exceptionalities to see characters, with similar challenges to themselves, in print—something we hope all young readers will experience, whether they have special needs, or not. It is important for collections of books to go beyond what can be perceived as *popular culture*, including a broad array of personalities and issues for readers to sample. What our society has already purported in terms of encouraging an acceptance of cultural and gender differences through literature, should now be extended to issues of difference in regards to people with disabilities. After all, heroism is based on one's achievements in a particular place and time, not on a predetermined set of attributes.

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