Disability Bias in Children's Literature

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Our article will address a subject that is somewhat less recognized than others usually discussed in the forum of minority issues in children's literature—namely disability bias. By disability bias, we refer to the attitudes and practices that lead to unequal and unjust portrayals of people with disabilities in children's literature. Some writers and publishers have taken steps to eliminate racial and ethnic stereotypes from children's literature as well as removing the limiting effects of sex role stereotyping. Several have tried to eliminate negative images regarding age and class. Educators have come to realize that these kinds of biases limit the growth and development of children. What for the most part has gone unrecognized is that bias and stereotyping on the basis of disability also limit children's potential, and, therefore, this too needs to be addressed from the perspective of writers and publishers, and through a comprehensive re-evaluation of the language and literary style of children's literature.

In 1977, The Council for Interracial Books for Children published a landmark issue of their Bulletin on "Handicapism." In it, Douglas Biklen and Robert Bogdan presented an analysis of children's literature as it relates to the portrayal of people with disabilities. In this piece, the authors describe 10 common stereotypes associated with the portrayal of people with disabilities. (Note: The eleventh stereotype is one that the current authors have commonly noted but was not included in the Biklen and Bogdan piece.) The stereotypes cited were:

1. Person with a disability portrayed as pitiable and pathetic. This image is one widely touted and perpetuated by charity drives and telethons. It is also a stereotype that widely exists in classical as well as modern children's literature. Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol is such an example.

2. Person with a disability as the object of violence. Since a 'handicapped person' must be incapable of defending his/her own self, we become perfect ploys or victims of crime. Of Mice and Men shows an example of this stereotype.

3. Person with a disability as sinister and/or evil. This may be the most historically prevalent stereotype ranging from fairy tales with
stooped witches who use canes to hunched-back kings. Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* is a classic example.

4. Person with a disability used as “atmosphere.” Basically undeveloped as characters, persons with disabilities are often peripheral to the main action, perhaps as a blind musician or amputee beggar. The mentally retarded brother in Betsy Byar’s *Summer of the Swans* serves merely as such a prop.

5. Person with a disability as “super crip.” All too often, in order to be accepted both in children’s literature and in real life, people with disabilities are put in positions of being over-achievers. Thus, people with disabilities are thought to be endowed with super powers, ranging from the paraplegic detective, *Ironside*, to social activist, Helen Keller.

6. Person with a disability as laughable. Just as there are ethnic jokes, so too have the media and children’s literature made frequent use of this ploy as a gimmick to facilitate the plot. For example, the person who is visually impaired becomes the brunt of many jokes and pranks. This is a particularly insensitive portrayal of people with disabilities.

7. Person with a disability as his/her own—and only—worst enemy. This is the popular portrayal of the self-pitying person with a disability who could “make it” if only he or she would shed a cloak of bitterness. Such portrayals deny the reality of architectural, communicational, and attitudinal barriers which legitimately interfere with the true acceptance. Clara in *Heidi* is such an example.

8. Person with a disability as a burden. Burdens imply something to be gotten rid of, hence portraying people with disabilities as burdens in society objectifies, dehumanizes, and negates the values and contributions of people with disabilities. A prime example in this category is Laura in *A Glass Menagerie*.

9. Person with a disability as asexual. Simply stated, people with disabilities are very rarely presented in caring or love relationships. *Flowers for Algernon* clearly suggests this.

10. Person with a disability as incapable of fully participating in everyday life. Until recently, the notion that people with disabilities can contribute to everyday life, be it as functional members of the work force or in families, was not prevalent or pervasive. Differences, rather than commonalities, may make for more “exciting” story lines, but they do little to break down barriers or increase awareness of the abilities and values of people with disabilities. The play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* clearly analyzes this issue.
Person with a disability as being isolated from disabled and non-disabled peers. Too often, both in pictures and text, people with disabilities are depicted as alone and/or loners. Such stereotypic representations become self-perpetuating as in To Kill a Mockingbird.

Literary style and language play a large role in perpetuating disability bias—just as they do in sex and race bias. Drawing a parallel from sexist and racist language, "handicapist language" has a similarly damaging effect on self image but is just now beginning to be recognized by the public in general and writers in particular. Our choice of words is reflective of personal and societal attitudes and prejudices. What do you think of when you hear the words "confined"? A bird in a cage? A prisoner? If this is the case, how can we continue to use the term to describe a person who is a wheelchair user? For a person with a mobility impairment, a wheelchair is anything but confining. Quite the contrary, the wheelchair provides freedom of movement which may otherwise not be possible. The word "invalid" means "not valid" and the word "crippled" which comes from the word "creep" are two examples of the negative images that we must begin to examine and eliminate. The word "handicapped" is believed to be derived from a begging term, "cap-in-hand"—an image that arouses pity rather than respect—and yet, it is this term that the U.S. Government chooses to use throughout its system. A more subtle example of bias in language would be to refer to a person as a "handicapped person." The expression "handicapped person" does two things: (1) it perpetuates the use of the word "handicapped" which conveys a sense of neediness and dependence that disability rights activists have worked hard to dispel; and (2) it continues to make the "handicap" the factor of prime importance about the person. The term "person with a disability" is the preferred term of the disability rights movement as it acknowledges the disability as being secondary to the person.

Due to the tireless work of disability rights advocates, some important legislation has been passed. In 1972, in amendments to the Economic Opportunities Act, Congress mandated that at least 10% of the children enrolled in Head Start programs have disabilities encompassing orthopedic, speech, hearing, visual, intellectual, or emotional impairments ranging from mild to severe. In 1972, a major piece of legislation for people with disabilities was passed—Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in all federally financed and assisted programs. In 1975, Public Law 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, was passed. This law declares that all children with disabilities are en-
Adults and children with disabilities are entering the mainstream of society in unprecedented numbers. Increases in the accessibility of transportation, public buildings, and work sites have meant that many adults who are disabled can now actively participate in the social, political, and economic life of the society; however, only a limited number of children's books reflect these changes. What follows are brief comparisons of positive and negative portrayals of adults and children with disabilities as presented in children's literature. In each case, we will begin with the positive portrayal.

**Early Childhood**

**Mobility Impairment**

*Darlene* by Eloise Greenfield tells the story of a young child's afternoon stay with her uncle and cousin. Initially, Darlene's main concern is to return home, but by the time her mother returns, Darlene, in typical early childhood fashion, decides that she no longer wants to go home. Darlene is clearly shown as an active, independent child who can and does fully participate with her family. The fact that Darlene is a wheelchair user is peripheral to the plot. Other assets of this delightful book include a positive portrayal of a Black family, including a male caregiver.

On the other hand, in *Nick Joins In* by Joe Lasker, we find a young child with a disability who is mainstreamed in school, but almost always depicted as isolated from his classmates. Additionally, the story only hints at complete peer acceptance after Nick has "saved the day." Nick's disability is a pivotal focus in what is an otherwise unremarkable story.

**Developmental Disability**

While *Making Room for Uncle Joe* by Ada B. Litchfield begins on an almost negative note, the beauty of this book lies in the changes that take place as a result of positive interaction with Uncle Joe. Joe's family soon learns to appreciate the fact that Joe can actively participate and contribute to family life. Joe, too, benefits from being a part of a family by learning to accept and share household responsibilities and chores. When Joe is given an opportunity to move into a
group home, the entire family reaches the decision that Joe should not move out.

In *Copycat Sam* by Alfred T. Stefanik, Sam is clearly shown as pitiable, pathetic, laughable, burdensome, and incapable of fully participating or interacting with peers. No explanation is given about Down's Syndrome and the common interests and ties that link non-disabled and disabled children. In addition, the illustrations portray Sam in the most stereotypic, offensive manner possible providing further discouragement for any child to learn about or interact with mentally retarded children.

**Visual Impairment**

*Through Grandpa's Eyes* by Patricia MacLachlan is a warm, sensitive story of a relationship between grandfather and grandson. Because of this positive relationship, Grandpa is able to enhance John's understanding of blindness. Grandpa is depicted as an independent, active member of the family. While most persons with visual impairment use some form of mobility aid, the absence of such an aid used by Grandpa presents a somewhat atypical picture; nevertheless, Grandpa does present a positive image of an older person with a disability.

*My Mother is Blind* by Margaret Reuter deals with the onset of disability and how it affects the family. While the mother is able to resume household chores, no other aspect of her personality and lifestyle is presented. Undoubtedly, adjustment to a newly acquired disability is difficult, yet there is little justification in portraying this family as so saddened by "the loss."

**Elementary Years**

**Hearing Impairment**

*Silent Dancer* by Bruce Hlibok tells the story of Nancy who is deaf and studying ballet. The book, written by Nancy's brother (who is also deaf), shows how first-hand knowledge contributes to a bias-free story. In addition, the non-traditional portrayal of a person who is deaf as a dancer adds an unexpected and welcome dimension to breaking down barriers.

Another book which portrays a woman who is deaf in a nontraditional manner is *The Fastest Woman on Earth* by Alida Thacher; however, major flaws exist in this book. As a well-known stunt
woman, Kitty O'Neill might be considered an excellent role model for the deaf community; however, O'Neill has never learned sign language and consequently cannot communicate directly with others who are deaf. By limiting herself to oral communication, O'Neill has chosen to isolate herself from the very community for which she serves as a role model.

**Developmental Disability**

*Between Friends* by Sheila Garrique is what this story is all about. Jill moves into a new neighborhood only to find that all of the kids except one have left for the summer. Brought together while walking dogs, Jill meets DeeDee, a teenager who has Down’s Syndrome. Jill and DeeDee find that they have much in common and enjoy each other’s company; however, come autumn when school begins, Jill finds that the neighborhood kids do not understand what she sees in DeeDee. It is through her friendship with DeeDee and others that Jill learns the importance of loyalty.

*Circle of Giving* by Ellen Howard is also a story about friendship. Unfortunately, this friendship is based on pity. Marguerite’s own isolation in a new community draws her to Francine, a child who has cerebral palsy. Marguerite is also drawn to the fact that Francine is “simply, horribly fascinatingly different from everyone we knew.” Indeed, such are the qualities on which all true friendships are based! The story portrays Francine as a burden to her family and society, incapable of fully participating in society, and isolated from her peers. In short, although this story is set in the 1920s, it is recently published and written and there is simply no excuse for its sexist, racist, and handicapist language.

**Junior High and Up**

*Visual Impairment*

*Belonging* by Debra Kent describes a teenager’s rite of passage through adolescence. The fact that this teenager is blind is neither minimized nor unduly emphasized. All of the interactions Meg encounters are real, both in terms of the resolution of the conflict to belong as well as the desire to value one’s own uniqueness. The particular sensitivity to the depiction of someone who is blind is due to the author’s first-hand knowledge of blindness.
Summer Dreams by Barbara Conklin also deals with relationships; however, in this story, it is a child who is blind who serves as the vehicle by which two teenagers are brought together. The relationship between the two teens is stereotypic with Steve wanting to be a doctor and Katie a teacher. The child, Michael, is portrayed as one-dimensional with blindness being blamed for his behavior problems. Michael is clearly a burden to his family and isolated from his peers. In short, Michael's participation is limited by his father, caretakers, and society at large.

Mobility Impairment

As the title implies, Run, Don't Walk, by Harriet Switz, takes a proactive approach to disability rights — something that is truly unique to children's literature. This book tells how the paths of two teenagers who are wheelchair users cross as they struggle to overcome personal, social, and political barriers. Samantha and Johnny are portrayed as active, independent, contributing members of society. Although Samantha is initially presented as her own worst enemy, readers will enjoy seeing her growth as the plot unfolds. Also unique to this book is the direct, unsentimental presentation of Johnny and Samantha's sexuality. The author is to be commended for her sensitivity toward the many issues affecting teenagers, disabled or nondisabled.

The Promise of Moonstone by Pat Engebrecht is not promising. In fact, it is sexist, racist, and most of all, handicapist. Kristina's mother, Anna, has become paralyzed as a result of a swimming accident and is now clearly a burden on her family — to the point where Anna herself contemplates suicide. Kristina is so concerned with getting her mother to walk again that her own personal growth and relationships suffer. Rather than focus on accepting and coping with a disability, this author has clearly chosen to reinforce the misplaced hope and energy of a newly disabled person and her family towards searching for a magical cure.

Bias in books cannot be dismissed as insignificant. It affects the reader's self-image, philosophy of life, interpersonal sensitivity, and opinions towards different minority groups and social problems. Conversely, nonbiased materials have a positive effect on attitudes, self-perceptions, and future options. Therefore, it is essential that readers as well as writers become aware of the implications of bias and the need to take an active role to ensure that stereotypes are not perpetuated.


