

Disabled Literature—Disabled Individuals in American Literature: Reflecting Culture(s)  
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**Abstract:** In American literature, disabled characters are often portrayed as “that other” and used to generate fear, pathos, and hatred. This affects how variously-abled individuals are perceived and accepted by society. While writers are being more inclusive and broadening their inventory of characters, many characters are simply a negative plot tool.

**Key Words:** literature, superstition, evil, stereotypes, disabled, culture

### Introduction

The manner in which disabled individuals have been portrayed in modern and contemporary American literature has, for the most part, shown disabled women and men, girls and boys as feared, reviled, misunderstood, or pitied. Disabled characters have been used primarily, if not only, to elicit pathos, fear, or hatred, with the disability eliciting the feeling as much as the character.

Literature affects, not just reflects, society and its views of disabled individuals; so how were disabled characters portrayed, what did they say, do, or become? What was reality-based and what was simple plot-driven necessity? During the later part of the 20th century and certainly into the 21st, especially with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, through the efforts of the Head Injury Foundation and other people with disabled rights-centered organizations, how disabled people are seen has been changing.

The dominant feelings held by nondisabled persons toward disabled persons are so very often sympathy, fear, or distaste; these reactions are often accompanied by avoidance or patronization. These terms also describe how disabled people are treated in American literature—that is, the subject of disability is avoided or the individuals are generally presented in a stereotypical, and often negative, manner. Disabled people are portrayed as helpless, super-abled (pure and good), or evil monsters. While these portrayals may seem unimportant—after all, literature isn’t “real life”—research has shown time and again that portrayals are extraordinarily important and influence culture(s) for decades and beyond.

### Disabled Literature

The attitudes towards disabled individuals are as diverse as people are diverse. Some of those attitudes, however, can be grouped together: attitudes of fear, attitudes of revulsion, and attitudes of pity are just three of the more horrific ones. These attitudes have not only been displayed by people, they have also been imposed upon people—often disabled people.

Historically, these attitudes resulted in practices of exclusion and confinement and defined whole people as wholly ill. Sterilization, especially of people with cognitive disabilities, was common in the United States and Europe at one time. Segregation denied people a wider voice, and their experiences, thoughts, and insights were ignored (Pirofski, n.d.).

In the contemporary United States, mainstreaming in schools, physical access to public sites, and technology have all improved access. Access, in turn, made people with disabilities visible and allowed more participation in society and in decision making. Those publicly seeking rights for disabled individuals have been active since the 1940s and have become particularly effective since the 1960s. As a result, in the last half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, there has been movement toward an acknowledgement of the normalcy of disability. Our literature (contemporary United States in this case) is starting to reflect that movement, albeit slowly and sometimes grudgingly. The literature of the nation is making its way from the two-dimensional portrayals of disabled individuals as monstrous, evil, inhuman, or cloyingly pitiful to characters that are fully functional. Those changes in characterization have grown out of a new sociopolitical consciousness about disability, particularly among disabled people themselves, and then from their push to not be characterized as the “other” by everyone else. Reading about the normal-disabled has joined the mainstreamed school and workplace in making America more inclusive (see Pirofski, n.d.).

### Self-Awareness

There is another aspect to the appearance of disabled people in literature: to allow nondisabled people to deal with their own fears and become more aware of their own prejudices. Murphy explains:

“The kind of culture the handicapped American must face is just as much a part of the environs of his disability as his wheelchair. It hardly needs saying that the disabled, individually and as a group, contravene all the values of youth, virility, activity, and physical beauty that Americans cherish however little most individuals may embody them. Most handicapped people, myself included, sense that others resent them for this reason: we are the subverters of an American ideal, we become ugly and repulsive to the able-bodied. We represent a fearsome possibility” (1995, p. 143).

Among other things, reading about disabled people reveals to us disquieting truths about our response to traditionally stigmatized segments of the population, making clear that, beneath the benign tolerance that the more “enlightened” among us profess to feel, primal terrors beset us even as they do the least “enlightened.” Reading novels, poems, and plays will not, let us be clear, exorcise those terrors, but by raising the issues to the level of full consciousness, these works can deliver us from hypocrisy and make us aware of how little is altered by mere verbal changes: that superficial re-labeling of which we tend to be so foolishly proud (Murphy, 1995).

### Literature as a Mirror of Culture

Literature tells us who we are as a culture; it mirrors our beliefs or challenges them; it helps sell a life-style. Literature has been used deliberately to normalize groups of individuals

and create social change. For example, one of the effects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1998) was to make people aware of the negative issues in slavery. *The Bone Collector* (Deaver, 1997) was written not only as a thriller mystery, but also a statement against mercy killing. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee (1960) masterfully used this fear and distrust of those who are different, in this case the developmentally disabled, to communicate the ignorance this attitude embodies. She uses narrow-minded townspeople to connect with what may be the reader's own narrow views of developmentally disabled individuals. The character, Boo, is presented as dangerous by seeing him only from the townspeople's parochial viewpoint. In the end he is revealed as both compassionate and brave. Literature reflects our realities and our dreams. It tells us what is good and bad and what does not fit into the cultural ideal.

## Portraits of Evil

Until recently, the primary societal attitude was that disabled people were less-than-human, evil, or even monsters. During the Victorian period, teratology—the study of abnormalities of physiological development—was represented in cabinets of human curiosities. These displays often included deformed skulls or bones of those who had been disabled in life, and unusual items of clothing for those who had been born as conjoined twins. These displays were eventually commercialized in the form of sideshows popular in the late 19th and early 20th century (Bogdan, 1988). In England, Canada, and the United States, the so-called “freak show” was also a popular entertainment in the first half of the 20th century. People with all sorts of bodily differences such as missing or additional limbs, obesity, hirsuteness, smallness, or tallness were exposed to paying audiences, who gawked at what were often billed as “mistakes of nature.” Thus the disabled (or the just-different) marked the boundaries of humanity and crossed them at the same time. It is this ambiguous state that both fascinated and frightened the audience (Bogdan, 1988).

This cultural background was reflected across literature from children's stories to adult novels and plays until very recently.<sup>1</sup> Any impairment usually made a character into a villain or a monster. Traditional children's tales often feature Cyclops, giants, evil one-armed captains, and those who can be identified as evil simply because they are physically very different from the beautiful “good” people (Goldman, 1990).

Probably because people understand most easily that which is most obvious, or has physical form, physical characteristics have always been used to set evil people apart from good people (Reese, 1998). For example, it is easy to see that Captain Hook is evil—he has the talk and most definitely the walk. The hook hand makes him even more menacing. The reason for the use of image to convey an idea goes back to the basic developmental patterns of childhood. Children's language development begins with nouns—the concrete objects which they can see, touch and easily understand (Reese, 1998). Thus, people understand the clues that concrete objects provide to enhance their understanding of ideas and situations. So clues have been found or created: dwarfism came of evil parents; mental illness is still often believed to be the result of possession by the devil or demons.

During the mid-1980s, children's literature began to change (Goldman, 1990). In response to activist groups, and due to some of these groups' own in-house publishing efforts, a

body of literature has grown up that spans from picture books to young adult novels. However, it should be noted that quantity is not the same as quality. Goldman (1990) noted that the number of books for children and youth that depicted disabled characters increased after 1975, but most of the books offered bland depictions of disability, outcomes were predictable, the characters were one dimensional, and the content was often more like a sermon than a story.

The idea that different is evil was true in adult literature as well as literature for children: Captain Hook was replaced by Captain Ahab. Not so long ago, missing limbs, twisted bodies and chronic illnesses were all attributed to witchcraft in both children's and adult literature (Ellison, 2006). When evil was marked, or made visible, it was easier for the audience to understand. In the past, the list of misunderstood physical and mental characteristics (disabilities) was endless; perhaps attributing the cause of these disabilities to evil could be seen as justifiable from a social, physical, and knowledge-based time line. John Quicke (1985) said:

“There are, latent to the dominant culture, ideas about handicap and disability from an earlier period which still have considerable force. An example is the notion, which runs through the history of Western civilization and is legitimated by various religious teachings, that disability indicates possession by the devil or by an evil force, or is the outcome of evil doing” (p. 3).

Feelings of guilt sometimes led to the rationalization that disabled persons hated the nondisabled and were jealous of them (D. King, 2007). That supposed resentment and hate towards the able-bodied alone has been enough reason to portray a character as evil. Crime fiction such as *Doctor No*, *Doctor Strangelove*, and *Hookman* commonly include revenge as a motivation for some acts by the disabled character. Disabled villains, raging against their fate and hating those who have escaped affliction, often seek to retaliate against those who are not disabled. In *Hookman*, the main character is a double-amputee sniper who lost both hands in a foiled bank robbery. He pledged to avenge his maiming by killing a police detective.

Another *Hookman* is a monster in the book *Elfwood*. He becomes a “monster” because he undergoes physical changes and grows a hook instead of his normal hand.

Even when disabled people were not actually evil, they were, and often are, to be feared or treated as less than human, as reflected by a caregiver in the 1970s who worked in a facility for the mentally disabled and is quoted as saying, “I’ve always said that what we need here is a vet, not a psychiatrist” (Shearer, 1981, p. 82). A classroom textbook used during the mid-1960s at California state hospitals warned nursing students “do not to refer to your charges as vegetables, no matter how you feel about the patient” (Abel, 1960, p. ii). The Otherness of disabled people was seen as dangerous; one dealt with them at one's own peril.

### **From Blatant to Subtle**

We have gone from a nation where telephones were a novelty and automobiles were rare to a nation where 90% of the houses have television and more than half of the country has access to the internet in their homes.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to assume that, because the physical/social environment has changed dramatically over the last century, literature has changed as completely. We have

seen this is not the case. While most contemporary work is not as blatant in casting people with disabilities into the role of evil or sub-human, these ideas are still present in a more subtle form.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Robert J. Jackson (personal communication, August 26, 2002) says, “We attach bad and evil to ugliness and we attach good to the more perfect.” For example, Faulkner often portrays disabled persons as a curse, or punishment against their families. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner wrote that Benjy’s mother thought that he was “punishment.” People in Faulkner’s fiction who see others as “punishment” tend to personify a destructive force. That means they act in a self-centered way using the disability of another as an excuse for their inability to cope (K. Richardson, interview, June 12, 2002).

## Linguistics

American writing is, of necessity, based on the culture and language of the arbiters of the nation and its education. Linguistic theory says that it is difficult to have an idea, let alone express it, without the vocabulary to think about the idea. Limited vocabulary languages often give us great poets, but not as many scientists, who must have a large pool of precise words to communicate their results. T. Eagleton (1983) said, “The meaning of language is a social matter; there is a real sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me” (p. 71). Marshall McLuhan (as cited in Anderson, 1991) argued that the introduction of print-based information technologies—whose economies of scale demand homogeneous spelling, grammar and vocabulary—inevitably produces a sense of nationhood. In the same vein, McLuhan (as cited in Anderson, 1991) wrote, “There cannot be nationalism when there has not first been experience of a vernacular in printed form” (p. 218). Thus, there is a tendency to tap into that pre-existing societal language even as the nation continues to evolve intellectually because it is part of the nation’s psyche.

In order to change ideas and express new ones, new vocabulary must be created or, at least, existing vocabulary must be altered. In that regard we must turn to the medical model to explain cultural changes:

“The medical model remains the typical perspective not only in medicine, rehabilitation, special education, and other applied fields, but in the social sciences and humanities as well. As a result, traditional academic study represents disability as a defect located in individuals that requires corrective treatment. This approach not only medicalizes disability, it thereby individualizes and privatizes what is in fundamental ways a social and political problem” (P. K. Longmore, 2003, p. 4).

Much of the new vocabulary and cultural ethos, the language of society and literature, comes from the sciences and the medical model because most of our society now accepts that mental disability can usually be traced to genetic, physiological, or situational roots (Good, 2008). With the understanding of the causes of physical and mental differences, there comes more understanding and acceptance by society in general and the literary community in particular. The new science-based understanding is reflected by authors and publishers because the larger cultural context affects them just as it does the rest of society.

Even when disabled people are presented in a positive light, they are often stereotyped. “An impairment involves a loss or diminution of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. But an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers— affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural” (Davis, 2002, p. 41). Most fiction presents disability as catastrophic or sad or a burden for the person affected and those around them. Many novels feature disabled characters who must adjust to their lives. While this is a reasonable theme, most of these novels portray that life as a great struggle, hateful to the individual and far less rewarding than the previous, nondisabled, life. Biographies often laud people with disabilities who have “overcome” their situation.

### Superstition Plays a Part

The fight against stereotypes has been, and will continue to be, a difficult battle. One reason is that it is easier to stereotype a group of people than to have to deal with them individually. The people with disabilities are not alone in this. However, the stereotypes of disabled people go back into the history of our culture and much of that history portrays the disabled as monsters (Stiker, 1999).

Back through the mists of antiquity, the idea of monsters has been intertwined with superstition: werewolves and vampires stalk the land; the planets influence our lives; black cats portend disasters; certain dates are propitious; certain numbers are to be avoided; and physical disability is a reflection of wrongdoing (Stiker, 1999).

### The Disabled as Lab Animals

Throughout early history in the United States, a baby born disabled was often left to die. The disabled were a menace, an evil stalking beast that was going to devour society (Pernick, 1992). Additionally, one was free to use both the physically and developmentally disabled, like animals, for human experiments. In 1966, Harvard medical professor Henry Beecher published the article “Ethics and Clinical Research” in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Beecher’s (1966) article cited a series of cases in which human experimentation created, in his opinion, ethical problems of the first order. He cited the case where live hepatitis viruses were fed to residents of a state institution for the developmentally disabled in order to study the progression of the disease under “controlled” conditions as one example. Mainstream medical researchers claimed that a great deal of good could (and had) come from human experimentation. “Even if a few lives were sacrificed along the way, humanity would be better for it in the long run” (Hoefler & Kamoie, 1994, p. 120) seems to be a fair representation of the prevailing ethos.

Along with that assumption was another: that the only value developmentally disabled persons (and some physically disabled persons) had was as sort of lab animals. In the years that followed Beecher’s revelations, religious and activists groups such as the National Legal Center for the Medically Dependent and Disabled, have come to play an important role as sources of policy restraint in the treatment of the disabled (**National Legal Center for the Medically Dependent and Disabled, 1994**). Simply the need for these kinds of pressure groups to inform public policy is indicative of how the attitudes concerning the value of some human lives still affect our societal view and, by extension, our literature.

## Disability as a Tool

The shelves of bookstores and libraries are lined with copies of *Midnight Cowboy*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Flowers for Algernon*, *Rain Man* (Johnson & Levinson, 1988) and dozens of other books that use the disabled to frighten, amuse, or sadden readers. Rare indeed is a novel's central character disabled unless there is an overriding purpose for that disability, a purpose that drives the story, a purpose that tugs at the heart, educates, frightens, or provokes laughter (Nelson, 2003). It is as if authors see the disabled as a type of prop. The Russian author Anton Chekhov established the idea that every element in a play or story must be necessary to the story: if there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it will fire in the third act. In the case of a disabled character, it seems the handicap must be either necessary to the story, or at least a prop that must be used. For example, author Jean Jenkins said that she chose a disabled young man as a primary character in a young adult novel because:

"I needed somebody who was appealing but vulnerable. And also its part of the crux of the whole story that the main character, whose name was Dee Dee sees this really 'hot' guy in a really 'hot' car. She falls for him. She's seen him around town and everything, but doesn't find out until the first day of school when she encounters him in the hallway that he's disabled. So it becomes an issue at that point" (interview, 2002).

Can we ever divorce ourselves from a character's disability? Would the author truly want us to? The answer to both questions is: probably seldom. There are a few books where a disability is treated as such a minor part of the characterization that it is of minimal importance, but not many. A disability is part of the character, so to ignore it would be to disregard a substantial piece of the characterization. Authors do not want a reader to forget a character's disability any more than they want a character's sex forgotten. Otherwise why put it in the story? If minimizing the importance of the disability is necessary or desired, then even achieving that end is an act based on the disability.

Secondary to the disability driving characterization is our society's expectation that all the main characters be near physically perfect.

"When you see a novel, whether it be a romance or detective or mystery, or whatever, and let's say it's a female main character, are they normally 275 pounds with crooked teeth, and crossed eyes and blemished skin, a big pot-bellied stomach? No. So we have this perfection in our characterization in the novels. At least in this century . . . the disabled are usually secondary characters" (R. J. Jackson, personal communication, August 26, 2002).

Nevertheless, if, as M. Eagleton (1986) says, "literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, renders objects more 'perceptible'" (p. 4), then indeed including the disabled in literature is of paramount importance. The question is, what is the perception now, and is it changing for the better? Do authors use disabled characters as emotional hostages, for

emotional catharsis, to be politically correct, or because they are necessary to the story? Is the disability necessary to the story? Why? Would the story be as good without the disability?

### American Literature: Driven by Emotion and Character

The physically or mentally impaired person has consistently been used as the “other”: the person to whom other characters react, emphasizing that someone else is good or evil, or as an excuse for the creation of their own inner world. In many contemporary novels, characterization is often based on reaction and disabilities help create the matrix for that reaction (Thomson, 1997).

Reaction is usually emotion-driven, whether it is on stage or within the pages of a novel, and disabled characters, or the disabilities themselves, can help a writer evoke emotion. American literature is distinguished from English literature in part because it is the norm to seek reader identification with the protagonist in a story and seek or emphasize emotional reaction against a villain. As Mason (1988) said:

“Novel, poem or short story, even the briefest of forms in modern American literature there is an immediate appeal to the senses and evocative descriptions: ‘To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. White-maned, wide-throated, the heavy-shouldered children of the wind leap at the sea-cliff (Jeffers, 1). . . .’ These descriptions are the introduction to the works in question. They are part and parcel of the emotionality of American literature.... Besides the sensual, American literature is also driven by the characters themselves more often than plot. We are asked to identify with the protagonists and respond to the antagonists in ways British literature seldom does. As a result, the characters are often more broadly drawn in American literature” (pp. 12–13).

During a recent speech at the University of California, Mason (2003) added the following:

“Even disabilities (in American literature) are often over-the-top. Aboulia isn’t a major player while the just-as-rare Osteogenesis Imperfecta is the core of a major motion picture. It is no fun to have a character who does nothing, but someone who can’t even be born without shattering into pieces evokes emotion simply in its description.”

It is this focus on emotionality that underlies the selection of a disabled character by some American authors. Many authors use them one time, and then merely as tools to invoke horror, fear, disgust, pity and a plethora of other negative emotions. The use of a disabled character is often the means to a mean end and that process often requires the disabled character to be the monster or the villain. There are three primary reasons the disabled have been used as villains: ease, superstition and as a reflection of a limited reality.

### **Instant Villains: The Easy Way Out**

Disability has often been used as a melodramatic device to create the emotionality Dr. Mason discusses above. Among the most persistent is the association of disability with evil and

wrongdoing (Thomson, 1997). As noted earlier, deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil. P. Longmore (1987), himself disabled, provides categorizations of disabled representation in media based upon symbolism, characterizations, and stereotypical narratives—a number of which echo the themes discussed here:

- disability as an emblem of evil
- the disabled as ‘monsters’
- disability as the loss of one’s humanity
- disability as total dependency and lack of self-determination
- the disabled as being maladjusted
- disability as a compensation for some other special gift/power
- disability leading to courageousness or achievement
- the disabled as sexual menace

Even psychiatrists, in their earnestness to try to educate using literature as a medium, can be guilty of the perpetration of the disabled-as-evil stereotype. Charles Atkins (1998), a psychiatrist, wrote the mystery novel *The Portrait* in order to educate people about mental illnesses. His protagonist is a painter with bipolar disorder who must untangle a mystery while working to control his own disorder. Unfortunately, the villain is mentally ill as well, and presented in stereotypical fashion. Likewise, another Atkins (1999) novel, *Risk Factor*, explored youth violence by connecting that violence with mental illness.

Carroll (1990) said that monsters are horror made visible. Carroll, among other attributes, said that monsters have the following attributes:

- Monsters are deformed and ugly.
- A monster’s physical deformities reflect thematic conflict—good vs. evil, for instance, or specific kinds of corruption.
- Monsters can be . . . possessed, incomplete. They are beings who are not like us.
- Monsters are unnatural according to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature.
- Monsters violate the scheme of nature.
- Monsters challenge a culture’s way of thinking.

While Carroll was writing about non-human monsters such as Godzilla or werewolves, one can easily see how all of these attributes apply to many depictions of people with disabled in literature. The most obvious feature of monster characterizations is their extremism. The physical disabilities portrayed in literature typically involve disfigurement of the face and head and/or gross deformity of the body. As with the criminal characterization, these visible traits express disfigurement of personality and deformity of soul. Once again, disability may be represented as the cause of evildoing, punishment for it, or both.

According to P. Longmore (1987):

“The depiction of the disabled person as “monster” and the criminal characterization both express to varying degrees the notion that disability involves the loss of an essential part

of one's humanity. Depending on the extent of the disability, the individual is perceived as more or less subhuman" (p. 135).

Such depictions also exemplify the "spread effect" of prejudice. The spread effect assumes that an individual's disability negatively affects other senses, abilities, or personality traits, or that the total person is impaired. For example, many people shout at people who are blind or don't expect people using wheelchairs to have the intelligence to speak for themselves (Office of Disability Employment, n.d.-a). Focusing on the person's abilities rather than his or her disability counters this type of prejudice (Office of Disability Employment, n.d.-a). The stigmatized trait assumedly taints every aspect of the person, pervasively spoiling social identity.

The spread effect carries over into the attitude that there is a loss of self-control and thus as endangering the rest of society (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.-b). The dangerous disabled person is not necessarily a criminal or a malevolent monster, but may be a tragic victim of fate, as in Steinbeck's (1937) *Of Mice and Men*. In that story Lennie is the exemplar of the idea that the specific nature of the disability is moot. Whatever the manifestation of disability, it unleashes violent propensities that usually would be kept in check by internal mechanisms of self-control.

In both horror stories and criminal characterizations, it is often the disability itself, and the resultant out-of-control behavior, that separates and isolates the disabled character from the rest of society. While viewers are urged to pity characters such as Lennie, we are also shown that disability must forever ostracize severely disabled persons from society. For both monstrous and criminal disabled characters, the final and only possible solution is often death, a fitting and just punishment in the context of the story. For sympathetic monsters, death is the tragic but inevitable, necessary and merciful outcome.

This acceptance or rejection of good and evil based upon appearance is pandemic in our society. Varni and Setoguchi (1996), from the Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, noted that:

"In our society (and perhaps more generally, in our species), physical attractiveness represents a highly prominent personal characteristic that systematically influences interpersonal interactions, perceptions, and inferences about an individual's ability. This 'beauty-is-good' prejudice has been found across all age groups" (p. 201).

Beyond mental illness, there are those whose bodies and faces are so far removed from what people are used to seeing, so far from any semblance of normalcy, that they represent unsettling or frightening possibilities to many.

### Abby-Normal Is Just a Name

Like any identifiable group, whether ethnic, religious, or social, a percentage of individuals with disabilities break the law, are homeless, or abuse various substances. However, the vast majority live, love, eat, sleep, work, get sick, and get well like anyone else. Where are these normal disabled people in literature? Images of these ordinary people are so rare that when

they appear they are fodder for television, newspapers, and magazine articles (Fielder, 1996). Marlee Matlin, the Academy Award winning star of the movie *Children of a Lesser God* (Palmer & Haines, 1968) made headlines because she was a deaf actor even before winning the prize. The *Denver Post* found it necessary to use the headline “Princess’ Regales in Tale of Regals: Handicapped Actors’ Troupe Hits Mark in Musical Comedy” when reviewing the cast of the acting troupe PHAMALy appearing in *Once Upon a Mattress*—a play which has nothing to do with disabilities (Moore, 2002).<sup>3</sup> The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1947 gave Harold Russell, who lost both his hands in World War II and was the star of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Goldwyn & Wyler, 1946), not only the award as Best Supporting Actor, but also an Honorary Oscar for bringing hope and courage.

### **Being Ignored is not Necessarily the Problem**

In discussing the portrayal of disabled people in American literature, one can almost be tempted to ask, “What portrayal?” Yet that would be the wrong question to pose because, indeed, disabled people have been included. Books have had a disabled central character or the hero, such as Steven King’s (2001) *Dreamcatcher*, Susanna Kaysen’s (1993) *Girl Interrupted*, and of course, *Forrest Gump*, by Winston Groom (1986). Indeed, literally hundreds of disabled characters appear in literature. Certainly, in some books and short stories, supporting characters, whether victims or villains are present as a foil for the author to use in order to evoke emotion. To say that disabled people have been ignored would be incorrect. If, in the literature of the United States, the plays and scripts of its theatre, television and movies are included, one encounters countless disabled characters. Characters with all sorts of disabilities include victims rendered helpless by disability, horror stories whose antagonists are monsters because of their physical problems or appearance, and a plethora of disabled criminals.

During the last quarter of the 20th century, minority voices, including those with disabilities, found a place at mainstream publishers. Some of this new openness was simplistic and offered few, if any, answers to the questions they raised.

### **Opening the Door**

To be successful, the writer must allow readers to in some way identify with their characters. In ever-greater numbers, people of different races, colors, heritages, and cultural and religious backgrounds are able to walk into a bookstore, pick up a novel, and find a more personal connection than previously. Unhappily, a person with a disability can rarely read about a sexy spy, a rich business person, a tortured yet sought-after actor, a rock and roll singer, or a working cop in a wheelchair, on a respirator, with short-term memory deficit, right or left hemisphere paralysis, or with any of a hundred other problems that leave them disabled. Where is their identification with a character beyond self? Moreover, where is the nondisabled person going to see persons with disabilities as whole people with complete lives?

Instead of portraying disabled individuals in the many roles they actually play in our world, literature tends to stereotype their roles. Dr. Robert J. Jackson says:

“I think that the disabled are often portrayed as isolated, secluded although in many cases I see that they might have someone who takes care of them. They don’t live alone. They portray them as dependant, maybe they had money, or they weren’t always disabled. But now they’re disabled, recluses. They are portrayed as bright, especially the blind. They tend to think of the blind as insightful and wise, right? That’s the wise group.

I’ve noticed that with the wheelchair, they tend to portray those guys as alcoholics, angry, rebellious. Then in many of the books I’ve read they convert them once they’ve been given something meaningful to do by the main character. They’re never the main character. So wheelchair is strong and angry, rebellious, but they make it. They turn it around. . . .

How often do you see stroke victims portrayed in novels? Not often because now you’re getting into the cognitive. People don’t want to hear about dementia. People’s greatest fear is dementia. So if you’re a novelist you write into a Steven King type fear, you don’t want to write into a fear personalized to that level” (personal communication, August 26, 2002).

This is the time of political correctness, the raising of social consciousness, racial, social, and sexual correctness, and laws prohibiting most forms of discrimination, sexism, ageism, and segregation. Additionally, the federal Americans With Disabilities Act, along with state and local laws regarding nonexclusion of the disabled, is helping to bring about increased and, often, new awareness of the person living and coping with a disability (Cromwell Center, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Whether literature leads or follows national trends is a debatable point. Change is almost always evolutionary, not revolutionary. Knowledge evolves from what exists. As Sir Isaac Newton said, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants” (as cited in Bartlett, 2002, p. 290). However, if we allow ourselves to climb to the exalted heights of those who have gone before us, we may glimpse the future and may help mold it. Literature has already begun to change, and is continuing to evolve, with regard to how the disabled are portrayed. It is rising above sympathy, and that is a direction that contemporary literature can afford to take.

### Conclusion

With the slow beginning evident in modern literature, through the hesitant steps in the early 1940s, the portrayal of disabled people seems to be evolving gently into the mainstream. That is not to say that its arrival is complete, but with works like *The Stand*, *A Dangerous Woman*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *Rain Man* we are seeing greater public acceptance of the previously side-lined and disenfranchised mentally and physically disabled person as well as greater risks taken by authors who choose these individuals as central characters.

Raymond Babbitt, the central character in *Rain Man*, is not necessarily a sympathetic character, regardless of whatever awe his mathematical abilities may invoke in the reader. As his mannerisms become annoying, the reader can understand his family’s impatience, and is disturbed by the inconsistency of his abilities/disabilities.

In *Children of a Lesser God*, we sympathize with Sarah and James in their quest for each other, while enjoying the fact that she is not a timid little person who uses her disability as an excuse to garner pity. Certainly she uses her hearing loss as a controlling mechanism, but that is a survival mechanism rather than an abdication of life. This is a strong woman, who seems real to us.

The sense of humor that Ken Kesey manages to impart to Randle P. McMurphy is rare in literature with disabled characters. Yet McMurphy's ability to know the absurdity of many of the situations in his institution, absurdities the reader fully sees, is pronounced only because of the situation. The American public fell in love with this character. Even though we are not sure if McMurphy is mentally disabled or not, or is simply feigning a disability, he is a man who fights the establishment, is independent and, yes, tilts at windmills using a disability.

There is still use of sentimentality, pathos, and fear of disabled characters in literature. While those portrayed in these ways are often central characters, their disability is usually also just as central. We seem to be approaching the point where this is true of most literature, but we have not yet reached that point. From all indications, literature is not suffering due to this more realistic approach, but rather is expanding with ever more verisimilitude. It is becoming ever more inclusive. Eagleton is correct: reading is more of a boudoir than a laboratory. In reading we are intimate, we are close, we hold. Whether we love, hate, or are angered when we read, if the work is successful, it moves us. We learn not only cerebrally, but also emotionally, when we pick up a book. Other people's lives, homes, loves, tragedies, and successes are ours to learn from, relate to, and share. T. Eagleton (1983) noted that:

“...The strength of Leavisian criticism was not that it was able to provide an answer, as Sir Walter Raleigh was not, to the question, why read Literature? The answer, in a nutshell, was that it made you a better person” (p. 35).

If literature can make you a better person and create a richer culture, might not greater, more inclusive literature create an even richer environment? We do know that the inclusion of valid feminist, gay, lesbian, African American, and so many other under-represented characters in the canon of American literature, has widened its attraction for all readers, so that the inclusion of properly depicted disabled persons can only increase that readership again (Andrews, 1998). Hopefully, the scope of literature will be expanded with fewer stereotypical characters in more believable situations. This is already happening as authors search for ways out of the old patterns of portraying the disabled as either fearsome or evil. That search must continue and, if it does, eventually readers and writers both will realize that the disabled are not the “other.” This does, indeed, require a new way of looking, but only by looking do we see.

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### End Notes

1 According to the Bowker Agency, which assigns ISBN numbers and does research on what is being published, there are about 500 companies that have published at least some juvenile literature pertaining to the disabled. According to the Society for the Disabled, this has grown from less than a dozen 5 years ago.

2 The Face of the Web, Year 2002 study of Internet trends by global marketing research firm Ipsos-Reid, which has been tracking Internet awareness and usage around the world since 1999.

3 PHAMALy: Physically Handicapped Amateur Musical Actors League, a company of actors with a wide range of physical and mental disabilities.