

Using Children's Literature to Cultivate Compassion for People with Differences

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Abstract: A review of 20 children's picture books and novels featuring characters with disabilities. Through examining the literature, parents, teachers and students can learn about disabilities in a safe, informative and engaging way. Understanding is the first step to cultivating compassion for people with differences, thereby fostering tolerance and social change.

Key Words: children, literature, disabilities

Introduction

Grace looks like an average kid. She wears glasses and loves to tell jokes. She is also behind academically and has difficulty understanding social cues. Grace has learning disabilities and speech problems. She is in classrooms all over America.

Grace has been called names, which makes her mad. She has been left out of games, which makes her sad. She goes home and hugs her dog, which makes her feel better. In more ways than not, she is just like all the other kids, but Grace has different needs than many others.

Grace's teachers and peers do not know how to talk about her differences. She is embarrassed if they focus on her in class, so they do not say anything. Instead of making the situation better, their silence makes her feel that no one understands her, only adding to her social isolation.

What can they do?

Children's literature can help teachers, children and parents understand what life is like for children with disabilities. Reading a story about children's differences is a safe and respectful way to talk about issues and concerns. Writing a poem, a story, or an essay about the feelings and concepts addressed in a book is a natural way for kids to process and express their reactions. This is true for *all* children.

Books written before the 1980s negatively portray children with disabilities. They are never in a typical school setting. Even in more recent books, such as *My Sister Annie* (1993), Annie is sent to a "special school" because she has Down's syndrome. In *Crazy Lady* (1993), Ronald, a young adult with mental retardation, is also sent to a separate school though he longs to be with all kinds of people. It is still very rare in children's literature to see a child with a cognitive disability or severe multiple disabilities in an inclusive school environment. Most books dealing with school issues feature kids with learning disabilities (*Hank Zipzer*, *Thank You Mr. Falker*) or Attention Deficit Disorders (*Joey Pigza*, *Eddie Enough!*). Kids with typical intelligence and physical disabilities such as hearing impairments, visual impairments or physical disabilities are seen in books in regular classrooms.

I chose the following books to illustrate how children's literature reflects societal norms and biases as they have evolved over time. In the last 26 years, since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted, our society has moved from believing people with disabilities should be put in separate schools and institutions to "mainstreaming" kids or putting them in regular schools and classes, though not

necessarily providing the free and appropriate education (FAPE) they have a legal right to obtain. Currently, there is a movement towards creating inclusive educational environments. Inclusive education is an approach to educating children with disabilities using research-based standards curriculum in a general education classroom. It is supported through the December, 2004, reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act). Inclusion is a premise backed up by IDEA, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 that provides civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities in all aspects of life, including employment and other public sector positions

Children are usually accepting of people with disabilities. Their natural acceptance makes it easier for schools to implement new curriculum incorporating all types of learning styles. Authors are writing books reflecting this needed change in public attitude. Nearly every classroom in America has a child with some kind of disability. If young children read books like these in preschool and kindergarten, perhaps the world would be as Charlie (*My Friend Isabelle*) says, "more fun with friends like Isabelle."

Illustrating Tolerance: Picture Books

Picture books are uniquely suited to depict people with disabilities as more like everyday, average individuals. The use of engaging illustrations safely invites readers to look at people with disabilities and to see how they are equal members in society.

Don't Call Me Special

Pat Thomas's non-fiction book, *Don't Call Me Special*, is an overview for educators, kids and parents about kids who have disabilities. The book conveys information about disabilities, but not about children who have disabilities. Harker, the illustrator, presents simple pictures, uses normal colors and portrays kids in typical school situations. This illustrates the text and does not distract the reader from valuable information.

Although the picture book medium is appropriate for kids under five, the content is not. It is possible that the kind of information presented could lead to name-calling behavior or cause others to be jealous of special equipment.

Different Just Like Me

Author and illustrator Lori Mitchell offers a more complex picture book in *Different Just Like Me*. Her daughter has vitiligo, a loss of skin pigment. Like most kids with differences, she is very much like her peers. She just happens to have white spots on her skin.

In the story, mother and daughter describe different people they meet on their daily outings. On Monday, they see two kids who are deaf using sign language. On Tuesday, they see people choosing different fruits and vegetables at the farmer's market. At Dad's office, a blind woman uses Braille to read the elevator buttons and an artist draws different kinds of chairs (the daughter also likes to draw). At the diner, the man

next to them has the exact same lunch and in the restroom, a woman in a wheelchair and the daughter both wash their hands.

Mitchell's illustrations burst with detail and realism. The backgrounds are left as line drawings while the featured characters shine with color. Her intention is to ask readers to look carefully at each illustration and play a "Same and Different" game (other games and lesson plans can be found on her website at www.differentjustlikeme.com).

Both Mitchell's daughter and the people in her story are those with physical differences; none have social, cognitive or behavioral differences. Given the author's art background, perhaps it was easier and more appealing for her to use visually recognizable disabilities.

Like Mitchell, Thomas also focuses on physical disabilities. It is much more difficult to portray kids with "invisible" disabilities (such as learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorders) using pictures. There is considerable need to teach understanding about those issues for readers at the picture book level. *My Friend Isabelle* addresses these issues for the youngest readers but for kids in first grade and above, more examples of invisible disabilities in their books are needed. Good examples of invisible disabilities can be found in *Ian's Walk* and *Moses Goes to a Concert*.

My Friend Isabelle

In *My Friend Isabelle*, written by Eliza Woloson and illustrated by Bryan Gough, Woloson charmingly shows the tender friendship between her daughter Isabelle and Isabelle's friend Charlie. Like most friends, they enjoy each other's company. On their weekly play date they eat snacks, go to the park and play together. They are very much alike.

Though the same age, they are also different - one is fast, the other slow, one is tall, the other short. The biggest difference between them is that Isabelle has Down syndrome.

Woloson's book does a much better job both normalizing disability and making it personal for her readers. She never tells the reader that Isabelle has Down syndrome. Parents learn this fact from the back cover. The author gracefully shows that everyone is different and that differences are not impediments to forming friendships. Woloson's message is that differences are what make friendships interesting. From Charlie's perspective, and hopefully readers', Isabelle is not defined by Down syndrome—it is just part of who she is, along with being a good friend to Charlie.

A perfect example of using illustrations to teach tolerance, Gough's gentle illustrations complement Woloson's succinct text. Soft sweeps of color are given shape with pencil outlines giving both children a realistic and whimsical look. Though simple, there is movement and expression. This book does a beautiful job of showing the natural acceptance kids have for one another. It draws on common activities and realistically shows what a friendship between preschoolers looks like.

Ian's Walk

In *Ian's Walk*, Ian's two big sisters decide to take Ian, who has autism, on a walk to the park. Their mother makes sure they feel it is a choice and not an obligation; they

are the ones who want to take Ian for a walk to get an ice-cream cone at the diner. Ian is not interested in ice cream or a soda. He sniffs the brick wall at the post office but will not smell the lilacs his sister shows him. Ian insists on eating his baggie of dry cereal one by one while his sisters urge him to get pizza. At the park, he flaps his hands and then, when the girls go get pizza for themselves, he wanders off.

The girls frantically ask everyone but no one has seen him. One sister closes her eyes and tries to think like Ian. When she hears the park bell ringing, she is sure it is him. Relieved to have found him, they are more tolerant of his different interests on the way home. The final line, when Ian gives his sister a slight smile, makes Ian seem like a typical child.

Author Laurie Lears provides a good introduction to classic autism. She portrays Ian as someone who has interests, tastes and desires- they are simply very different than most people's. His sisters also show a range of reactions to Ian-- they are embarrassed by him, frustrated by him and also worried about him-- but most of all, they accept him as their brother. This is a realistic picture of a family living with autism.

Moses Goes to a Concert

In *Moses Goes to a Concert*, author Isaac Millman presents Moses, a boy who goes to a deaf school. It offers a delightful glimpse into the experience of being deaf and communicating with sign language and other senses.

Moses and his classmates go on a field trip to a concert of classical music. It is not where readers expect them to go--all the kids are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Moses's teacher hands each child a balloon. He asks them to hold them in their laps to feel the music. The percussionist, who is not wearing shoes, creates music they can feel. She is deaf too. Afterward, they go backstage to meet her and she tells them how even though she lost her hearing at age seven, she wanted to be a percussionist. She worked very hard to make her dream come true. That night, Moses signs to his parents that though he knows he could be a doctor or an artist or a lawyer or a teacher, he wants to be a percussionist.

Millman's drawings do a fine job of illustrating the story. Each page has Moses signing a few key words, encouraging readers to try for themselves. Showing Moses and his friends enjoying a musical concert in an everyday way is a great way to see people with disabilities as more similar than different. We need more books like this one.

Thank You, Mr. Falker

A few picture books for older kids show kids with challenges/disabilities in the school setting. Based on a true story, *Thank You, Mr. Falker* is the story of Trisha, a young, gifted artist, who could not read. It is torture for her to sit in class trying to sound out simple words or to solve simple math problems. The shapes just looked like squiggles to her. When her family moves to California, Trisha hopes for a fresh start but ends up having the same problems. The kids call her a dummy and laugh at her. Trisha becomes depressed and hides in the stairwell to avoid being teased on the playground.

Then, in fifth grade, Trisha gets a new teacher. Young and enthusiastic, Mr. Falker recognizes Trisha's problems. He acknowledges her pain and isolation and honors

her cleverness at fooling so many teachers. He gives her the specific help she needs to learn to read.

This book's illustrations have edginess to them. The author uses lots of bold pen strokes and darker colors. They are not "childlike," but are definitely appropriate as the story is a serious one. Patricia Polacco realistically portrays her emotional struggle and the triumph of adapting to her disability. Without Mr. Falker, Trisha could have had a very different life. Instead, she took her talent at drawing and her new joy with words to become a prolific children's book writer. It is certainly an inspiring story.

The Face at the Window

In many ways, we shun those with mental illnesses as much as those who have learning disabilities. Sometimes we can understand differences better when they are filtered through different lenses. In *The Face at the Window*, Regina Hanson describes Dora, a young girl in Jamaica. Dora's neighbor, Miss Nella, suffers from untreated mental illness and is seen as having magical powers.

Miss Nella is feared among the children; they believe if a child looks upon her face in the window, something terrible will happen. Though Dora's parents have told her that Miss Nella is sick, she believes her friends. After trying to steal Miss Nella's mangoes, she sees Miss Nella's face in the window. She runs home after her friends tease her and that night it starts to rain. When it doesn't let up for days, she believes it is because of her bad deed and she finally tells her parents what happened. They explain that Miss Nella is not an evil sorcerer, just an old woman whose mind plays tricks on her. As the three walk to Miss Nella's for Dora to apologize, she learns her parents had good memories of her and that Miss Nella knows who they are. Dora starts to see Miss Nella as a person and offers her a small gift.

Using rich and vibrant pastel illustrations, an authentic island setting and speech patterns that evoke the Jamaican culture, Hanson gives readers a unique view of mental illness. Through young Dora, whose own mind plays tricks on her, we see how rumors create separation and fear. When Dora faces her fears with the help of her attentive parents, she finds her own compassion. This is a lovely book on many levels-- from how different cultures view mental illness, to how we can cultivate compassion by learning to look at our own faces in the window.

The Seeing Stick

In *The Seeing Stick*, Jane Yolen, a master storyteller, tells a tale about a Chinese emperor's blind daughter who everyone feels sorry for, including herself. Her father hopes that some day she will be able to see and sends word he will reward anyone who can restore her sight with a fortune in jewels. A blind old man, who lived far away, takes up his walking stick and whittling knife and goes to help the princess. He carves his journey with uncanny likeness on the stick and shows her how to "see" through her fingers. Happy that she is part of the world again, she tells the other blind children she meets that she learned to grow eyes on the tips of her fingers, just like the blind old man.

Children's picture books that portray kids with special needs in an inviting and accepting light are valuable tools for teaching kindness and compassion. These books

each offer a piece of understanding. Some, such as *Moses Goes to a Concert* or *The Seeing Stick* illustrate a specific disability. It shows how being blind or deaf is part of who a person is but does not define them. Moses wants to be a percussionist in a symphony. The old man has an extraordinary ability to carve. In *The Face at the Window*, fears and myths around disability are dissolved when young Dora meets the woman with a mental illness and realizes she is part of their community, sharing history, skills and a mango tree. Woloson sums it up beautifully when writes in her notes to parents, "Through their friendship, Charlie and Isabelle are doing their small part in making the world a more tolerant place" (page 28).

Differences in Common: Chapter Books

Several novels for children and young adults have kids with disabilities as the main characters. These books offer insight and information in an interesting and entertaining fashion.

Stuck in Neutral

Some books are told from the view of the child with disabilities, such as the intense young adult novel *Stuck in Neutral*. Shawn McDaniel tells readers what it is like to live in a body he cannot control. He has a rich inner life, but he cannot tell anyone about it due to his severe cerebral palsy.

What makes the story interesting is that Shawn's father thinks Shawn has a horrible, painful life and that it would be merciful to kill him. Shawn has no way to tell his father he is happy and wants to live even in the limited way he does. As his father gets closer to killing him, we see what it is like to be Shawn, brilliant inside, and totally crippled outside. It raises the issue of the quality of life for people with differences and asks readers to consider another way of viewing their lives.

Sees Behind Trees

Easier chapter books, such as *Sees Behind Trees* also take readers into the mind of the hero – in this case a blind Indian boy living in sixteenth-century America. Michael Dorris's compelling story is about a boy named Walnut who learns to listen deeply to the forest and to "see" what cannot be seen. Dorris has a profound ability to enter an individual's body, mind and soul and show him as a real person with both challenges and gifts.

In this tribe, a boy becomes a man when he can accurately shoot an arrow. But Walnut cannot see the target. He cannot see the tops of trees or clouds or his people around a fire. However, his other senses are highly developed, and he can move through the forest by listening and feeling. The tribal elders understand his differences and see the gifts he does have and so he becomes Sees Behind Trees and embarks on a journey that tests his courage and his skills.

On this quest, a village elder continues to teach him to see without his eyes: "Your body will remember where it has been if you let it. It recalls what's familiar—but

not as your mind does. With your mind you stand outside the world and look in. With your body you are inside already” (Dorris, p. 52).

Sees Behind Trees starts by depending on the elder and through a terrifying ordeal, he learns to depend on himself and the profound skills he has. His story, set in a seemingly much simpler era, is actually quite similar to several books set in present times. Joey Pigza and Hank Zipzer also learn that they have gifts because of their disabilities, not in spite of them.

Joey Pigza Loses Control

Joey Pigza Loses Control is a contemporary tale of a boy with Attention Deficit Disorder who takes medicine to control it. Joey spends the summer with his father, who is also hyper but medicates with beer and compulsions, and careens in and out of Joey’s life. In one of his manic modes, his father flushes Joey’s medicine down the toilet. Jack Gantos’s writing changes as Joey loses control:

So we each jumped [bungee-jumping] five more times and all the fear and falling and screaming wiped out every hyper feeling I had and when we got home I was exhausted and went directly to my room and threw myself onto my bed and it was as if I had fallen one more time, only straight down an endless black hole. (p. 139)

Gantos makes the “problem” kid real and ordinary. Joey craves a relationship with his absent father and tries to please him. He wants to have friends, play baseball, love his Chihuahua, Pablo, and let his mom take care of him. He tries to please others, but without his medication, he only disappoints everyone. It is a powerful way to learn about an attention disorder through the eyes of a boy who is really just a regular kid.

Hank Zipzer: The Mostly True Confessions of the World’s Best Underachiever Series

Hank Zipzer, hero of the *Hank Zipzer: The Mostly True Confessions of the World’s Best Underachievers* series, is a great kid with a big problem. Though he is a smart fourth-grader, it is very hard for him to read, write or do math. The school principal, who has a mole on his cheek in the shape of the Statue of Liberty, thinks he is a troublemaker. His teacher, in gray from head to toe, thinks he does not try hard enough. His dad, a crossword puzzle nut, thinks he just needs to focus. No matter how hard he tries, he always seems to mess things up. Thank goodness Hank has two best friends and a grandfather who believes in him.

This series is available both in print and audio form. Superbly read by Winkler, kids who learn better by listening than by reading will laugh (and cry) as they identify with Hank. Each of the four stories in this series can be read alone. The first book is *Niagara Falls or Does It?* It is the first day of fourth grade and the gray teacher assigns a five-paragraph essay on what they did over the summer vacation. So many words and sentences make Hank’s head swim. Before he has even written a word, he already feels like a failure. But Hank, like many kids with learning challenges, is gifted in other ways. He decides to build a working model of Niagara Falls.

Ashley (an Asian-American girl) and Frankie (an African-American boy), his two best buds, along with Robert, the boy-genius who tags along, help him make a model, complete with water gushing over the falls. Once again, his creative attempt to impress those that doubted him ends in a wet classroom, an outraged teacher and two weeks of detention. The detention turns out to be a blessing when the new music teacher recognizes Hank's "learning differences" and not only gets him help, but truly understands what he needs from the adults around him. Henry Winkler, whose affection for Hank is palpable in his readings, based these stories on his own life. Winkler went to school before there was much awareness about learning problems, so he did not get help for his dyslexia the way Hank does. Winkler offers a great service by showing Hank as a regular kid, who wants good friends, to do well in school and to be treated with respect and not scorn. It is important for kids and adults to see kids like Hank as a smart, creative and loyal friend, even if he has trouble reading. Hank deserves to be understood and included. Winkler, with lots of humor and heart, does a fabulous job at making Hank a real success. The other books in the series follow a similar plot. Hank, ever the delightful adventurer, tries to make something better and ends up making a mess.

My Sister Annie

Chapter book stories often take place in the school setting. For instance, *My Sister Annie*, by Bill Dodd, is told from the viewpoint of Charlie, an eleven-year-old boy in middle school and on his way to the league championship for his baseball team. While he yearns to be part of the cool group, he has to come to terms with what he wants his life to be like and what it is like living with his older sister Annie, who has Down's syndrome. Her child-like behavior embarrasses him. She cheerfully yells at him when he is on the pitcher's mound. She throws a tantrum in a restaurant and a boy he wants to like him sees the whole thing. He goes to Annie's special school's open house and sees the girl he wants to ask to the dance. Involved in his own embarrassment and anger, it doesn't occur to him that they are both at a 'special school.' Instead, he sees it as more proof that Annie is ruining his life.

He thinks he is the only person who has a sister with a disability. His parents just accept Annie and all her needs, so they expect Charlie to do so as well. Through the plots of the baseball championships and his wanting to be accepted by the cool middle-school boy's group, he finds comfort from unexpected places.

Written with realistic language and real-life emotions experienced by many kids who have a sibling with differences, Bill Dodd's book is an honest portrayal of what life can be like for a "typical" brother. His coach tells Charlie about his own brother, blinded as a baby:

"...When I was a kid, sometimes I wished my parents would put him in an institution. Then I'd hate myself for feeling that way. I'd feel guilty about it. Some choice, huh? Feel mad or bad or guilty. I loved my brother, and sometimes I hated him. You aren't the first one to go through this, you know." (p. 86)

Eddie Enough!

A new style is for authors to write about disabilities from the perspective of the character who has them, rather than from the view of a family member.

An example is Eddie, the protagonist of *Eddie Enough!*, who narrates his own story. He takes readers through his day and tells what it is like to live in a hurry, forgetting along the way, bumping into people, spilling drinks and eagerly raising his hand in math. Just reading it is tiring!

Eddie is likable. Kids will surely laugh at his fumbblings until they get deeper into the story. Eddie shares how hard it is for him when he gets in trouble all the time, and always having the adults around him telling him to sit still and slow down and pay attention. He shares how hurtful his nickname is, and how angry he gets at the other kids for teasing him. It is not easy knowing Eddie, and it is clearly not easy being Eddie.

The school principal tells Eddie that he used to have similar problems in his life, so Eddie starts to trust him. After some testing, assessments, and a visit to the doctor, Eddie is put on medication, which makes him feel like Eddie Just Right.

Very readable, entertaining and realistic, *Eddie Enough* shows one way to help kids with ADHD. Although medication worked for Eddie, the author missed a chance to educate readers that it does not work for everyone.

The Gift of the Girl Who Couldn't Hear

Earlier, the picture book, *Moses Goes to a Concert* was discussed. In that book, Moses goes to a school for deaf children and uses sign language to communicate. The chapter book, *The Gift of the Girl Who Couldn't Hear*, offers a different choice. The main character, a middle school student, goes to a typical school and reads lips instead of using sign language. It is one of the rare books showing a child with disabilities being mainstreamed.

The narrator, Eliza, is in the middle of the awkward transition from girl to teen. She's moody, depressed, overeating and getting poor grades. The seventh grade tryouts for the musical *Annie* are coming up and though she has been waiting years to get the lead, she has no interest in doing the play. She feels fat, ugly and unmotivated.

Her best friend Lucy, who is deaf, decides she is going to try out for an orphan part and asks Eliza to help her learn to sing. Lucy cannot sing, even with Eliza gesturing the cadence and tempo of the song. And Eliza cannot believe she is going to go up on stage in front of everyone and attempt to sing. Lucy, an incredibly optimistic girl, signs Eliza up to audition and, of course, she gets the part of Annie. Lucy does not get an orphan part, but her courage to audition has earned new respect from other kids who sometimes made fun of her.

Lucy's parents insist that Lucy learn to communicate by reading lips. In the book, she does not know anyone else who is deaf. Though it is not discussed in the book, that choice is part of an ongoing debate. The deaf community is the largest sub-group of people with disabilities. Furthermore, the deaf community has its own culture as a result of having their own language, a shared system of beliefs, and similar values, customs and behaviors. Many deaf people do not agree with choosing not to be part of this community. With this in mind, it is refreshing to see her fully included without making it too rosy. Susan Shreve makes good use of dialogue and keeps the story engaging. It is a

good middle-school book to talk about inclusion and how kids treat people with differences.

Lucy struggles as a deaf person in a hearing community. Her positive personality makes it work for her but others do not have the cognitive abilities she has, and, as a result, did not go to typical schools. They, like Charlie's sister in *My Sister Annie*, Shawn, in *Stuck in Neutral* or Ronald, in *Crazy Lady!* struggle not only because of their disabilities but also because they often get little or no support.

Crazy Lady!

In *Crazy Lady!*, Ronald is a boy with mental retardation. He goes to a "special school," never speaks, and lives with his alcoholic mother. She is the crazy lady the rest of the neighborhood kids poke fun at as she stumbles down the street in wild costumes ranting at everyone in her drunken state. But they are not the only family with problems. Vernon's mother has recently died and his illiterate father is barely keeping Vernon's large family afloat. Through the elderly lady who lives next door to Ronald, Vernon finds himself slowly drawn into Ronald's and his mother's world. Jane Leslie Conly shows all the characters' weaknesses. Vernon's siblings squabble and fight as they figure out how to live without their mother. Maxine, the crazy lady, cannot control her drinking even though it means she may lose Ronald, and Vernon struggles with his own anger and pain.

Conly makes the people of the neighborhood real and shows, not tells, readers how inclusion should work. The whole neighborhood learns how to be a friend to Ronald and realizes every family has their secrets and their struggles:

"...Well, with Ronald I didn't really know him, so he made me nervous. But then we became friends. After that, I kept learning more and more about him—he's complicated, you know?" Vernon tells the special education teacher. She responds, "Yes, he feels deeply. It must be frustrating to have strong emotions and not be able to express them." (p. 167)

Conly gives us a glimpse into the needs of kids and families with disabilities and shows us a way to help them. Vernon has to move through his own fears and feeling uncomfortable in order to begin to see Ronald as a whole person. He learns about him by being with him. He notices what he is interested in even though Ronald can't tell him and then he acts upon his new knowledge such as the time he gets involved in Special Olympics. The elderly lady next door supports Vernon by tutoring him and in exchange, he plants a garden for her since she is no longer able to do physical work. Her physical infirmity is another kind of disability. Conly subtly reminds readers that many "typical" people will be dealing with their own disability someday. Another book, *Tiger's Fall*, deals with a child who becomes disabled due to an injury.

Tiger's Fall

A strong book about an eleven-year old girl in Mexico who falls from a tree and breaks her back, *Tiger's Fall* is a powerful tale of how life does not always turn out the way you expect. Another author might have made Lupe consider her future deeply, but

Molly Bang understands that is not how preteens think. Instead Lupe is at first in a daze, then grief-stricken when she finds herself in a self-sustaining community for “cripples” where others in wheelchairs carve wooden toys, meld metal parts of wheelchairs and take care of each other. Though readers know that she will find her path there, Bang makes the path believable. She makes us care about Lupe and her poor, worried family. Bang based the book on PROJIMO, a center for people with disabilities near Mazatlán.

Bang’s book is also unusual in that it features disability in another country. She raises big questions--how do people with little money and limited services deal with disabilities such as paralysis? Bang does not weigh the tale down with the enormity of this question, however, she lets little Lupe, based on a real girl from the center, show us. Unlike many of the other books on this list, Lupe became disabled at 11. *Tiger’s Fall* is a wonderful book that allows readers into the mind of someone who becomes disabled.

A Corner of the Universe

It is hard to stay away from disability clichés. And though the protagonist in *A Corner of the Universe* is an engaging young girl who questions stereotypes, the adults around her never rise above them. Believable Hattie Owens lives in a small, middle America town with her parents in a boarding house. She is happier visiting and talking with the storekeepers than girls her own age. Her quiet summer is shaken up when her mother’s twenty-one year old brother comes back to live with Hattie’s grandparents, a formal, snobby, rich couple. The fact that Hattie has never been told she has an uncle reflects the ongoing shame and silence surrounding those with disabilities. Her uncle’s parents had sent him to an institution and tried to pretend he didn’t exist; his autism-spectrum disorder too unruly and disruptive for their way of life. Hattie and her uncle Adam become friends, though she feels like she has to take care of him. Her mother and grandmother do not explain why they never told her about him. He still seems like a burden to them and Hattie tries to understand. The story is well written and begins asking the reader difficult questions until, shockingly, Adam kills himself over an unrequited love. His suicide seems totally out of character and only leaves the reader disappointed. Hattie’s coming-of-age realization comes out contrived. Hattie didn’t need his death to know she had a unique place in her own life. Author Ann Martin could have “lifted the corners” without killing the messenger.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Mark Haddon did a much better job portraying the silence and shame that well-meaning people have about disability. In this case, the parents kept secrets from their son who has autism. A 2003 release, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is high on the best-seller list. It features Christopher, a 15 year-old with a very different approach to life, who ‘writes’ his story. It opens with him finding the neighbor’s dog killed with a garden fork in the middle of the night. When he decides to solve the case, we meet his teachers, neighbors, and other adults, but as is typical of kids like him, no other friends. Set in England, he attends a school for kids with disabilities. He lives with his father. He believes his mother has died. Christopher has Asperger’s syndrome, an

autistic spectrum syndrome that makes him self-aware but in great need for structure, routine and predictability in his life.

In his quest to solve the murder, Christopher has to move outside of his comfort zone and knock on neighbor's doors, have conversations and ultimately take a train to find his mother. Christopher goes off on all kinds of tangents in the story, such as explaining some of his quirks and habits. If he sees four yellow cars on the way to school, it becomes a Black Day. He will not eat yellow food and he dislikes novels because they are so full of lies. But these tangents give his tale texture and interest. Mark Haddon puts readers right into Christopher's unusual mind; bringing us back to the "plot" before the tangents become uncomfortable.

Like any rite-of passage story, Christopher does things outside of his realm of experience. By the end, he solves the murder case, finds his mother alive, and realizes he is capable of much more than he or anyone else thought. Though there are other books with characters like Christopher, they are not usually told in the first person. This book stands out. Through the carefully constructed portrayal of Christopher's mind, readers are likely to find connections, leading to understanding and, ultimately, compassion.

Granny Torelli Makes Soup

One of the best books on accepting with our hearts and not necessarily our minds is *Granny Torelli Makes Soup*. In this excellent novel by Sharon Creech, twelve-year old Rosie and her buddy and next-door neighbor, Bailey, have known each other forever, but they are having a problem. Rosie's grandmother, Granny Torrelli, uses cooking, eating and storytelling to gently guide the kids to understand each other's perspective.

Bailey joins them as they make homemade pasta, tomato sauce and spareribs. Granny Torrelli tells Rosie to guide Bailey's hands to mix the dough. Bailey is blind. His blindness has never interfered with his and Rosie's friendship, though she was devastated that he could not go to the same school as her. However, Bailey's blindness is at the heart of the problem between them. Rosie taught herself Braille so she could read Bailey's books with him and he got very angry. With Granny's help, she learns that Braille was one of the few things Bailey had that she did not. When she learned it, in a way, she took it away from him.

Other characters, like the new girl down the street who has a crush on Bailey, also challenge their friendship. At the end of the story, as everyone is gathered at the table for a big pasta party, Granny raises her glass to Rosie and Bailey for making the meal. Rosie, filled with the love of her family and friends, realizes she is stronger after weathering the storm with Bailey, still her pal, her buddy and her best friend. This is a delicious story, seasoned with complex characters, and filled with hope, love, and Granny's charming wisdom.

Summary

There are still relatively few books available featuring characters with disabilities. Increasingly, more well-written and engaging stories are being published involving characters with disabilities. This is a good sign for the future as we define and adapt to a culture where disabilities are not just tolerated, but understood and accepted. As a

society, we are welcoming more and more people with differences and viewing them as whole people with their own gifts to share. Fiction offers a way to develop our ability to create an inclusive society by giving readers a first-hand perspective on what it's like to have a disability.

Books can illustrate tolerance and acceptance. They can show that people have much in common with one another and everyone has something unique or "different" about them. Children with "invisible" disabilities such as Trisha in *Thank You Mr. Falker*, Hank in the *Hank Zipzer* series, Joey in the *Joey Pigza* series or Eddie in *Eddie Enough!* are often misunderstood by peers and the adults around them. Reading their stories allows children to learn about their challenges without focusing on a real child in their class.

Perhaps the most important point offered in all of these books is given in *Stuck in Neutral*. Through Shawn's personal story, the author asks readers to consider their own judgments about people with disabilities. He challenges readers, as do the authors of *Ian's Walk* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, to consider what it might be like to be a person with a disability. Fiction allows readers to put themselves into the shoes of the characters and to see the world from their eyes, thereby cultivating compassion and tolerance and ultimately realizing their own differences.

Anna Stewart, B.A., is an accomplished reviewer, writer, teacher, advocate, and leader. A prolific writer and columnist, she has published more than 80 book reviews and over 200 articles, essays and columns. She is on the Boulder Valley School District Advisory Board for disabilities, works as a parent mentor, and edits a bi-monthly newsletter for parents who have children with disabilities.

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